

SEFER YETZIRAH 5.2



משנה ב': שתים עשרה פשוטות ה' ו' ז', ח' ט' י', ל' נ'
ס', ע' צ' ק', יסודן שנים עשר גבולי אלכסון, גבול מזרחית רומית
גבול מזרחית צפונית גבול מזרחית תחתית, גבול דרומית רומית
גבול דרומית מזרחית גבול דרומית תחתית, גבול מערבית רומית
גבול מערבית דרומית גבול מערבית תחתית, גבול צפונית רומית
גבול צפונית מערבית גבול צפונית תחתית, ומתרחבין והולכין עד
עדי עד והן הן גבולות עולם:

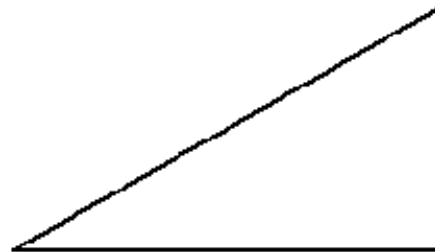
5.2: Twelve Elementals HVZ ChTY LWS OTzQ Their foundation is the twelve diagonal boundaries: The east upper boundary, The east northern boundary, The east lower boundary, The south upper boundary, The south eastern boundary, The south lower boundary, The west upper boundary, The west southern boundary, The west lower boundary, The north upper boundary, The north western boundary, The north lower boundary. They extend continually until eternity of eternities And it is they that are the boundaries of the Universe.

(Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation)

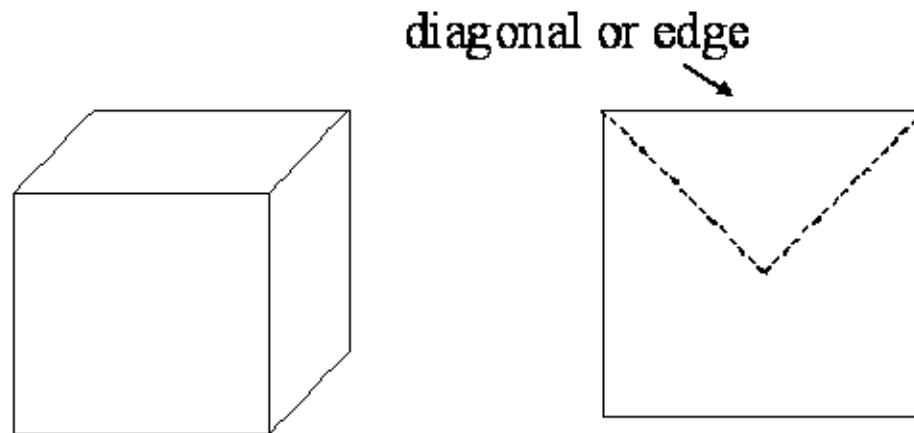
5:2 Twelve plain, hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamed-nun-samach-ayin-tzaddi-kuf. Their foundation is twelve diagonal boundaries. Boundary east north, boundary east ascent, boundary east below. Boundary south east, boundary south ascent, boundary south below. Boundary west south, boundary west ascent, boundary west below. Boundary north west, boundary north ascent, boundary north below. And they are permitted to go until forever, and behold, they are the boundaries of the world.

(Doc Benton translation)

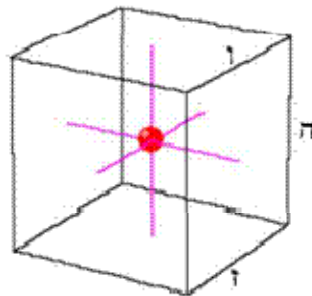
What is most important in this verse is the correspondence between the letters and the diagonal boundaries. However, what is meant by a “diagonal boundary” in this verse can easily be misunderstood. The Hebrew word that is employed is *alachson*, and this word actually means the longest side of a triangle. For example, in a right triangle this would be the hypotenuse which is usually oriented so that it looks like a diagonal line from the bottom to the top of the triangle.



