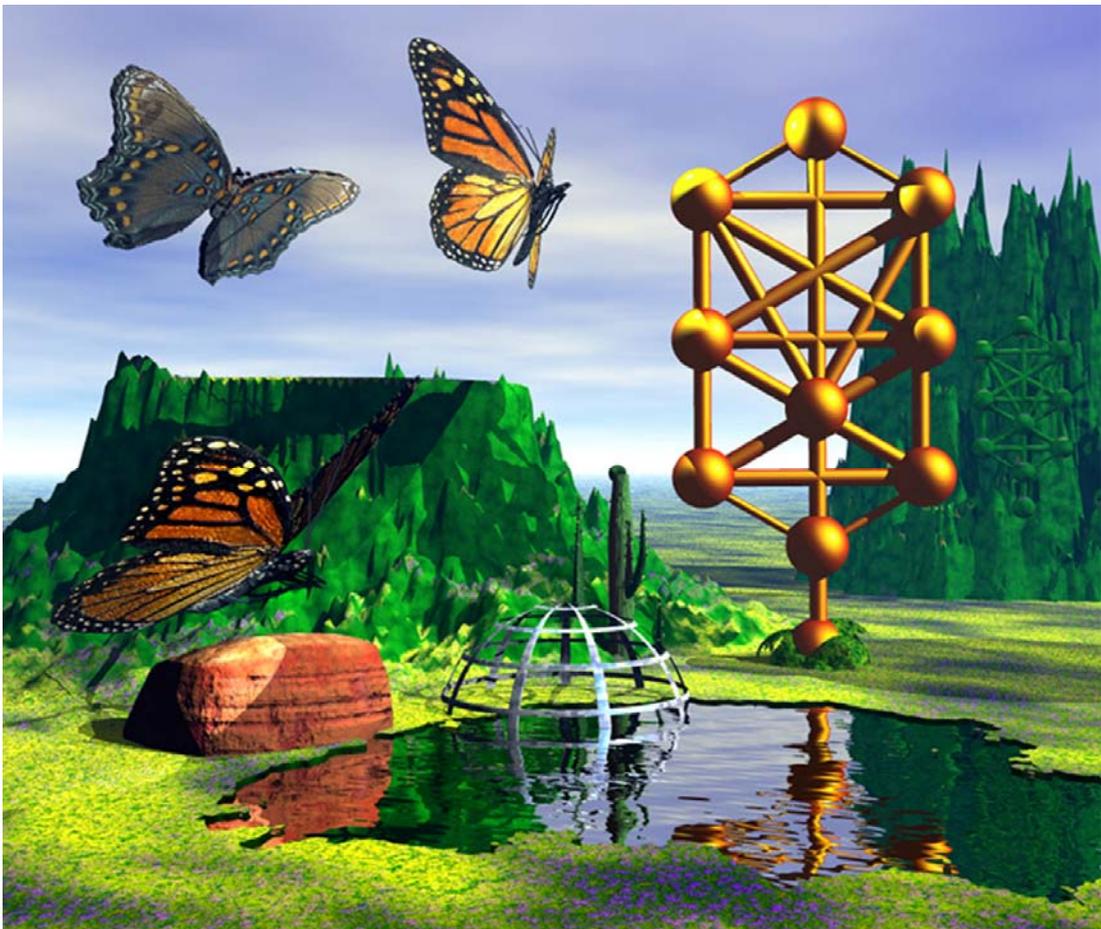


1-PAGE TORAH

A COLLECTION OF UNIQUE TORAH COMMENTARIES THAT ARE ONE
PAGE IN LENGTH

BY

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“Do not follow the multitude to do evil.” – Exodus 23:2

“All multitudes do evil.” – The Book of Benton

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INTRODUCTION

I hate long introductions, so this will be as short as possible. This book began with a goal to write several *Torah* commentaries while making each one only a single type-written page in length (MS Word). Hence, the title “1-Page Torah” that was also inspired by a popular anime series titled “1-Punch Man.” Additionally, by making each *Torah* commentary so short, none of them will take very long to read. However, the fault (or feature) of this is that explanations are often abbreviated and, consequently, incomplete. Overall, though, I see this as more of a feature rather than a fault as it leaves room for the reader to round out the discussion with their own thoughts. Plus, if nothing else, this set of *Torah* commentaries will introduce one to a wide range of both rabbinic and mystical Jewish literature, and that, in and of itself, should make it all worthwhile.

Long ago the rabbis divided up the *Torah* into smaller sections that could be studied weekly in groups at one’s synagogue. The names for these *Torah* portions are always derived from a distinctive word near the beginning of that portion. For example, *Bereshit* means “In the beginning,” and it covers *Genesis* 1:1-6:8. Likewise, *Noach* covers the Noah story from *Genesis* 6:9-11:32. As for the names of the other *Torah* portions, it’s not really necessary to know their translations into English, and, furthermore, the verses of the *Torah* covered by each portion are listed in the *Contents*.

