

Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Formation)

Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah

This commentary is by Dr. David Blumenthal as given in his "Understanding Jewish Mysticism".

A more detailed commentary by the late Aryeh Kaplan is available at Amazon and other book shops.

Commentary on Chapter 1

1.1 There are three things to note here: (1) The thirty-two wonderful paths of wisdom are the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet plus the first ten numbers of the decimal system. These ten numbers correspond to each of the Sefirot. (2) The multiplying of names and terms seen here is one of the characteristics of rabbinic Hebrew style. One can also see traces of it in the liturgy and legal literature. Here, several names of G-d are enumerated. YHVH is the most holy name of G-d. It is usually (incorrectly) rendered Yehweh or Jehovah in English. (3) The last three terms can be translated in several ways. One must understand "border" to mean "boundless." It becomes clear, then, that G-d created the world - i.e. made it bordered, and finite - by use of the Hebrew letters and numbers. Keep in mind that letters and numbers, in antiquity, are not just signs or symbols but have real existence outside our minds, in this case, are also holy.

1.2 The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters, and by accepted rules of grammar, seven pairs of the letters have the same shape, with one member of each pair having a dot in the middle. The dot changes the pronunciation of the letter slightly. These are the "seven doubles." Twelve letters have no dotted pairs, there are called "simple letters". That leaves three letters which the author calls the "Mothers".

1.3 The "covenant of the Only One" or "covenant of the Unique One" appears to be composed of the other two elements. One element is the "word of the tongue," i.e. speech, and the other is the circumcised male organ. The symbolism is two-fold: (1) the covenants of the flesh and of the spirit are the main tools of creation, the one human, the other divine; and (2) the sex organ and speech are the metaphors for the creative process.

1.4 First, the number ten is precisely set and proper wisdom evoked. Then, the reader is told "test" and "explore" - that is, to try to combine letters and numbers to "create" as G-d did. Such activity was, in fact, known in the Judaism of late antiquity. By it, some rabbis were reported to be able to create small animals and homunculi (animated clay men; the Golem). In performing these acts, the practitioner "sets the Creator in His place," i.e., becomes (in a small way) like him. The other magical mishnayot are 2:4,5; 4:5,10; and 6:7.

1.5 In this section the basic dimensions and "borders" of reality are delineated: the physical dimension bounded by the six directions of the sphere, the temporal dimension bounded by beginning and end, and strange though it may sound to modern ears - the moral dimension of reality, which is as basic as the physical and temporal dimensions. Note that the temporal precedes the moral, and that both precede the physical.

1.6 The images from this section have been taken from Ezekiel 1.

1.7 The first image here, "end ... fixed in their beginning," is easily decipherable: a circle, which is the perfect geometric form, is generated. The second image - the flame and the coal - is a richer image: (1) Without the coal, there is no flame (i.e., God is indispensable to the sefirot). (2) The flame is the coal in another form (i.e., the sefirot participate in the divinity of God in some way). (3) The flame fluctuates. And so on. The reader can extend his literary imagination here.

1.8 The Hebrew word for "shut your mouth" is *belom pikha*, and some commentators connect *belom* with *belimah*, the term used to describe the sefirot. If this is correct, one should translate: "the ten ineffable sefirot" or "the ten self-contained sefirot." (The rendering "intangible" derives from an artificial division of the word *belimah* into *beli* and *mah*, meaning "without anything.") Two other points are worth making here: (1) Note that it is the heart, and not the brain, which is the organ of thinking and consciousness. This is true in other rabbinic sources too, when one is told to "direct one's heart" i.e., consciousness, to G-d. (2) The "covenant" is the agreement of the initiates not to speak openly of the mysteries. It is an oath of secret.

1.9 The enumeration of the sefirot begins. Each constitutes a realm within which the Creator carries out a specific creative activity. The first four follow the text of Genesis: "And the spirit of God hovered ..." (Gen.1:2). "And God said," i.e., He created with words (Gen 1:3), the "water" (Gen. 1:2, 6), and the "fire," which according to the rabbis, was created on the second day (Gen. 1:6-8).

1.10 There are three terms here: "The Spirit of living Elohim" (Ruah Elohim Hayyim), "Spiritual Air" (Ruah), and "Elemental Air" (Avir). The first term refers to the creative spirit of God, which is, however, not identical to God Himself. The third term comes from standard ancient physics. It refers to air, one of the "Four Elements" which encircle the Earth (cf. chap. 3 of Sefer Yetzirah). The middle term is complicated. It is intangible, and offspring of Spirit yet different from it, and parallel to water and fire. The function is clear: it is the realm in which the holy letters are created. Accordingly, I translate "Spiritual Air" to capture its divine yet physical properties and to set it in associative sequence with the other sefirot.