If we now imagine creating triangles by drawing lines from the center of a cube to its various corner points, then the longest side of each triangle will be an edge of the cube. Thus, the twelve diagonal boundaries are nothing more than the twelve edges found on a typical cube.



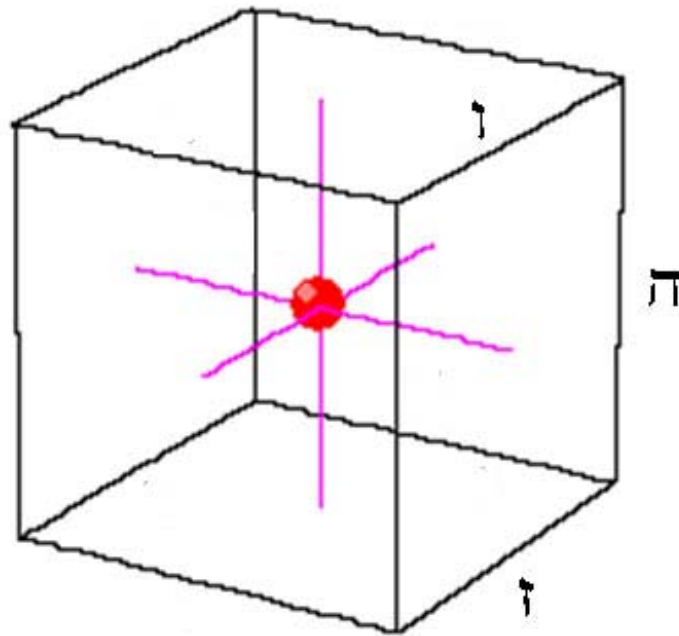
In this particular passage, by the way, I am generally following the *Saadia* version rather than the *GRA* version even though I go around the cube in the clockwise direction like the *GRA* instead of the counterclockwise direction like the *Saadia* version. The letter assignments are made to the twelve edges in such a way that each set of three tends to describe the letter *bet* which is closed on three sides and open on one, . The letter *bet* stands for a *bracha*, a blessing, and this conforms to the teaching in the *Zohar* that the world was created with the letter *bet* so that it would be a blessing. Furthermore, the letter *bet* consists of two opposite sides connected by a third, and this reiterates a basic teaching of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that creation depends upon one thing opposite another with a mediating principle in between.



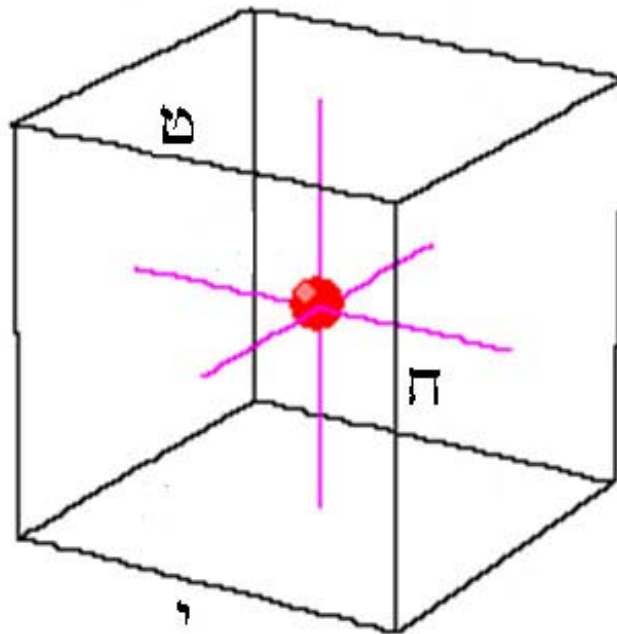
In the *Saadia* version, one finds a pattern of center, one side, and then the other side for the placement of the letters, and as my chapter on the *Tree of Life* shows, this same pattern of center-side-side occurs with respect to the placement of the plain letters on the diagonal branches of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*. Furthermore, the counter-clockwise pattern found in the *Saadia* version seems to tell the story of humanity's fall from grace followed by eventual redemption.