Most *Torah* commentaries focus just on ethical lessons, and there are many, many astute commentaries of this sort that I can’t even begin to compete with, and, thus, the focus of my commentaries is quite different. Much of my commentary focuses on either the mystical literature of Judaism or the interpretive literature of the rabbis known as *Midrash*. In particular, I’ll frequently cite material from tractates of the *Babylonian Talmud* (excerpts from this source are usually prefaced by the letter *B* for *Babylonian* as in *B. Sanhedrin 36a*) or from the *Midrash Rabbah Collection*. The word *Rabbah* means “big” or “great,” and *Midrash Rabbah* is a big rabbinical commentary on the books of the *Torah* as well as a few other books in the *Hebrew Bible*. Furthermore, my writings contain several quotes from the mystical *Zohar* (Book of Radiance) that was composed in the 1200s. The *Zohar* is arranged by *Torah* portion, but it often goes off on its own tangents and while sometimes I briefly show how a tangent in the *Zohar* directly connects to the *Biblical* text, there are other times that I lack the space to do so. However, even if you have no idea how what the *Zohar* is saying is connected to a particular part of the *Torah*, just go with it and focus on the lesson the *Zohar* is trying to convey. Some of the additional texts I quote are the *Sefer Yetzirah* (the Book of Creation, the oldest extant book in Jewish mysticism), *Pirkei Avot* (Chapters of the Fathers, pithy sayings by the rabbis of the *Talmud*), and the *Bahir*, (Book of Brilliance, composed in the 1100s).

There are also a few different names for *God* one should know. The two most common names for *God* in the *Hebrew Bible* are *Elohim* and *yud-hey-vav-hey*. This latter name is usually unpronounced, and it is often referred to as either the TETRAGRAMMATON (4-letter name) or as *Adonai* (Lord). Also referenced is the *Shechinah* which stands for the feminine aspect of *God* that is felt as a nurturing *presence*. Finally, you can read the sections of this book either in or out of order. Either way, enjoy!

BERESHIT

(*Genesis 1:1-6:8*)

THE TORAH IS THE BLUEPRINT FOR THE UNIVERSE!
THE PRIMORDIAL LIGHT
TOHU AND BOHU
THE BASIC PATTERN FOR CREATION
PLAY MISTY FOR ME!
MORE IMPULSIVENESS
THE TEN UTTERANCES
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HARD NONDUALISM VERSUS SOFT NONDUALISM
ONENESS IN THE ZOHAR

THE TORAH IS THE BLUEPRINT FOR THE UNIVERSE!

At the beginning of *Genesis Rabbah* we read the following,

“Rabbi Oshaya commenced his exposition thus: Then I was by Him, as a nursling (*amon*); and I was daily all delight (*Proverbs* 8:30). ‘*Amon*’ means tutor; ‘*amon*’ means covered; ‘*amon*’ means hidden; and some say, ‘*amon*’ means great. ‘*Amon*’ is a tutor, as you read, As an *omen* (nursing father) carrieth the sucking child (*Numbers* 11:12). ‘*Amon*’ means covered, as in the verse, *Ha’emunim* (they that were clad-i.e. covered) in scarlet (*Lamentations* 4:5). ‘*Amon*’ means hidden, as in the verse, And he concealed (*omen*) Hadassah (*Esther* 2:7). ‘*Amon*’ means great, as in the verse, Art thou better than *No-amon* (*Nahum* 3:8)? which is rendered, Art thou better than Alexandria the Great, that is situate among the rivers? Another interpretation: ‘*amon*’ is a workman (*uman*). The *Torah* declares: ‘I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.’ In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus *God* consulted the *Torah* and created the world, while the *Torah* declares, IN THE BEGINNING *GOD* CREATED (*Genesis* 1:1), BEGINNING referring to the *Torah*, as in the verse, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (*Proverbs* 8:22).”
(*Genesis Rabbah* I:1)

There are several things that must be clarified here. First, one should read *Proverbs* 8 in its entirety due to the many references to it, and I would also recommend reading *Proverbs* 3. Second, the pronoun “she” in *Proverbs* generally refers to *wisdom* (*Proverbs* 8:1-2) and to the *tree of life* (*Proverbs* 3:18). Likewise, *Torah* is also associated with *wisdom* (*Proverbs* 31:26) and, hence, with the *tree of life*. Furthermore, in *Proverbs* 8:30 we have *wisdom* being compared to a little child or nursling, but the word for nursling can also be translated as meaning workman or architect. Consequently, the bottom line of all of these associations is the conclusion that the *Torah* existed before the rest of creation and that it was used as the blueprint for creation!

A question that is often overlooked at this point is, “Why?” Why in this *Midrash* do the rabbis want to establish such a role for *Torah*? After all, the *Torah* is already seen as the word of *God*, and shouldn’t that be exaltation enough? Well, I believe the answer to this question lies in the pressure Judaism was feeling at this point from that younger religion known as Christianity. Furthermore, Rabbi Oshaya was known for his debates with Christian clergy and scholars, and so it wouldn’t be surprising to discover that this *Midrash* is also a rebuttal of sorts to Christianity. In particular, one should note that Jesus was a carpenter which means Jesus was a builder, and that suggests that Jesus was like *God* in that he could also create things. However, what is the one thing that precedes even the builder? Clearly, the blueprint! Hence, by declaring the *Torah* to be the blueprint for all of creation, the rabbis were placing the *Torah* above Jesus and Judaism above Christianity. And as is often the case, this *Midrash* has a political agenda!

