

Where is God in all this? What earthly figure here is the metaphoric analogy of God? Third, I have referred to this book as a text in creative magic. How did that magic work? Why did it work? Who used it, and why? And fourth, we want to bear in mind the general questions of this whole unit: What are the characteristics of this material? What kind of impression does it leave the reader with? And what motivates this kind of text? What is its secret?

The structure of *Sefer Yetsira* is as follows: Chapter 1 describes the *sefirot*. Chapter 2 describes the origin and function of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with the three types of letters contained in the alphabet and their respective functions in Creation. Chapter 6 is the conclusion. Each chapter is broken down into units, and each of these is called a *mishna* (pl. *mishnayot*), which simply means, "a unit of study." This is the same term used in the legal rabbinic materials.

The translation given here is my own, based upon the Hebrew texts in L. Goldschmidt, *Das Buch der Schöpfung* (Darmstadt, 1969), and *Sefer Yetsira*, anon. ed. (Jerusalem, 1964). I have also used the German translation of Goldschmidt; the English translation of K. Stenring, *The Book of Formation* (1923; reprinted., New York: Ktav, 1970); and the English translation of an anonymous, uncopyrighted pamphlet which was sent to me through the mail. The translation is accompanied by notes, which are my own, and by diagrams where I felt they would be helpful. As with many such texts, there are parts which I do not understand, and I have indicated them in the notes.

## *Sefer Yetsira: Text and Commentary*

### CHAPTER 1

1. By means of thirty-two wonderful paths of wisdom, YH, YHVH of Hosts, ELOHIM of Israel, Living ELOHIM, and Eternal King, EL SHADDAI, Merciful and Gracious, High and Uplifted, Who inhabits Eternity, exalted and holy is His Name, engraved. And He created His universe by three principles: by border and letter and number.
2. There are ten intangible sefirot and twenty-two letters as a foundation: three are Mothers, and seven double, and twelve simple.

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MISHNA 1: There are three points to note here: (1) The thirty-two wonderful (or hidden) paths of wisdom are the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet plus the first ten numbers of the decimal system. (2) The multiplying of names and terms seen here is one of the characteristics of rabbinic Hebrew style. Traces of it can also be seen in the liturgy and the legal literature. Here, several names of God are enumerated. YHVH is the Tetragrammaton, i.e., the most holy and most personal name of God. It is usually rendered Yahweh or Jehovah in English. (3) The last three terms can be translated many ways. This rendering is good, but one must understand "border" to mean "boundedness." It becomes clear, then, that God created the world—i.e., made it bordered, bounded, finite—by the use of letters and numbers. Bear in mind that letters and numbers, in antiquity, are not just signs or symbols but have real existence outside our minds and, in this case, are also holy.

MISHNA 2: The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters, and by the accepted rules of grammar, seven pairs of the letters have the same shape, with one member of each pair having an (extra) dot in the middle. The dot changes the pronunciation of the letter slightly (see below, chap. 4 of *Sefer Yetsira*). These are the "seven doubles." By the accepted rules, twelve letters have no dotted pairs. These are called "simple letters" (cf. below, chap. 5 of *Sefer Yetsira*). That leaves three letters which the author chose, by means not clear to us, to single out. These he calls the "Mothers" (cf. chap. 3 of *Sefer Yetsira*).

3. There are ten intangible sefirot: the number of the ten fingers, five opposite five, and in the center is set the covenant of the Only One with the word of the tongue, and with the covenant of nakedness.
4. There are ten intangible sefirot: ten and not nine, ten and not eleven. Understand with wisdom, and be wise with understanding, test them and explore them, know, count, and form. Understand the matter thoroughly, and set the Creator in His place. He alone is the Former and Creator. There is no other. His attributes are ten and infinite.
5. There are ten intangible sefirot whose measure is ten without end:

depth of First, and depth of Last, depth of Good, and depth of Evil, depth of Height, and depth of Abyss, depth of East, and depth of West, depth of North, and depth of South.

