

JEWISH MYSTICS: USING LANGUAGE, TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE, BECOMING LANGUAGE

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Creation through Letters in the Sefer Yetzirah

The Sefer Yetzirah, writes Aryeh Kaplan, is considered to be the oldest of all Kabbalistic texts. Eliot Wolfson corroborates this claim, calling the Sefer Yetzirah "one of the most ancient books of Jewish esotericism," ^[1] and cites sources dating the Sefer Yetzirah back to the third century C.E. The text itself is quoted as early as the sixth century C.E.; references to the work appear in the first century, and traditions regarding its use attest to its existence in Biblical times. ^[2] The book is attributed to the Patriarch Abraham. Unfortunately, the origins of the Sefer Yetzirah are no longer available to historians, if in fact they were ever known; the author, or authors, of this text(s) is a mystery.

Some modern scholars find it useful to divide Jewish mystical texts into the subcategories of "meditative" and "magical," theosophic and theurgic. The Sefer Yetzirah fits into both of these categories; there are passages which deal extensively with meditative techniques, as well as detailed instructions for tapping into divine power. In some ways, the Sefer Yetzirah obviates the distinction between meditative and magical mysticism, since the meditations described in the text also enable magical acts, and the magical (*or practical*) passages are also meditative. In his most recent book *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Moshe Idel emphasises the connections between theosophy and theurgy. Idel writes that an understanding of God as divided into Infinite Ein-Sof and knowable Sefirot enables the contemplations of the mystic to have deep theurgic capability. According to Idel, there are two major trends in Kabbalah: the theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic. The first type, writes Idel, "encompasses two central subjects: theosophy - a theory of the elaborate structure of the divine world - and the ritualistic and experiential way of relating to the divinity in order to induce a state of harmony." ^[3] This type of mysticism is highly theocentric. (*In contrast, Idel characterises ecstatic Kabbalah as anthropocentric, regarding the mystical experience of the individual as the highest good, regardless of its impact on the divine.*) The Sefer Yetzirah is both a theosophic text and a theurgic text.

There is strong disagreement on the part of scholars and translators, however, as to the grammar of the Hebrew in which the Sefer is written. Commentaries which treat the Sefer Yetzirah as a strictly theoretical and meditative text translate the Hebrew in the third person, i.e. "He combined," "He created" etc. According to this reading of the text, the words refer to God's creation of the universe. However, in many cases the grammatical form more closely resembles the imperative: the author is telling the reader to "combine" and "form" Hebrew letters in a mirroring of the initial Creation. ^[4] When translated in this fashion, the Sefer Yetzirah becomes an instruction manual for a very specific type of meditation. The implications of this translation are enormous: that by combining Hebrew letters in a very specific and extremely demanding manner, we can master techniques of telepathy and telekinesis, as well as taking part in acts of creation, creating living beings, and reaching unity with the Divine. Through manipulation of language, we can gain access to the divine Language which is the stuff of creation; through manipulation of language, we can reach God. This is the doorway to mystical union that the Sefer Yetzirah provides.

The title of the Sefer Yetzirah is also significant. Sefer, simply means book. However, the word Yetzirah, has two different connotations. The root of Yetzirah is 'yetzer', which means "make" or "do," often translated as "create." However, yetzer also appears in the phrases 'yetzer ha-ra' and 'yetzer ha-tov', which are usually translated as the evil and good impulses, drives, or urges. While the evil urge is considered to be the root of evil behaviour, it is also

considered to be necessary; without the tension between good and evil, good would have no meaning. Judaism holds that, without the evil urge, creation and change would not be possible. There exists a rabbinic midrash in which the evil urge is imprisoned by a group of Talmudic rabbis. They are told by a prophet that if they destroy the evil urge, the world will end. They imprison the urge for three days, at the end of which time no newly-laid eggs can be found in all of Israel. ^[5] Clearly, no creation and no change can take place without the existence of both the good and the evil urge. And so, Sefer Yetzirah means "the Book of Creation" - but it refers to a type of creation that is involved with the urge. When the title is considered in this light, it is hardly surprising that the meditations found in the Sefer Yetzirah have theurgic repercussions.