THE PRIMORDIAL LIGHT

We don't have to go very far in the *Torah* before we find some problems with the text. Namely, at the very beginning of *Genesis* we read that *God* created light on the first day, but then he created the Sun and the Moon and the stars on the fourth day.

“And *God* said, Let there be light; and there was light (on Day 1).”
(*Genesis* 1:3)

“And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth; and it was so. And *God* made two great lights; the large light to rule the day, and the small light to rule the night; and he made the stars (all on Day 4). And *God* set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth.”
(*Genesis* 1:15-17)

The problem is that light was created on the first day, but all the ancient sources of light were created on the fourth day. How can that be? What happened to the light that was created on the first day? Well, the rabbis concluded that this was a special spiritual light set aside for the righteous.

“But it is written And *God* said: Let there be light? ... But when [*God*] saw that wicked people were destined to arise, such as the generation of Enosh and the generation of the Flood, and the generation of the Division, and the men of Sodom, he took it away. That is the meaning of the verse, But from the wicked, their light is withholden (*Job* 38:15), and He hid it away for the righteous in the time to come, as it is said, Light is sown for the righteous (*Psalms* 97:11).”
(*Ruth Rabbah Prologue* VII)

The *Zohar*, as one might expect, notes that the Jewish people have a special duty to be “a light to the nations (*Isaiah* 49:6).”

“The children of Israel stand here below as emissaries of the Most High, to open the gates, to shed light upon the ways, to kindle the radiance of the heavenly fire, to draw all things that are below near to them that are above, in order that all may become a unity.”
(*Zohar* II:181b)

While the ancient sages saw this light in terms of a special duty for the Jewish people, let me note that *Psalms* 97:11 says that light is sown for the righteous, not just righteous Jews, but all righteous people regardless of race, creed, gender, or national origin. It is a spiritual light available to all, and the qualification for this light is not to be a Jew, but to be righteous. Any righteous person can access this light to the degree that they are indeed righteous. Furthermore, if you have experienced love or joy, then you have tasted this light. And to the degree that you live properly and expand your understanding, to that degree you will know the light and can be a light unto others through your example. It is primarily through your actions rather than your words that you may be able to best share your light. And if requested, words can come later.

TOHU AND BOHU

Everyone knows *Genesis* 1:2 where we read, “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And a wind from God moved upon the face of the waters.” The Hebrew words that are often translated as “without form” and “void” are *tohu* and *bohu*. The translation of these words is somewhat uncertain, and other renderings that one can find in rabbinic literature, for example, are “bewildered and astonished” and “chaos and confusion.” In the *Zohar*, we find *tohu* associated with the right side of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, and, thus, it is associated with formlessness while *bohu*, on the other hand, is associated with the left side and it has form. If I use the English words “chaos” for *tohu* and “confusion” for *bohu*, then I would say that chaos is a state that we literally cannot make sense of with our left brains, and, consequently, we cannot fully describe what is occurring. In contrast, confusion or *bohu* is more akin to a messy room. We can perceive all the details, and the result is something that is just a mess.

“*Tohu* is a place which has no color and no form, and the esoteric principle of “form” does not apply to it. It seems for a moment to have a form, but when looked at again it has no form. Everything has a “vestment” except this. *Bohu*, on the other hand, has shape and form.”
(*Zohar* I:16a)

In the *Midrash*, however, Rav Huna marvels at how our highly organized world rests upon a foundation that is equivalent to garbage.

“In human practice, when an earthly monarch builds a palace on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage, if one says, ‘This palace is built on a site of sewers, dunghills, and garbage,’ does he not discredit it? Thus, whoever comes to say that this world was created out of *tohu* and *bohu* and darkness, does he not indeed impair [*God's* glory]! R. Huna said in Bar Kappara's name: If the matter were not written, it would be impossible to say it, viz., GOD CREATED HEAVEN AND EARTH; out of what? Out of NOW THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU (*Genesis* 1:2).”
(*Genesis Rabbah* I:5)

When looked at through the lens of modern science, I see something quite remarkable here. Namely, that the universe from its very beginning through the Big Bang has been characterized by random chaos. In physics this is the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. This is the law that says that everything we do just adds to the overall randomness of the universe. In other words, even though the universe contains both hot places and cold places, everything is inexorably headed towards “lukewarm.” Salt and pepper will inevitably be randomly distributed. However, life, itself, is the very antithesis of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. Life represents structure and organization, not randomness, and while all our efforts at creating order still add to the overall universal disorder, we are, nonetheless, unable to help ourselves. We are biologically driven to create more organization and order and ever higher levels of complexity, and all our science and religion are examples of this. Still, don't forget that chaos exists as a part of the whole.