1.11 Within this realm, the *tohu va-vohu* of Genesis 1:2 is created. Note that, all through this section, the Creator's activities are described as "hewing and engraving" or, better perhaps, as "hewing and stamping" (as one stamps and image on a coin). The three metaphors may refer to different visual images of the same action or to three different type of creative activity. The initiate, presumably, knew.

1.12 The Seraphim are fiery angels (Isaiah 6:2). The Hayot are the complex holy creatures, and the Ophanim are the wheels with eyes, both in Ezekiel's vision. The rabbis taught that both prophets saw all the heavenly beings. Note that God's "Dwelling Place" - i.e., the seven palaces of the seven heavens are made from the three "spiritual elements."

1.13 Having generated the four realms (Spirit, Spiritual Air, Spiritual Water, and Spiritual Fire), and having created within these realms the letters, the primal chaotic matter of the universe, and the heavenly messengers, God now sets boundaries to space. He uses three letters of the Tetragrammaton (His Holy Name), which he infuses with Spirit. He then "seals" - sets limits - to the six dimensions of space. Note that God faces east.

Concluding Note: What are the sefirot and what is their role in Creation? The sefirot are not stages in the progressive revelation of the Godhead. Rather they are realms generated by God within which He performs His various creative acts. He acts within them as an artisan, forming and shaping His products. These realms are real, and they are, at least partially, divine. However there are still several open questions. The text does not indicate where the sefirot come from, or how they proceed from one another. We also cannot fully resolve the conflict of imagery between mishna 5 and 14.

What is the relationship of this chapter to Genesis 1? It supplies answers to the following questions: Where did "chaos" come from? (It is not co-eternal with God. It was created out of Spiritual Water.) How did God "talk"? (He didn't. He created letters from Spiritual Air and used them, as an artisan, to build the world.) What happened before Creation? (God generated realms, the tools, and the boundaries of Creation.) Where do angels come from? (From Spiritual Fire.) Is this version of Creation more elegant in some way than that of Genesis 1?

Note that the initiate, too, can "create," on a smaller scale.

Commentary on Chapter 2

2.1 Neither of the images here is clear. The first seems to indicate that guilt and merit are the basic moral dimensions of the universe (see chap. 1 of the Sefer Yetzirah) and that it is speech (the tongue) that determines which shall prevail. The second image is even less clear. Some take it as a linguistic reference. Perhaps some breathing technique is hinted at: breathe out (*mem*, and translate "is silent"), breathe in (*Shin*), and hold one's breath (*Aleph*, a gottal stop). Perhaps some incantational procedure is meant.

2.3 The sounds of these letters are produced at the points indicated.

2.4 and 2.5 The "gates" described here are the gates to creative activity, and the assumption is that, if one can combine the letters properly, one can reenact the creative process used by God Himself in the formation of the world. To understand this text, one must distinguish between the "basic arrangement" of the letters in "combinations" and "gates" and the "basic forms" by which the arrangement is presented, the "wall" and the "wheel." For a fuller explanation of these charts, see *The Creator and The Computer*

The "combinations" are formed by combining each letter with all the other letters in the alphabet. This yields 462 "combinations" (22 letters x 21 other letters). By eliminating all the mirror images (e.g., AB, BA), one arrives at the required 231 "combinations." Alternately, one can combine each letter of the alphabet only with all those letters which follow it. Using the English alphabet, this generates the series: AB, AC, AD, ... BC, BD, BE, ... XY, YZ ... YZ. This is the meaning of the text "Aleph with all of them, Bet with all of them," etc. However, the text also says, "All of them with Aleph, all of them with Bet," etc. So one must construct another set of "combinations," using the

same principle but beginning at the end of the alphabet. Again, using the English alphabet, this generates the series: ZY, ZX, ZW, ... YX, YW, YV ... CB, CA ... BA. This pairing of letters forward and reverse, then, generates the "combinations."

The "gates" are formed by pairing the pairs are the forward and reverse "combinations." This is illustrated in Figure 1, where the upper line represents the reverse "combinations," and the lower line represents the forward "combinations." So much for the "basic arrangement" of the letters.

As to the "basic forms," the word "wall" suggests are chart, and Figure 1 illustrates that. The word "wheel" suggests a spokelike arrangement, and Figures 2 and 3 show the forward and reverse combinations displayed in that form. But what is the key? Which is the magical chart (or magical position of the wheels)? The text hints that when 'NG and NG' have been brought into some kind of balance, the "proper" position has been found. By shifting the "combinations" of the "gates" eighteen times to the right, one arrives at the "proper" point, i.e., the point where 'NG and NG' appear. This is illustrated in Figures 4, 5, 6 at the arrows.

The "one term" referred to here is probably the alphabet.

For another interpretation of this magic circle, see Figure 7, taken from Stenring's translation. I do not know how to read this diagram accurately, despite Stenring's explanations.