In other words, we begin our story in *Eden* which is symbolized by the east, the direction of connection with the light. This is followed by a fall and harsh times as symbolized by the bitter cold of the north. As a result of the fall, we have to work hard to plow the earth and grow our own food, and the earth is symbolized by the west, the direction of the setting sun. Finally, however, there is the promise that we will be redeemed and that life will become easier and more joyous again, and this is symbolized by the direction of the warm south where life is not constantly surrounded by the bitterness of the north.

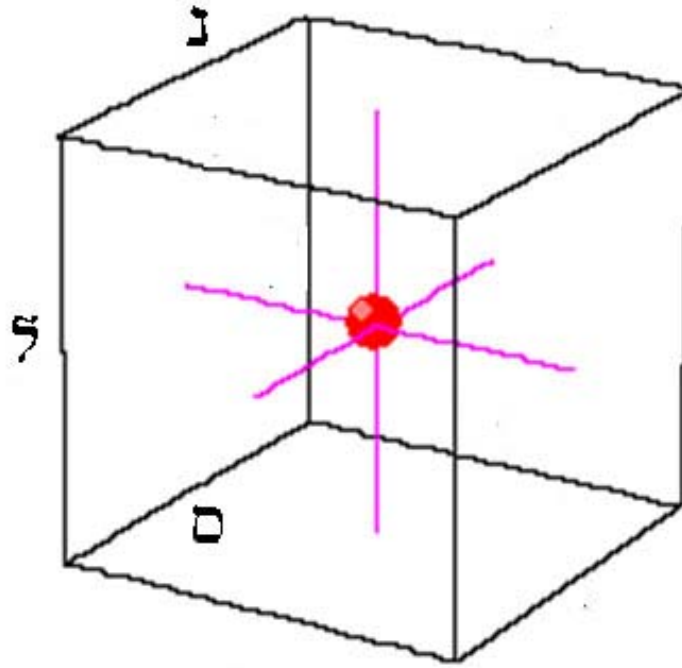
However, I have chosen the clockwise direction because that represents the way things should be. In other words, like the beginning of day, life begins in the east. Next, our childhood should be peaceful and nurturing, and these are attributes associated with the pleasant weather in the south. Following this, we should become responsible adults with our own lives which is represented by the west, the direction of the end of the day where we have experienced life and now have time to pause and reflect. And lastly, we reach the north direction when we become elders. At this point, life is more constrained for us just as life is harsher in the north, but we also have wisdom to share with the younger generations. Below now are the placements of the twelve letters along the edges of the *cube of space*.