THE BASIC PATTERN FOR CREATION

In *Ecclesiastes* we read the following,

“This against this made the *Elohim* to the end that man should find nothing after Him.”
(*Ecclesiastes* 7:14)

Not many people realize that this passage might be considered as the foundation of all Jewish mysticism. In particular, it is found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation, which is the oldest extant book on Jewish mysticism, and it is also found in the *Bahir*, the Book of Brilliance, whose publication preceded that of the *Zohar* by about a hundred years, and it is found in the *Zohar*, too. Additionally, in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the basic pattern that is presented for creation is one of three – two opposites plus a third element that allows for interaction between the opposites. In the *Sefer Yetzirah* this pattern is initially represented by the opposites of *fire* and *water* with *air (steam)* serving as the intermediary between the two. This pattern is also identical to that of *yin* and *yang* and the constant change or interaction between the two that is the basis of so much Taoist philosophy.

One could argue, though, that our verse from *Ecclesiastes* only mentions the opposites, but not the principle of interaction between them. Thus, how do we account for this third principle that the Jewish mystics knew was necessary? Easy! We can find that in *Genesis*.

“And *God* said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.”
(*Genesis* 1:6)

The upper waters and the lower waters are the two opposites, and the firmament represents the principle of communication between the two. Furthermore, this is confirmed by the following from the *Zohar*,

“The lower waters call to the upper and drink them in through the medium of this firmament, because all the upper waters are collected in it.”
(*Zohar* I:32b)

Thus, the pattern of three that we see in *Genesis* was continued in *Ecclesiastes* and became the foundation for the mysticism of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. However, don't forget the last part of *Ecclesiastes* 7:14, “to the end that man should find nothing after Him.” The whole point of this separation of things into pairs of opposites is to intellectually realize and mentally experience that the so-called opposites and their interaction are all the same. They are all just different versions of the presence of *God*. In other words, once we realize that the upper waters and the lower waters and the firmament are all just water, then the opposites will disappear and all that will remain will be a unified *Presence*, and yet we can understand this unity only by first knowing opposites.

PLAY MISTY FOR ME!

In *Genesis 2:6* we read the following,

“And a mist went up from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.”
(*Genesis 2:6*)

Now look at what the *Zohar* says about this:

“A MIST WENT UP FROM THE GROUND, to repair the deficiency below, by “watering the whole face of the ground”. The rising of the mist signifies the yearning of the female for the male. According to another explanation, we supply the word “not” from the previous clause after “mist”, the meaning being that God did not send rain because a mist had not gone up, etc., it being necessary for the impulse from below to set in motion the power above. So vapor first ascends from the earth to form the cloud. Similarly, the smoke of the sacrifice rises and creates harmony above, so that all unite, and in this way there is completion in the supernal realm. The impulse commences from below, and from this all is perfected. If the Community of Israel did not give the first impulse, the One above would not move to meet her, for by the yearning from below completion is effected above.” (*Zohar I:35a*)

There are certain themes in the *Zohar* that appear over and over again, and one of these is that any change we want has to begin with us. It is our desire, our impulse to accomplish something. that sets the wheels in motion. Also, as our *Zohar* passage suggests, this doctrine is a natural development of the sacrificial system where the response from a deity follows the offering. In this as in other cases, it all begins with our impulse to achieve a particular outcome.

Think about all that you have accomplished in your life so far, and you will probably realize that everything you have done began first as a thought or desire for such an accomplishment. In my own life, I remember as a child in 1st grade thinking that if I studied the daily list of spelling words the night before, then I could probably make a 100 on each of our daily spelling quizzes for the rest of the semester. And so I did! The point, though, is that this outcome occurred because I first took action toward such an outcome. Likewise, when I was in graduate school in mathematics and had truly tremendous problems to solve for homework, my daily mantra was, “How the heck do I solve this one?” However, it turned out that that desire to solve the problem, that impulse that originated from me, was all it took to get the process started and before too long all sorts of ideas and solutions would pop into my head.

Sit down for a moment now and think about what you really want out of life and how you might accomplish that goal. If it is something you really want and really should do, then I’m confident the universe will help you find a way. However, there are also many times when we think we want something, but at deeper levels we really don’t, and in these cases the universe seems to help us best by shutting that door. Learning what you really want in life often takes time. Still, it all begins with you and your impulse to grow.

MORE IMPULSIVENESS

As mentioned previously, one prominent theme in the *Zohar* is that the impulse for any change has to begin with us, and the origin of this doctrine may very well be the sacrificial system where a sacrifice to *God* elicits and precedes the expected response. Below is just a collection of additional passages from the *Zohar* that discuss this idea. Enjoy!