Creation is assumed from the beginning of the Sefer Yetzirah to be a linguistic act, an act of separation. That creation is linguistic can be observed in chapter one of Genesis: God has only to speak and creation takes place. Genesis also shows that creation is an act of separation: God created by separating light from darkness, earth from sea. However, there are layers of Torah beyond the purely narrative, and the Sefer Yetzirah deals with a deeper level of what it means that creation is linguistic. Creation took place when God made boundaries, distinctions, within God's-self; boundaries between that-which-is-God and that-which-is-creation. These divine boundaries enabled the transition from One into many, and they mirror the divine contraction which preceded creation. This Divine self-limitation is called *tsimtsum*. The term *tsimtsum* in the Zohar designates "God's initial creative act, an act which of necessity occurs within God... It is this first act of creation which allows the Name, and with it the finite world, to emerge from out of the infinity of the Transcendent Creator." ^[6] The act of *tsimtsum* was a self-contraction within God, the primal act before any divine emanation. ^[7] God withdrew into God's-self, enabling the existence of something limited, a finite and temporal space which was not-God. In this finite space, according to the Kabbalists, God created the universe. With the appearance of finitude to stand in contrast to the Infinite, the subject-object distinction came into play, and the Creator-Created relation became possible. The first lines of the Sefer Yetzirah speak of how God created the universe with letters and with text.

With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom
engraved Yah...the living God...
Whose name is Holy...
...And He created His Universe
with three books (*Sepharim*),
with text (*Sefer*)
with number (*Sephar*)
and with communication (*Sippur*). ^[8]

The "32 paths" are the twenty-two characters of the Hebrew alphabet, plus the ten Sefirot. (*Another interpretation is that the 32 paths are the twenty-two characters of the Hebrew alphabet, plus the numbers one through ten, which in Hebrew are represented by the first ten letters of the alphabet.*) The Sefer Yetzirah states clearly that God created the universe with Hebrew letters: these first lines begin to set up the complicated relation of language to reality. On one level, divine Language is ultimate reality. Creation takes place through Hebrew letters. However, language will also come to represent the differences and distinctions which stand in opposition to divine Unity. On this second level, the duality of language masks the Oneness of ultimate reality.

Letters and numbers are the basis of the most essential elements of creation, quality and quantity. The qualities of a thing can be expressed by words formed out of letters; quantities can be expressed in numbers as well as words. However, without plurality, letters and numbers cannot exist. The Creator is absolutely unitary; thus, plurality came into existence with creation. Creation was inherently a pluralising act; letters and numbers came into being when the Divine established a separation within God's Infinite Self, between Creator and the Created Universe. The first elements of plurality in creation involved the ten Sefirot, God's quasi-attributes or aspects. The Sefirot therefore defined numbers and the concept of quantity in general. ^[9]

According to the Kabbalists, these thirty-two paths are alluded to in the Torah by the thirty-two times that a specific name of God, 'Elohim', appears in the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. The name 'Elohim' is a plural word; it therefore represents the manifestation of difference. ^[10] Each of the thirty-two paths, therefore, served to further delineate creation. In other words, language - as manifest in the thirty-two paths used by God to create - is equivalent with delineation and distinction.

The letters are referred to as thirty-two "Mystical Paths." The Hebrew word for "paths" used in this passage is an unusual one: instead of the ordinary 'derekh', meaning "road" or "way," the Sefer Yetzirah contains the word 'nativ', meaning "path." Kaplan's commentary indicates that this was a conscious and intentional choice of wording. "A

Derekh is a public road, a route used by all people. A Nativ, on the other hand, is a personal route, a path blazed by the individual for his personal use. It is a hidden path, without markers or signposts, which one must discover on his own, and tread by means of his own devices." ^[11] The thirty-two paths are private paths, which must be created anew by each individual.

The thirty-two mystical paths are also paths of "Wisdom." The Hebrew word used for Wisdom is 'Chokhmah', one of the ten Sefirot. Kaplan writes that, for the mystics who used the Sefer Yetzirah (*and, later, for the Lurianic Kabbalists*), Chokhmah (*Wisdom*) is understood as pure, undifferentiated Mind. ^[12] Wisdom is thought which has not yet been broken up into parts or differentiated in any way. Wisdom is "the level above all division, where everything is a simple unity." ^[13] Wisdom is, in short, non-linguistic "thought."

Kaplan's commentary indicates that, within the paradigm of the Sefer Yetzirah, the antithesis of Wisdom is Understanding. The Hebrew word for Understanding is 'Binah' (*interestingly enough, also one of the ten Sefirot*) which is related to 'Beyn', meaning "between." At the level of Understanding, ideas exist separately. Understanding is the level where division and difference exist; Understanding enables and necessitates the subject/object distinction. Understanding is inherently linguistic. Within this perspective, language acts to pluralise and differentiate, thereby hiding the Oneness of divine Wisdom.