2.6 Here, God begins to make concrete things from chaos. The first thing He makes is columns to support the physical universe. These He makes from "elemental air," here called "Air which is not tangible" to differentiate it from "atmospheric air." The twenty-two needs of the body are not specified, although whatever they are, they correspond to the twenty-two letters of the alphabet.

Commentary on Chapter 3

3.2 The "six rings" are the six directions or borders, or the six combinations of YHVH.

The sequence in this chapter is as follows: the three Mothers rule over the three Elements. From them, basic physical reality (the Fathers) is generated in three dimensions: in the physical universe, in the year (i.e., the seasons), and in the body. From the Fathers, flows the rest of physical reality. The following chart illustrates this (see Stenring, The Book of Formation, for similar charts):

Mothers	Aleph	Mem	Shin
Elements			
Fathers			
in the universe			
in the year			
in the body			

The author presents this sequence from two points of view - in mishnayot 5-7 from the point of view of the balances triad, and in mishnayot 8-10 from the point of view of the creative process.

Throughout the Sefer Yetzirah, the word for "body" is nefesh, which is usually translated as "soul." The context here and at the end of the book calls for "body," however.

3.4 The repetition here is due to manuscript irregularities. I have not always included the explicatory word "[elemental]," so as to give the reader a feeling for the text, but it is always intended.

Commentary on Chapter 4

4.1 These are all blessings which are generated from these letters.

4.2 According to grammatical convention, the first letter of each of these doubles has a dot in it called the "hard dot." Hence, the letter is "hard."

4.3 Note that the opposite of peace is evil. One manuscript reads "war," but the principle of *leccio difficilior praestat* ("the more difficult reading has precedence") is operative on the grounds that no one would change "war" into "evil," but someone might choose the easy way and emend "evil" into "war." The reading "evil," then, must be the more accurate because it is the more difficult to explain. Actually, the contrast may derive from Isaiah 45:7.

4.5 Again, the magical testing is referred to.

4.7 Note which are the "seven stars." This is standard ancient astronomy, with the Earth at the center of the universe and the various heavens revolving around it.

4.8 The chart for this mishna is as follows:

The double letters	Bet	Gimel	Daled	Kof	Pey	Resh	Tav
the blessing							
the star							
the day of Creation							
the date of the body							

4.9 Every seventh year is a Sabbatical year according to the Bible. Every seventh Sabbatical year is doubly holy, and the fiftieth year of the cycle is called the Jubilee year. Note that here, as in Mishna 4, the Temple serves as a microcosm. Note, too, that if God prefers the seventh of each sequence, then He prefers the Tav (perhaps the mark of Cain), the blessing of Dominion, the Moon, the Sabbath, and the Mouth (which, by the power of speech, creates). The manuscripts, however, differ on the sequence of the blessings, with many ascribing Gracefulness to Tav.

4.10 The anonymous translator has supplied the following diagram:

2 Stones:	AB	BA
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3 Stones:	ABG	AGB
	BAG	BGA
	GAB	GBA

4 Stones:	ABGD	ABDG	AGBD	AGDB	ADBG	ADGB
	BAGD	BADG	BGAD	BGDA	BDAG	BDGA
	GABD	GADB	GBAD	GBDA	GDAB	GDBA
	DABG	DAGB	DBAG	DBG A	DGAB	DGBA

And so forth ...

To get the next figure, multiply the sum by the next numeral. For twenty-two letters, the number of permutations is 1,124,000,727,777,607,680,000 (thats one sextillion ...). But accumulating the sums, one can calculate the total number of permutations for the usual alphabetic sequence. By varying the alphabetic sequence and then generating a new set of permutations, one does pass beyond comprehensibility. Note, however, that this Jewish creative magic does not compel God (as does pagan magic). It has power only over matter and, perhaps, angels.

Commentary on Chapter 5

5.1 These are the twelve activities that characterize man. Again, the manuscripts differ on the sequence.

5.2 The image here is of a person who is inside a cube which, in turn, is inside a sphere. To picture it more easily, disregard the sphere. Facing in any direction, the person imagines a plane which is parallel with his face. He when imagines this plane intersecting with the perpendicular plane coming at his face-plane from behind, on his right side. Then, from behind, on his left side; then, from behind, above; and then from behind below. He is, thus, boxed in front, on two sides, above, and below by these planes. The lines of intersection are the "borders" of the mishna. As the cube grows to infinity, so do the lines of intersection.

5.7 The chart for this is as follow:

Letter	Hey	Vav	Zayin	Chet	Tet	Yod	Lamed	Nun	Samech	Ayin	Tzade	Kof
Constellation												
Month												
Organ												

The diagram in Figure 8 shows the representation as a sunset, with the letter "AU" being an Aleph. Note that the sunset, wall, and battle images, while representing the same creative process, evoke completely different moods as images.