“R. Eleazar was once on the way to visit his father-in-law along with R. Hiya and R. Jose and R. Hizkiah. Said R. Eleazar, ‘It is borne in upon me that stirring above is produced only in response to an impulse from below, and depends upon the longing of that below.’ He illustrated this from the text: O *God*, keep thou not silence, hold not thy peace, and be not still, O *God* (*Psalm* 83:2), which he expounded thus. ‘David said: “O *God*, keep thou not silence.” These words represent an impulse to *Elohim* to exert His sway.”
(*Zohar* I:86b)

““From the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof.” The “rising” is the supernal place from which the sun derives light to shine over all, the place of the supernal and hidden fountainhead. The “setting” is the place to which faith is attached, from which blessings issue to all, and from which the world is sustained, as has been affirmed. The whole depends upon the impulse from below which is given by the service of the Lord when they bless the Holy Name, as we have said.”
(*Zohar* I:233a)

“IN THE MORNING HE SHALL DEVOUR THE PREY (*Genesis* 49:27). This means that in the morning, when Abraham stirs in the world and it is the time of grace, the sacrifice brings appeasement and rises to the place called *ad* (perpetuity). We may also translate “In the morning *ad* shall eat”, this being the supernal throne which is forever and ever. The smoke ascends and love is awakened above, and a lamp is kindled and shines forth through this impulse from below.”
(*Zohar* I:247b-248a)

“Now the act below stimulates a corresponding activity above. Thus if a man does kindness on earth, he awakens lovingkindness above, and it rests upon that day which is crowned therewith through him. Similarly if he performs a deed of mercy, he crowns that day with mercy and it becomes his protector in the hour of need. So, too, if he performs a cruel action, he has a corresponding effect on that day and impairs it, so that subsequently it becomes cruel to him and tries to destroy him, giving him measure for measure.”
(*Zohar* III:92a-92b)

“In all things some action is required below to arouse the activity above. For observe: he who says that no action is needed or no audible utterance, a curse light on such a one! This section confutes him, of the lighting of the lights, for through this act there is a kindling above and a rejoicing above and below and a proper linking of both.’ R. Judah said: ‘The altar below rouses another altar, above, the priest below rouses another Priest, above.’” (*Zohar* III:105a)

THE TEN UTTERANCES

In *Pirkei Avot* (Chapters of the Fathers) we read the following,

“With ten utterances was the world created.”
(*Pirkei Avot* 5:1)

This is allegedly based upon the ten times that the expression *vai’yomer Elohim* (and said God) occurs in the first chapter of *Genesis*. In particular, this expression occurs in the first chapter of *Genesis* in verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, and 29. There are now two things that I should mention immediately. First, many of you may have *Bibles* where in the English in verse 28 of *Genesis* 1 it also says, “And God said unto them.” However, in the Hebrew it doesn’t use the exact phrase *vai’yomer Elohim* (and said God). Instead, the Hebrew that is used translates literally as, “And said to them God.” Hence, this occurrence doesn’t count as one of the times that we read “And said God.” The second thing to notice is that while I have indicated that the world was created with ten utterances, I’ve listed only nine verses above from the first chapter of *Genesis*. Clearly, this was not something the rabbis would overlook, and in the *Talmud* it is Rabbi Johanan who explains the discrepancy.

“R. Johanan said: The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? The expressions ‘And God said’ in the first chapter of *Genesis*. But there are only nine? — The words ‘In the beginning’ are also a creative utterance, since it is written, By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth (*Psalms* 33:6).”
(*B. Megilah* 21b)

The idea that the world was created with ten creative utterances suggests that words have a creative power, and in many ways this is true. Notice, too, that the Hebrew word for “word” (*devar*) also means “thing,” and this suggests that perhaps we can’t see something until we have a word for it. Concepts have to be identified before they can be perceived! Thus, for example, a word such as “snow” is meaningless unless one has actually experienced snow. Our development of language gives us words with which to better understand reality, but at the same time these words limit what we can actually perceive. They define both the boundaries and the relationships between objects in the reality that we perceive.

Another thing worth noticing is that the creation found in *Genesis* involves a process of separation and setting boundaries. Thus, for example, upper waters are separated from lower waters, light is separated from dark, day is separated from night, and land is separated from sea. The whole creative process is one of separation and the establishment of boundaries, and that is probably why the *Zohar* refers to this realm as the “world of separation” (*Zohar* I:22a).

TWENTY-TWO LETTERS AND THE CUBE OF SPACE

There is one tradition that *God* created the world with 10 utterances, but there is another tradition from the *Talmud* that the universe was created with the letters of Hebrew alphabet.

“Rab Judah said in the name of Rav: Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.”

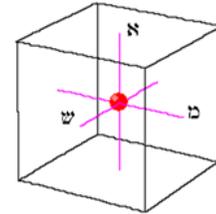
(*B. Berachot* 55a)

The Hebrew alphabet contains 22 letters, and while our *Talmudic* passage doesn't specifically state that all of the letters were used in the creation, that is generally assumed to be the case in works like the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) which is the oldest extant work on Jewish mysticism. In that short book, the author immediately reconciles the doctrine of the universe being created with 10 utterances versus 22 letters by means of the simple equation $10+22 = 32$. Also, it might be noted that since words (utterances) are composed of letters, it's not that hard to reconcile these two doctrines.