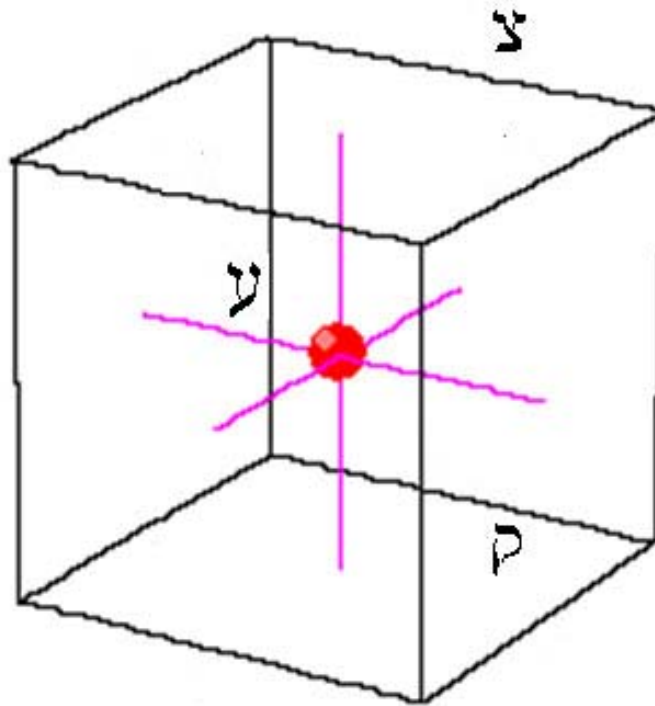
hey-vav-zayin



chet-tet-yud



lamed-nun-samach



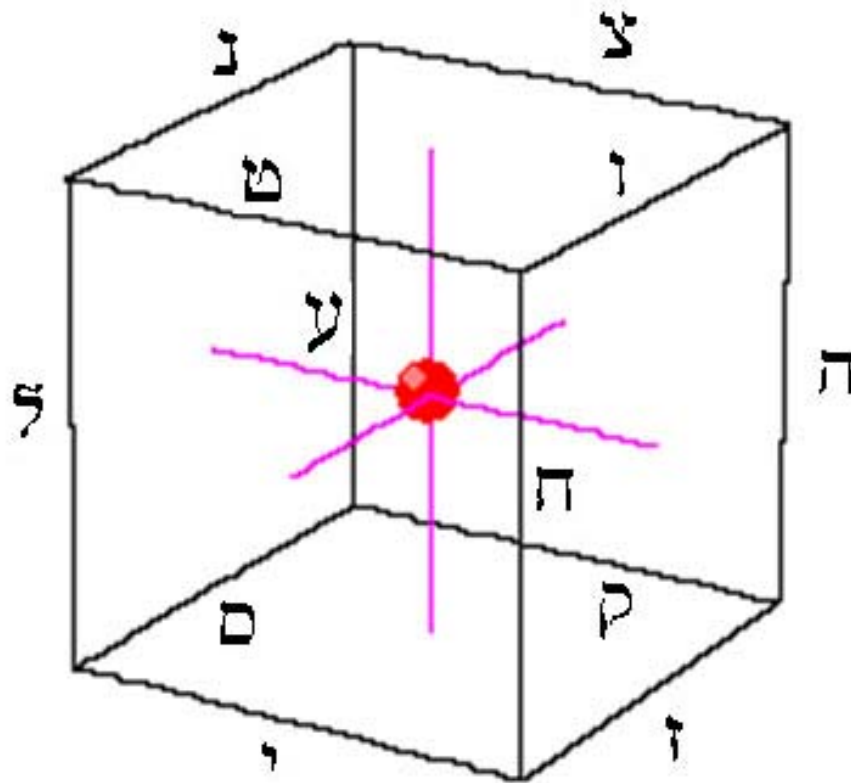
ayin-tzaddi-ku

Below now is another table showing how this placement of the letters, which helps align the *Sefer Yetzirah* with later mystical Jewish literature, compares with what is found in the various other versions of the text.

THE EDGES OF THE CUBE

<i>Letters</i>	<i>Assembler</i>	<i>GRA</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Long</i>	<i>Saadia</i>
Hey	east north	east up	east north	east up	east north
Vav	east up	east north	south east	east north	east up
Zayin	east down	east down	east up	east down	east down
Chet	south east	south up	east down	south up	north west
Tet	south up	south east	north up	south east	north up
Yud	south down	south down	north down	south down	north down
Lamed	west south	west up	west south	west up	west south
Nun	west up	west south	north west	west south	west up
Samach	west down	west down	west up	west down	west down
Ayin	north west	north up	west down	north up	south east
Tzaddi	north up	north west	south up	north west	south up
Kuf	north down	north down	south down	north down	south down

In spite of which edges one might assign the twelve plain letters to, the final result is that we now have the letters serving as a model for physical 3-dimensional space. In particular, we have defined that cube that is often referred to as the *cube of space*, and this completes the argument that the universe was created with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The three mother letters correspond to three spatial axes, the seven double letters correspond to the six directions plus center, and the twelve plain letters complete the cube by corresponding to the twelve defining edges. Below is a diagram showing the correspondences of all twenty-two letters.



The twelve edge letters of the cube of space