Another interpretation of the importance of Chokhmah, put forth by Leonard Glotzer, is the idea that Keter, the "first" or "top" Sefirah, is associated with Ayin (*nonbeing*), while Chokhmah (*the "second" Sefirah*) is associated with Yesh (*physicality or being*). "God created the world 'Yesh miAyin' - being from nonbeing. Therefore, creation is said to have begun with the Sefirah of Chokhmah, (*Wisdom*), the beginning of being." ^[14] Glotzer is careful to remind the reader that "nonbeing" in this sense does not refer to actual nothingness; Keter is called Ayin because of its incomprehensible nature, and not because of its lack of reality.

In his commentary on the Sefer Bahir, or Book of Illumination (*attributed to Rabbi Nehunia ben HaKana, and thought to have been written in the first century C.E.*), Kaplan writes of the Hebrew word for Wisdom, 'Chokhmah', that:

...[Wisdom] has the same letters as 'Ko'ach Mah',
the 'power' or 'potential' of What. (*Zohar 3:28a, 235b*)
Alternatively, Ko'ach Mah means 'a certain potential.'

In the first sense, it is the power to question, to go
beyond what is grasped with Understanding. In the alternate
sense, it is an undefined potential, a potential that cannot
be grasped with Understanding, which is a lower level, but
which must be experienced in its own right. As such, it is
man's power to experience, since Wisdom is built out of experience.
When one travels on the Paths of Wisdom, one begins with the Heart,
which is Understanding. But then, one goes beyond this, to the
Experience of Wisdom, which cannot be understood. ^[15]

From Understanding one must proceed to Wisdom, which is a higher level than Understanding, and which is equated with one's potential to go beyond. Wisdom is the potential of What-ness, the potential of Being. The experience of divine Wisdom is beyond understanding: such an experience is mystical union.

The divine Name associated with Understanding is 'Elohim'. Elohim represents difference and distinction, which necessarily only exist on the linguistic level of Understanding. Wisdom, by contrast, is a single undifferentiated mind - the "mind," if you will, of God - and is only divided into thirty-two different paths by the mediation of Understanding, or language. The initial act of creation was an act of differentiation: the separation between the infinity of the 'Ein Sof' and the finite created universe came into existence simultaneously with the subject/object distinction and with language.

The second half of the verse speaks of the "three books" with which God created the universe. The "three books" to which the verse refers are 'Sefer', translated as "book" or as "text;"; 'Sefar', translated as "number;"; ^[16] and 'Sippur', translated as "communication" or, literally, "telling." These three divisions represent quality, quantity, and communication. They are letters, numbers, and the manner in which they are used. ^[17] These three books also correspond directly to the three divisions of creation defined by Sefer Yetzirah, namely, Universe, Year, and Soul. (*In modern terms, these could be alternately defined as Space, Time and Spirit.*) These three aspects are most perceivable in the letters of the alphabet. Letters can be interpreted in three ways: they have a physical form, as they

are written; this is the aspect of text. Hebrew letters are also numbers; each one has a numerical value, and this is the aspect of number. Finally, there is the sound of the letter, which corresponds to communication.

These three aspects define the word 'Sefirah'. "Sefirah" shares a root with "Sefer," or book; like a book, the Sefirot can record information, and some scholars consider the Sefirot to be memory banks for the Eternal. The etymology reveals a deep-rooted connection between the two concepts of Sefirah and Sefer. The Sefirot, which can be understood as divine emanation, funnelled through specific characteristics or attributes, are analogous to books.

Humanity can strive towards the divine, and hope to gain access to God, through written Hebrew texts (*i.e. Torah*) and through contemplation of the Sefirot; therefore the Sefirot and [Hebrew] books are analogous.

The word "Sefirah" also shares a root with "Sefar," or number; it is the Sefirot that introduce an element of number and plurality into existence. "Sefirah" also shares a root with "sippur," or communication; the Sefirot are the means by which the Divine communicates with Creation. They are also, according to the Sefer Yetzirah, the means by which we can communicate with God. It is only through the mediation of the Sefirot that we can begin to grasp the Ein-Sof, the Infinite Divine.