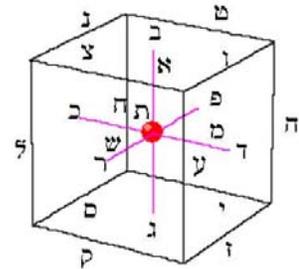
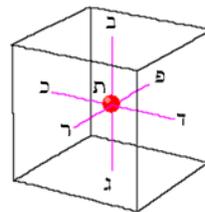
“With thirty-two wondrous paths (*netivot*) of ITS own wisdom, IT, Yah, the Creator of Multiplicity, created ITS universe.”

(*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1)

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet define a cube as an early model for the universe, a cube that some like to call the *Cube of Space*. The letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin* are called the “mother letters,” and they represent air, water, and fire, two opposites (water & fire) plus a third (air, steam) that represents the interaction between the opposites (*Ecclesiastes* 7:14). In the *Cube of Space*, these letters correspond to three spatial axes – up/down (aleph/air), east/west (mem/water), and north/south (shin/fire).



There are also seven double letters in the Hebrew alphabet. These are letters that can have either a hard or a soft sound, and they correspond to the six directions plus the very center of the cube. And lastly, there are twelve plain letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each letter corresponds to a personal experience such as seeing, hearing, and laughter. It's our personal experiences



that complete the creation of our world. And when we put it all together, we get the *Cube of Space*. (NOTE: Different ancient manuscripts label the edges in different ways with regard to the twelve letters. My way is the correct way.)

SEFER YETZIRAH 1:1

The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) is the oldest extant book on Jewish mysticism, and it contains within it succinct explanations of the *work of creation* and the *work of the chariot*, two forms of ancient mysticism mentioned in the *Talmud* in tractate *Chagigah* and with the latter corresponding to a technique of meditation. Based upon both the particular Hebrew of the text as well as some clues in the *Talmud*, I suspect that the *Sefer Yetzirah* was composed by the *Talmudic* sage Rav Huna (circa 212 CE – 297 CE). However, some scholars believe that the text was written either a few hundred years earlier or a few hundred years later. Furthermore, just as is the case with the *Zohar*, no original manuscript exists. Instead, we have four main variations of the original, and they are all similar to one another in the main points. Below, though, is my translation and commentary on the first verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

“With thirty-two wondrous paths (*netivot*) of ITS own wisdom, IT, *Yah*, the Creator of Multiplicity [the *God* of Israel, the living *God*, King of the Universe, *God Almighty*, merciful and gracious, high and exalted, dwelling in eternity, whose name is Holy, He is lofty and holy], created ITS universe with three books (*seferim*), with story (*sefer*, right brain), with number (*safar*, left brain), and with communication (*sippur*, interaction).”

The number 32 in this verse reconciles the rabbinic doctrine that *God* created the world with 10 utterances with the teaching that *God* created the world with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (10+22 = 32). Additionally, 32 is the sum of the first letter of the *Torah* (*bet*) and the last letter of the *Torah* (*lamed*), and *lamed-bet* spells “heart.” Thus, just as *Deuteronomy* 30:14 says that *Torah* is in our hearts, so is the *Torah* literally contained within the word *heart*. This verse also reflects the rabbinic teaching that *God* created the world using *Torah* as a guide (*Genesis Rabbah* I:10). The text continues by saying that *God* created the world with 32 wondrous paths (*netivot*). In Hebrew, the word *derekh* represents a wide path that can accommodate several people. In contrast to this is a *netivah* which is a narrow path that is made by a single individual. Thus, the choice of this word highlights the role that an individual plays in constructing the reality that they observe. Also, in *Proverbs* the word “wisdom” is identified as “female,” and the doctrine of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is that creation proceeds from the female principle, not the male. Additionally, in this verse I often use “IT” for *God* simply to illustrate the unknown nature of the *Creator*. However, I have also retained *Yah* which is a word used for *God* in *Isaiah*. Furthermore, the phrase that is usually rendered as “*Lord of Hosts*” has been translated by me as “*Creator of Multiplicity*.” This is because the name *yud-hey-vav-hey* that is generally replaced by “Lord” most likely, according to several linguists, translates best as the *Creator*, and the word usually translated as “Hosts” has a deeper meaning of a multiplicity of things. In other words, *God* is the creator of duality and multiplicity. Next are a series of epithets that are sometimes included in early versions and sometimes omitted. When included, they illustrate that we cannot see all of *God*. We can only see different aspects of *God*. And finally, the words *seferim*, *sefer*, *safar*, and *sippur* all have the same root, *samach-peh-resh*, that has a numerical value of 340 and which is the same as *shem* (*shin-mem*, *Name*). The *Name* refers both to the creation and the *Shechinah*, and the bottom line is that all is One and it is our brains that create our reality!