Lord, Only One, EL, faithful King, rules all of them from His holy Dwelling-Place unto Eternity.

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MISHNA 3: This mishna seeks to evoke some visual image although it is not clear what the image is. 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 "covenant of nakedness," i.e., the circumcised male organ. The symbolism, then, seems twofold: (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 par excellence for the creative process.

MISHNA 4: This is a magical mishna. First, the number ten is precisely set and proper wisdom evoked. Then, the reader is told "test" and "explore" (and in some manuscripts also "know, calculate, and form")—i.e., to try to combine letters and numbers and to "create" as God 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 who cannot, however, speak). 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; 6:7 (i.e., chap. 2, mishna 4 and mishna 5, etc.).

MISHNA 5: Here, 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.

6. There are ten intangible sefirot whose appearance is like lightning and whose limits are infinite. His word is in them in their to-and-fro movement, and they run at His command like the whirlwind, and before His Throne they bow down.
7. There are ten intangible sefirot whose end is fixed in their beginning, as the flame is bound to the coal. Know, count, and form. For the Lord is the Only One, and the Former is One. He has no second, and before one what can you count?
8. There are ten intangible sefirot. Shut your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking. And if your mouth runs to speak and your heart to reflect, return to the place, for thus it is said: "And the living creatures ran and returned," and upon this word a covenant is cut.
9. There are ten intangible sefirot. One: Spirit of living ELOHIM, blessed and blest is the Name of Him Who lives forever. (Sound, spirit, and speech, and speech is the Holy Spirit.) His beginning has no beginning, and His end has no end.

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MISHNA 6: The images here are taken from Ezekiel 1.

MISHNA 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.

MISHNA 8: The Hebrew 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 any thing.") 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, where one is told to "direct one's heart," i.e., consciousness, to God. (2) The "covenant" is the agreement of the initiates not to speak openly of the mysteries. It is an oath of secrecy.

MISHNA 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"

10. Two: Spiritual Air from Spirit. He engraved and hewed out in it twenty-two letters as a foundation: three Mothers, and seven double, and twelve simple, and they are of One Spirit.
11. Three: Spiritual Water from Spiritual Air. He engraved and hewed out in it chaos and disorder, mud and mire. He engraved it like a kind of furrow. He raised it like a kind of wall. He surrounded it like a kind of ceiling. He poured snow over them and it became earth, as it is said, "For He said to the snow, Be earth" [Job 37:6].
12. Four: Spiritual Fire from Spiritual Water. He engraved and hewed out in it the Throne of Glory, Seraphim, and Ophanim, and Hayot, and Ministering Angels. And from the three of them He established his Dwelling-Place, as it is said: "Who makes winds His messengers, the flaming fire His ministers" [Ps. 104:4].

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(Gen. 1:2, 6), and the "fire," which, according to the rabbis, was created on the second day (Gen. 1:6-8). The phrase in parenthesis is not in all manuscripts and may be out of place.

MISHNA 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 with 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 Yetsira*). The middle term is complicated. It is intangible, an 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.

MISHNA 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 an image on a coin). The three metaphors may refer to different visual images of the same action or to three different types of creative activity. The initiate, presumably, knew.

MISHNA 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

13. He chose three of the simple letters, sealed them with Spirit and set them into His great Name, YHV, and sealed through them six extremities. Five: He sealed Height; He turned upward and sealed it with YHV. Six: He sealed Abyss; He turned downward and sealed it with YVH. Seven: He sealed East; He turned forward and sealed it with HYV. Eight: He sealed West; He turned backward and sealed it with HVY. Nine: He sealed South; He turned right and sealed it with VYH. Ten: He sealed North; He turned left and sealed it with VHY.
14. These ten intangible sefirot are One— Spirit of Living ELOHIM, Spiritual Air from Spirit, Spiritual Water from Spiritual Air, Spiritual Fire from Spiritual Water, Height, Abyss, East, West, North, and South.

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seven heavens (cf. below, "The Chapters on Ascent")—are made from the three "spiritual elements."

MISHNA 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 mishna 14.