While the Sefirot are knowable and the Ein-Sof is beyond human understanding, the dualism between knowable Sefirot and unknowable Ein-Sof is not a dualism of opposition. These two ways of conceptualising God, the division within God between knowable and unknowable, reflect the dualism of concealed versus revealed. The two "parts" are not opposed to one another; they do not cancel each other out. One analogy (*found in the Zohar*) is that of a lamp and the rays of light which emanate from it. When one approaches the lamp to examine the rays of light, one discovers that in truth only the lamp exists as a tangible thing. God can be understood in much the same way: the Sefirot have no ontological reality.

From the point of view of the divine essence,
only the unique unity of En-Sof exists, and
the difference between the hidden, infinite
Emanator and the revealed, limited, emanated
beings...is nothing but a reflection of the
divine in the mirror of created things, which,
because of their limited nature and their lack
of unity, are not sufficiently able to grasp
absolute unity and infinity.^[18]

The dualism within God between Ein-Sof and Sefirot is a reflection of the inherent limitations of the (*linguistic*) human mind and powers of perception, not a reflection of an actual division within the Divine.

The three "books," or aspects, to which the Sefer Yetzirah refers are not merely conceptual; they have deep practical applications. They are the key to the methods of the Sefer Yetzirah. If one wants to influence or affect anything in the physical universe (*space*), she must make use of the physical shape of the letters (*perhaps through visualisation or envisioning letter combinations*). If one wants to affect time, she must use the numerical values of the letters. And if one wants to influence the spiritual realm, she must make use of the sounds of the letters, or of their spoken names.

The second verse of chapter 1 is only five lines long, and expresses the structure of the letters and of the Sefirot.

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness
And 22 Foundation Letters:
Three Mothers,
Seven Doubles,
And twelve Elementals.

The Sefer Yetzirah is now defining the thirty-two paths as twenty-two letters and ten Sefirot. According to some Kabbalists, the ten Sefirot also parallel the ten Hebrew vowels. Together with the twenty-two letters, they comprise the totality of the Hebrew language.^[19] The Sefirot are described as being "of Nothingness." The Hebrew phrase used in this line, 'b'li-mah' can be translated either as "nothingness" or "ineffable;" both interpretations lead one to the same conclusion, namely that the Sefirot are ultimately ineffable and incomprehensible, because they are part of God. Just as some scholars refer to the Sefirah of Keter as Ayin, nothingness, to indicate its ineffability, all ten Sefirot are now referred to as "of nothingness." The Sefirot are in this way distinguished from letters. Letters exist

both as components of communication and as powerful aspects of divine emanation; the Sefirot are inexpressible by their very nature.

The letters of the alphabet are called "Foundation letters" because it is these letters which are the foundation for the universe. In chapter 1, verse 1 of the Sefer Yetzirah we read that God created the universe with text, number, and communication; these three aspects of language exist through the Hebrew letters, which enable text, number, and communication. Glotzer writes that "[i]t has been said that the letters compose the body of the Sefirot, the vessels. Their soul is the inner light that flows through them." ^[20] In this interpretation, the Hebrew letters themselves compose the "body" of the Sefirot, the structure through which divine emanation flows.

Regardless of whether Hebrew letters are conceptualised as the structure through which divine emanation flows, or as the actual divine emanation itself, it is clear that these letters serve as powerful divine tools. Hebrew letters, conceptualised as divine emanation, are part of God; at the same time, being emanation, they are also partially not-God, or at least they are not the actual Ein-Sof itself.

This understanding of the power of letters is corroborated by the writings of Shabbatai Donnolo, a medieval commentator upon the Sefer Yetzirah. In his commentary, the Sefer Hakhmonah, Donnolo wrote:

...[T]wo thousand years before the creation of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, played around with the twenty-two letters of the Torah and He combined and rotated them and made from all of them one word. He rotated [the word] frontwards and backwards through all the twenty-two letters... All this the Holy One, blessed be He, for He wanted to create the world by means of His word and the epithet of the great name. ^[21]

For Donnolo, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet (*which also comprise the Torah*) are identical with the word formed on the basis of those letters, as well as with the divine name of God. Eliot Wolfson, a modern commentator, writes of Donnolo that "The specific connection with the logos is also brought out in another passage that describes God as... [containing everything with his Word.] The linguistic process is thus the first act of creation." ^[22] The word of God (*comprised of the twenty-two foundation letters*) is identical with God's creative power. It was through the letters of the alphabet that the universe was created; it is through these same letters that the universe is sustained. It follows that if one knows how to manipulate these letters correctly, one can also manipulate the most elemental forces of creation.