THE THREE MOTHER LETTERS

Ecclesiastes 7:14 expresses a fundamental tenet of Jewish mysticism – namely, that *God* has made one thing opposite another. In addition, *Genesis* 1:6 establishes the existence of a firmament between the lower and upper waters, and the *Zohar* interprets this firmament as an interaction between the two opposites. And this is also the fundamental pattern for creation that is highlighted in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. In that text, the fundamental triad consisting of a pair of opposites with interaction between them is represented by the three mother letters – *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*. *Aleph* stands for “air” (*avir*, *aleph-vav-yud-resh*), *mem* stands for “water” (*mayim*, *mem-yud-mem*), and *shin* stands for “fire” (*aish*, *aleph-shin*). Additionally, the “father letters” *yud*, *hey*, and *vav* are derived from the mother letters, and this points to a sharp distinction between the early Jewish mysticism of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the later declarations of the *Zohar*. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it is the female principle that gives birth to creation whereas in the *Zohar*, as in one of the tales of Adam and Eve, the male principle is created first followed by the female. I personally prefer the former where, just as is the case with the female Wisdom of *Proverbs*, life comes from the feminine. Also, if we substitute *aleph-mem-shin* for *yud-hey-vav* in *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:13 below, then we see the association of ***aleph* with above/below, *mem* with east/west, and *shin* with north/south.** Additionally, this cipher turns the “father name” into *aleph-mem-shin-mem* which literally spells “mother name!”

“Three mothers, *aleph-mem-shin*. Their foundation is a scale of credit and a scale of debit, and the tongue of decree decides between them. Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin*, a great and wondrous secret, covered and sealed with six rings, and out of them air, water, fire, and from them originated fathers (*yud-he-vav*), and from fathers, consequences.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:1-3:2)

“Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin* in the world, air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, and earth was created from water, and air from spirit/breath decides between them. Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin* in the year. Hot, cold, and moderate. Hot was created from fire, cold was created from water, and the time of moderation from spirit/breath decides between them. Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin* in the person, male and female. Head and abdomen and chest. Head is created from fire, and abdomen is created from water, and the chest from spirit/breath decides between them.” (Sefer Yetzirah 3:4-3:6)

“IT selected three letters from the plain ones, in mysterious counsel with the three mothers *aleph-mem-shin*, and IT placed them in ITS Great Name, and sealed/completed with them six extremes. Five: IT sealed/completed height and turned ITS attention to ascent and sealed/completed it with *yud-hey-vav*. Six: IT sealed/completed below and turned ITS attention to beneath and sealed/completed it with *yud-vav-hey*. Seven: IT sealed/completed east and turned ITS attention to front and sealed/completed it with *hey-yud-vav*. Eight: IT sealed/completed west and turned ITS attention to behind and sealed/completed it with *hey-vav-yud*. Nine: IT sealed/completed south and turned ITS attention to the right side and sealed/completed it with *vav-yud-hey*. Ten: IT sealed/completed north and turned ITS attention to the left side and sealed/completed it with *vav-hey-yud*.” (Sefer Yetzirah 1:13)

THE SIX DIRECTIONS

The first word of the *Torah* is *bereshit* which is usually translated as, “In the beginning.” However, the *Zohar* sometimes likes to look upon this as a combination of the Hebrew *bara* for “He created” and the Aramaic *shit* for “six.” Hence, “He created six” refers to both the six days of creation and the six directions.

“*BERESHIT* (In the beginning). Said R. Yudai: ‘What is the meaning of *Bereshit*? It means “with Wisdom”, the Wisdom on which the world is based, and through this it introduces us to deep and recondite mysteries. In it, too, is the inscription of six chief supernal directions, out of which there issues the totality of existence. From the same there go forth six sources of rivers which flow into the Great Sea. This is implied in the word *Bereshit*, which can be analyzed into *BaRa-SHiT* (He created six).’”
(*Zohar* I:3b)

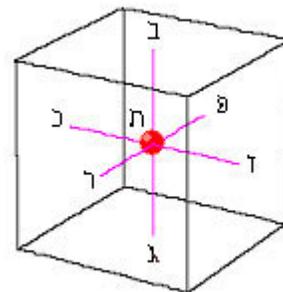
In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we find the seven double letters corresponding to these six directions plus the center of our *Cube of Space* model for the universe.

“Seven doubles *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav*. Their foundation is wisdom, wealth, seed, life, dominance, peace, and grace.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:2)

“Seven doubles *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav*. Ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south, and the Holy Temple dwelling in the middle, and it carries them all.”
(*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:4)

We can understand these attributions as follows. When we look up, the unbounded infinite dissolves our own boundaries and awakens us to wisdom. When we look down, we see the earth which is the source of all wealth on this planet. The east is where the Sun rises and we plant seeds for the new day. The west is where the Sun sets, and we reflect upon our lives. The north is where life is hard, and we need to dominate ourselves and our environment in order to survive. The south is the direction of warmth where life is easier, and that leads us to a sense of peace and wholeness. And finally, the center of our own being is where we experience the grace of awareness and existence. This last attribution additionally reminds me of the following quote from the *Talmud*.