Commentary on Chapter 6

6.1 The original texts here are more obscure than usual. Stenring (The Book of Formation, p. 27) lists several mishnayot before this one which summarize the preceding chapters. I have chosen to pick up the narrative at the point of greatest consensus. Note that this is the sixth chapter, corresponding to the sixth day of Creation. The author summarizes the book in several ways and adds three new images: (1) the Dragon - a constellation near the North Star, which swallows the sun and the moon during eclipses, (2) the Diurnal Sphere - the outermost heaven, which rotates once every twenty-four hours and sets the basic rhythm of time, and (3) the Heart - the central organ of the body, which feels and thinks.

Note, too, that nature is a witness, a proof, of the creative order.

6.2 See above, 1:1.

6.3 The Dragon rules the material world. The Diurnal Sphere rules time. And the Heart rules the body. The three metaphors are not clear.

6.6 These are some of the combinations of God's various names.

6.7 The phrase "at Creation as ..." is in only some manuscripts, but it does confirm that this is a magical text and that the word nefesh used here and throughout is intended to mean "living bodies." Note that there are two covenants - one for progeny and one for creative power - and that both the tongue and the male organ can serve as images for either covenant.

The Sefer Yetzirah has no real end. Rather, there are all sorts of endings. This indicates that part of the secret creative power as exercised by God and men was still consciously hidden.

Conclusion

From Understanding Jewish Mysticism.

Our study of Ma'aseh Bereshit, "The Mechanics of Creation," as represented by the Sefer Yetzirah has shown us a world which is very strange to modern minds. It is a world founded on intangible beings. It is a world created, and sustained, by animated letters and spiritual "elements." It is a world of strange correlations and of an even stranger cause-effect structure. Yet it definitely has a power and beauty of its own.

By whom and for whom was the Sefer Yetzirah written? It was written by highly educated orthodox rabbis for other highly educated orthodox rabbis. It was not intended for the masses. It is not written in simple style. In fact, after fifteen centuries of commentation, some of its key passages are still not clear. Why was this book written? It was written as an elucidation of some of the problems of the Genesis Creation story and as instruction in creative magic. The Talmud, that great compendium of rabbinic literature, reports many instances of magic as practiced by the rabbis. One example must suffice:

What [magic] is entirely permitted? Such as [the magic] performed by R. Hanina and R. 'Oshai, who spend every Sabbath eve in studying the Laws of Creation, by means of which they created a third-grown calf, and it it. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 67a, cited in J. Neusner, *There We Sat Down* {New York and Nashville: Abindon Press, 1972}, p. 80.)

The Talmud does not specify how or why the "Laws of Creation" worked, but the Sefer Yetzirah does. Creative magic "worked" for the rabbis because Creation itself was, after the formation of the sefirot and the letters, a mechanical - a magical - process.

By this I mean that God, too, in Creation acted as an artisan who uses his tools and material and who, therewith, "creates" new objects. God used His animated letters and spiritual elements, and once man had the knowledge and spirituality, he too could use the same tools and the same elements to create. Rabbinic magic was not a coercing of God into doing the will of man. It was a parallel, though lesser, use of the same Power. And for that reason, magic was "permitted" with Rabbinic Judaism only when practiced by a rabbi, that is, only when the creative act was done with the same spiritual craftsmanship as the original Creative Act. The rabbi, when pious and knowledgeable, shared part of God's Power. That was the "image" of God in which man had been created.

Finally, a study of Sefer Yetzirah does yield answers to some, but not all, of the unanswered questions of Genesis. First, Sefer Yetzirah clearly states that the "uncreated" elements of the Genesis text all were, in fact, generated at their proper time and place in the unfolding of the universe. Thus, the chaos, the abyss, the waters, the spiritual air, the angels, the darkness, etc., all came into being after Creation had begun. Nothing was co-eternal with God. Second, Sefer Yetzirah clearly interprets "image" of God in which man was created as the power of "hewing and engraving," i.e., the power of Creation itself, on a lesser scale to be sure. Third, Sefer Yetzirah interprets the "speech" of God in a very clear way. God did not talk to himself, like an absolute monarch who wills and it is

done. Rather, He generated substance, from which He formed letters, out of which He combined "words," which became things. God's "speech" was not sound but a modeling of units of clay. He is the great Potter here, not the King. Fourth, the gap between God, Who is pure spirit, and Creation, which is matter, is here bridged by the various levels of spiritual matter and spiritual beings. We still do not know how the transition from spirit to matter is accomplished, except that it is done in states. That is an important contribution (right or wrong) to the understanding of what happened at Creation. And last, Sefer Yetzirah does not tell us anything of why God created the world. Although it teaches us some of the secrets of how the universe came to be, Sefer Yetzirah still does not tell us why there was a Beginning. Is this a more elegant version than Genesis? Is it more spiritual? And, in the end, do we really know?