What is the relationship of this chapter to Genesis 1? It supplies answers to the following questions: Where did the "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 the realms, the tools, and the boundaries of Creation.) Where do angels come from? (From the 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.

## CHAPTER 6

1. These are three Mothers: Aleph, Mem, Shin. There go out from them three Fathers and from the Fathers are Progeny. Three Fathers and their progeny, and seven stars and their hosts, and twelve borders of a diagonal. As proof of the thing are faithful witnesses in the universe, year, body, and the law of the twelve, seven, and three. He assigned them in the Dragon, the Diurnal Sphere, and the Heart.
2. These are three Mothers: Aleph, Mem, Shin—Air, Water, Fire: Fire above, Water below, and Air is that which tips the balance between them. And this is the sign of the thing: the Fire bears the Water. The Mem stands still, the Shin hisses, and the Aleph is Air which tips the balance between them.
3. The Dragon in the universe is like a king on his throne. The Diurnal Sphere in the year is like a king in the province. The Heart in the body is like a king in battle.

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MISHNA 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.

MISHNA 2: See above, 1:1.

MISHNA 3: The Dragon rules the material world. The Diurnal Sphere rules time. And the Heart rules the body. The three metaphors are not clear.

4. Also ELOHIM made every object, one opposite the other: good opposite evil, evil opposite good; good from good, evil from evil. The good delineates the evil and the evil delineates the good. Good is kept for the good ones and evil is kept for the evil ones.
5. Three: Each person stands by himself: one acquits, one condemns, and one tips the balance between them. Seven: Three opposite three and one is that which tips the balance between them. Twelve: stand in battle: Three love, three hate, three give life, and three kill.
  - Three love: the heart and the ears.
  - Three hate: the liver, the gall, and the tongue.
  - Three give life: the two apertures of the nose and the spleen.
  - Three kill: the two orifices and the mouth.
 And EL, the faithful King, rules over all of them from His Holy Dwelling-place unto Eternity. One is above three, three above seven, seven above twelve, and all of them connected with each other. The sign of it is: twenty-two needs in one body.
6. These are the twenty-two letters through which EHEYEH YH, YHVH-ELOHIM, ELOHIM-YHVH, YHVH of Hosts, ELOHIM of Hosts, EL SHADDAI, YHVH-Lord, engraved. And He made from them three principles, and created from them all His universe, and He formed through them everything that is formed, and everything that is destined to be formed.
7. When Abraham our father, may he rest in peace, came: he
  - looked, and
  - saw, and
  - understood, and
  - explored, and
  - engraved, and
  - hewed out, and
  - succeeded at Creation as it is said, "And the bodies they had made in Haran" [Genesis 12:5].

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MISHNA 6: These are some of the combinations of God's various names.

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

The Lord of All—may His Name be praised forever—was revealed to him, and  
 He set him in His bosom, and  
 He kissed him on his head, and  
 He called him “Abraham, my beloved” [Isaiah 41:8], and  
 He cut a covenant with him and with his seed forever,  
     as it is said “And he believed in YHVH, and He considered it to him for righteousness” [Genesis 15:6], and  
 He cut a covenant with him between the ten fingers of his hands, and that is the covenant of the tongue, and between the ten toes of his feet, and that is the covenant of the circumcision, and  
 He tied the twenty-two letters of the Torah in his tongue, and  
 He revealed to him His secret:  
     He drew them through Water,  
     He burned them in Fire,  
     He shook them through the Air,  
     He kindled them in the Seven Stars  
     He led them through the twelve constellations.  
 [ . . . ]

### Conclusion

Our study of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, “The Mechanics of Creation,” as represented by the *Sefer Yetsira* 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 *Sefer Yetsira* 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 the 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 an 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. 'Oshaia, who spent every Sabbath eve in studying the Laws of Creation, by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it.\*

The Talmud does not specify how or why the “Laws of Creation” worked, but the *Sefer Yetsira* 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

\*Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 67a, cited in J. Neusner, *There We Sat Down* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 80.