The letters are divided into three categories. The twelve Elementals are the twelve letters of the Hebrew alphabet with only one sound. The seven Doubles are the seven letters in Hebrew which have two sounds: for example, Peh, which has both a "p" sound and an "f" sound; or Beth, which sounds both like the English "b" and the English "v." The three Mothers are by far the most complicated category of letters described in the Sefer Yetzirah. The three Mothers are 'Aleph', 'Mem', and 'Shin'. Kaplan explains that these letters are called the three Mothers because they span the entire alphabet, and thus encompass the potential of all twenty-two letters. Aleph is the first letter of the alphabet; Mem is the middle; and Shin is the second-to-last (*the last letter, Tav, is one of the Doubles.*) Since these letters contain between themselves the potential of the entire alphabet, it is as though they give rise to that potential, or give birth to it; thus the epithet of "Mothers." The three Mothers will be discussed at great length in chapters two and three of the Sefer Yetzirah.

It is in Chapter 1, verse 4, that the Sefer Yetzirah begins to provide instructions for the process of reaching the plane of undifferentiated Mind, and attaining Wisdom (*in other words, reaching the level of the Ein-Sof, and becoming a part of the Divine: mystical union.*) These instructions detail the methods by which an adept can use language to transcend language. In the fourth verse of Chapter 1, the reader reaches the couplet "Understand with Wisdom/ Be Wise with Understanding." The paradox in this set of phrases is the key to a technique for transforming consciousness. Understanding, as discussed before, requires verbal thought. Wisdom, by contrast, is nonverbal and un delineated. Wisdom is pure consciousness. Attaining pure consciousness (*what Kaplan calls Chokhmah consciousness*) is very difficult; it is in an attempt to reach Chokhmah consciousness that meditative techniques (*such as mantras or contemplation*) are used. The instructions "Understand with Wisdom, be wise with Understanding," involve a deliberate oscillation between verbal Binah consciousness and nonverbal Chokhmah consciousness. This ability is vital if one wishes to grasp the Sefirot. The Sefirot are non linguistic and ineffable;

they cannot be understood verbally. They must be reached by "paths of Wisdom," i.e. through the paths of nonverbal Chokhmah consciousness.^[23]

The second chapter of the Sefer Yetzirah begins with a further description of the three Mothers.

The Three Mothers are Aleph Mem Shin
Their foundation is
a pan of merit
a pan of liability
and the tongue of decree deciding between them.

The three Mothers are reintroduced here in detail. According to Kaplan, the three Mothers are significant because they serve as an introduction to the letter-oriented meditative techniques which occupy an increasingly central role as the Sefer Yetzirah continues. They also define the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure which is central to Kaplan's understanding of the Sefer Yetzirah. For Kaplan, one of the main purposes of the Sefer Yetzirah is to instruct the adept in methods of oscillating between opposing states of consciousness; the three Mothers represent the combination of opposites and the balance between them, which parallels Kaplan's understanding of the need to oscillate between opposite states of consciousness in order to find the balance between them which enables mystical union. Mystical union is reached by going outside of the dialectic of linguistic-non linguistic, Binah-Chokhmah; mystical union, in the Sefer Yetzirah, is clearly outside of dichotomy.

The three Mothers represent the three columns into which the Sefirot are separated in the traditional diagram of the Sefirotic structure or Sefirotic tree.^[24] The right-hand column, headed by Chokhmah, is represented by Mem. The left-hand column, headed by Binah, is represented by Shin. The middle column, headed by Keter, is represented by Aleph. [Meaning "Crown," Keter represents the understanding of God as Creator and Primal Cause. Keter is the Sefirah which is closest to the Ein-Sof, although the Kabbalists were careful to link this particular interpretation of Keter with the simultaneous understanding that no Sefirah is "closer" to the Infinite than any other, not only because distance is irrelevant to the Divine, but also because any attempt to use the finite constructions of language to label "aspects" of God is inherently fallible.]

The lines regarding the pans of merit and liability and the tongue of decree have two interpretations. The Hebrew word in the verse is 'Kaf', which can denote the pan of a scale as well as the palm of a hand. Likewise, the word 'Lashon' can be translated either as the tongue or pointer of a scale, or as the tongue which is in the mouth. One interpretation, therefore, is that Mem and Shin form the two pans of a scale, two opposite qualities, and Aleph serves as the pointer which holds them in balance. The second interpretation is that Mem and Shin represent the two hands, and Aleph is the tongue which serves as the "covenant between them."^[25]

The lines which follow this explanation of the three Mothers deal with the sounds made by the three letters.

Three Mothers, Aleph Mem Shin
Mem hums, Shin hisses,
and Aleph is the Breath of air
deciding between them.

These lines indicate that the sounds of these letters can be applied practically. Kaplan's interpretation holds that the humming sound associated with Mem is a calm and flowing sound, associated therefore with water and with Chokhmah consciousness. If one wants to attain Chokhmah consciousness, one repeats the sound in the manner prescribed by the text. The letter Shin, conversely, has a hissing "s" sound, a sound which is associated with fire and with Binah consciousness. Kaplan's interpretation is grounded in the interpretation of the Vilna Gaon:

Mem is from the lips and does not involve movement of the tongue and the voice, and so its pronunciation is with particular ease, without sound. Similarly, the attribute of kindness tolerates all, and remains silent, and so is water that rests in its place. The Shin is from the tongue in the teeth, and it whistles more than the other letters, and so does the sound and so does the attribute of Strict Law, which screams, and so the fire that does not rest a minute and burns everything. Aleph

is air and wind, when the throat is open with wind alone,
without the tongue, and this is related to the wind and
also to the attribute of Rachamim (*Mercy*). ^[26]

Mem is associated with water and with tranquility; Shin is associated with Judgement and with fire; Aleph is associated with air and with divine mercy. These connections are illustrated by the actual sounds of the letters when spoken; the aspect of sound, pronunciation of letters, reflects the deeper significance of the letters, and points one toward understanding of the particular divine potencies of these letters.

Kaplan writes that the two sounds, M and Sh, can be used as a device for oscillating between Chokhmah and Binah consciousness. Pronouncing the Shin invokes Binah consciousness; pronouncing the Mem shifts the adept to a state of Chokhmah consciousness. It is noteworthy that these two letters are dominant in the word 'Chashmal', which was considered by the Kabbalists to be the interface between the physical and the spiritual. One interpretation of Ezekiel's writings about his mystical vision holds that it was only after he visualised the Chashmal in the center of the fire that he was able to enter into the state of prophecy. ^[27] The word Chashmal comes, according to the Talmud, from two words: Chash, meaning "silence," and Mal, meaning "speech." Chashmal can therefore be translated as "speaking silence," the double sensation of existing simultaneously in verbal Binah consciousness and non-linguistic Chokhmah consciousness.

Since Mem and Shin are the dominant consonants in the word Chashmal, the word can be used as a mantra for inducing a state of oscillation between the two types of consciousness, between the mundane world and the limitless understanding of the Divine. The two letters Shin and Mem also spell out the word 'Shem', meaning "Name." It is through the names of things, and particularly through the Divine Names, that one can make the transition between Chokhmah and Binah consciousness.

It is important to note the importance of oscillating between two radically opposed states of consciousness in order to attain mystical union. This interpretation of the Sefer Yetzirah leads directly to an understanding of mystical union as flux between binary opposites; phrased another way, this interpretation leads to an understanding of mystical union as existing outside of binary oppositions. The techniques outlined in the Sefer Yetzirah for oscillating between opposing states of linguistic and non linguistic consciousness provide the mystic with a way to escape the dichotomies of language/nonlanguage, and finitude/infinity. When the mystic succeeds in stepping outside of these boundaries separating human from divine, she attains mystical union.

Once an initiate has mastered the simpler techniques for combining letters and vowels, she is ready to move on to the technique of the 231 Gates, a concept which arises in the Sefer Yetzirah in chapter 2, verse 4.

Twenty-two Foundation Letters:

He placed them in a circle
like a wall with 231 Gates.

The Circle oscillates back and forth.

If the twenty-two letters are placed in a circle and lines are drawn between each of them in every possible combination, 231 lines will be drawn. These lines are the 231 Gates.

Because of the grammatical ambiguity of the original Hebrew, these lines are particularly interesting. When translated in the imperative, the verse reads: "Place them in a circle, like a wall with 231 gates." Within this understanding of the text, the initiate is commanded to imagine the letters engraved into the ground, and then to stand them up in her mind, making a wall around her. She then visualises the lines between the letters weaving a ceiling over her head. Once she has completed the visualisation exercise, she can make use of letter combinations; the letter combinations, or connections between the letters, are the 231 Gates. The initiate should chant, or visualise, moving around the circle of letters in a specific order: combining Aleph with Bet, Aleph with Gimel, and so on, if she wants to create; combining the letters in the opposite order if she wants to destroy. When read in the imperative, this verse commands the mystic to use the power of Hebrew letters to create life.

The Divine Name, according to the Sefer Yetzirah, contains within it the structure of the world. Once again, the linguistic structure of experience manifests itself as a theme. In Chapter 2, verse 5, the author of the Sefer Yetzirah writes "It comes out that all that is formed/ and all that is spoken/ emanates from one Name." This Name is the Tetragrammaton, 'YHWH', and the Sefer Yetzirah calls for every letter to be permuted with the Tetragrammaton using all five vowels. For each letter, the initiate must go through the entire sequence of 231 Gates. Each letter must be pronounced with the five primary vowels and the four letters of the Tetragrammaton.

The Sefer Yetzirah provides a way for the mystic to strive towards the Divine through the manipulation of Hebrew letters. Despite the fact that letters are the primary tool used to strive towards God, the mystic somehow enters into a

nonverbal state of consciousness, in which letters lose their ordinary meaning. In this state of mystical consciousness, the raw power of the letters is released, and the mystic gains access to what is "really real" within the letters, which is their reality as divine emanation. If simple Hebrew letters, by themselves, come directly from the divine, then the Divine Names should have even more power, because they are combinations of letters (*powerful tools to begin with*) that describe or represent the essence of the Divine. However, the Sefer Yetzirah only hints at the potential contained within the Divine Name. In order to explore the Divine Name(s) in greater depth, it is necessary to examine the work of Abraham Abulafia and his contemporaries.

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1. Eliot Wolfson. *Through A Speculum that Shines*, (USA: Princeton University Press, 1994,) p. 70.
 2. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation . Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. ix. All of my quotations from the Sefer Yetzirah are from this edition (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990), and I will cite chapter and verse in the body of the thesis.
 3. Moshe Idel. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. xi.
 4. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation . Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan. (Weiser, Inc., Maine, 1990), p. x.
 5. Nahum Glatzer. *Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader*, ed. Nahum Glatzer. (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp 15-16.
 6. Stephen G. Wald. *The Doctrine of the Divine Name*, (USA: Brown University, 1988) p. 55.
 7. Gershom Scholem. *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, (USA: Schocken Books, 1991) p. 82.
 8. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation . Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, 1:1 (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990)
 9. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation . Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. 7. (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990)
 10. Ibid., p. 7.
 11. Ibid., p. 10.
 12. Kaplan cites Maimonides, the Rambam, as a reference for this conception of Chokhmah.
 13. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation. Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. 12. (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990), p. 12.
 14. Leonard Glotzer. *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book of Creation and its Commentaries*. (USA: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992), p. 5.
 15. *The Bahir: The Book of Illumination*. Commentary by Aryeh Kaplan. (USA: Sameul Weiser, Inc., 1989), p. 162.
 16. Modern hebrew for "number" is mispar; sefar is an archaic term that has fallen into disuse.
 17. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation. Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. 19. (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990), p. 19.
 18. *The Zohar*. Translated David Goldstein, commentary by Isaiah Tishby (USA: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 240.
 19. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation. Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. 25. (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990)
 20. Leonard Glotzer. *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism*, (USA: Aronson, Inc, 1992) p. 13.
 21. Sefer Hakhmoni. *Il Commento di Sabbatai Donnolo sul Libro della Creazione*, (cited in Wolfson's *Through a Speculum that Shines*, USA: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 15-16.
 22. Wolfson, Eliot. *Through a Speculum that Shines* (USA: Princeton Univesity Press, 1994), p. 137.
 23. Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation. Transl. and commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, p. 40. (Maine: Weiser, Inc., 1990)
 24. Ibid., p. 95.
 25. Ibid., p. 96.
 26. Eliyahu Gaon of Vilna, commentary on Sefer Yetzirah, Chapter 2, Mishnah 1. I was pointed to this source by Leonard Glotzer in *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism*, (USA: Aronson, Inc., 1992), p. 74.
 27. Ezekiel 1:4: Ezekiel says that he saw "The appearance of Chashmal in the midst of the fire." Kaplan in particular espouses this reading of the verse, and this understanding of the scriptural basis for the concept of Chashmal.