“Resh Lakish says: To him who is engaged in the study of the *Torah* by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day, as it is said, By day the Lord will command his loving kindness, and in the night his song shall be with me.”
(*B. Avodah Zarah* 3b)



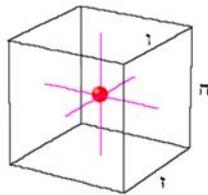
THE TWELVE PLAIN LETTERS

“5:1 Twelve plain, *hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamed-nun-samach-ayin-tzaddi-kuf*. Their foundation is conversation, reflection, walking, seeing, hearing, action, procreation, smelling, sleeping, anger, swallowing, laughter.

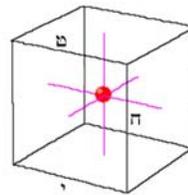
5:2 Twelve plain, *hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamed-nun-samach-ayin-tzaddi-kuf*. Their foundation is twelve diagonal boundaries. Boundary east north, boundary east ascent, boundary east below. Boundary north west, boundary north ascent, boundary north below. Boundary west south, boundary west ascent,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

(*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:1-5:2)

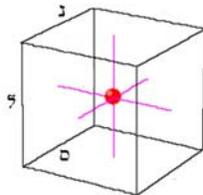
The twelve plain letters of the Hebrew alphabet are used to represent both personal experiences we contribute to the creation and the edges of the *Cube of Space*, the mystical model for the universe presented in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation). However, different commentators place these letters on the edges slightly differently. For example, the version by the Gaon of Vilna begins with the first three plain letters (*hey-vav-zayin*), places them in the positions east upper, east north, and east lower, and then proceeds clockwise to the south side of the cube for the next three letters. Meanwhile, in Saadia Gaon’s version we find the first three plain letters placed east north, east upper, and east lower, and then this pattern is continued counterclockwise to the north. I, however, begin with the same pattern as Saadia Gaon and then continue in a clockwise direction to the south because, as we’ll see later, this harmonizes the cube better with the *tree of life* diagram. Also, regardless of which scheme one adopts, three letters on the side of the cube trace out the letter Hebrew *bet* which stands for a blessing. Below is my scheme for placing the twelve plain letters on the cube.



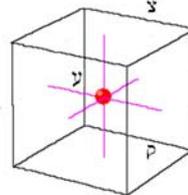
Hey-vav-zayin



chet-tet-yud



Lamed-nun-samach

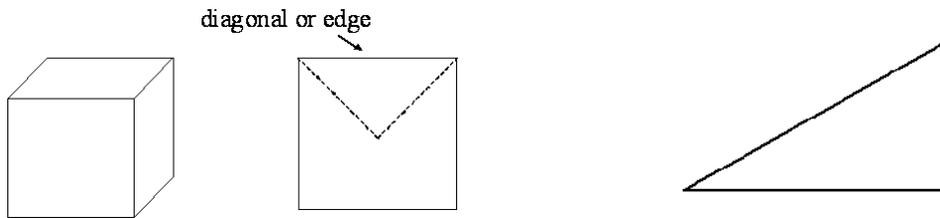


ayin-tzadde-kuf

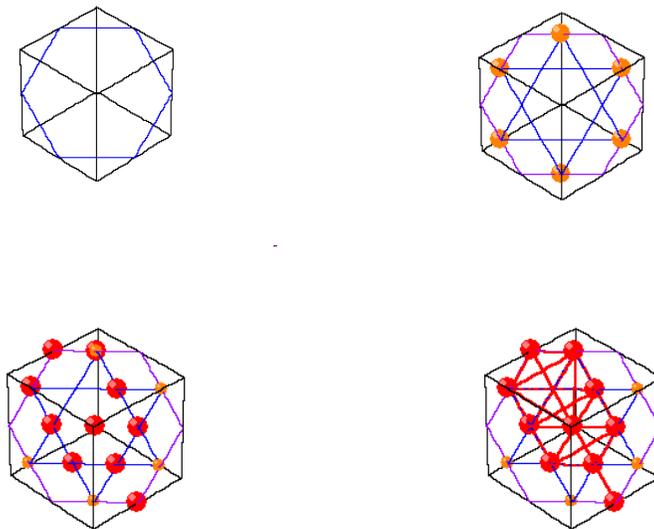
HOW TO MAKE A TREE

“The Blessed Holy One has a single Tree, and it has twelve diagonal boundaries. The northeast boundary, the southeast boundary, the upper east boundary, the lower east boundary, the southwest boundary, the northwest boundary, the upper west boundary, the lower west boundary, the upper south boundary, the lower south boundary, the upper north boundary, the lower north boundary. On the inside of them is the tree.”
(Bahir 95)

The twelve diagonal boundaries in the above passage from the *Bahir* refer to the twelve edges of the *Cube of Space* that is described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and which is an early mystical model for the universe. The cube edges are called diagonals because if you imagine a cube with a dot at the center and then draw lines from the center to two cube corners, then you can create a triangle where the longest side is also an edge of the cube. The Hebrew word for “diagonal” is *alachson*, and this word also means the longest side of a triangle since the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the longest side and is generally drawn diagonally.

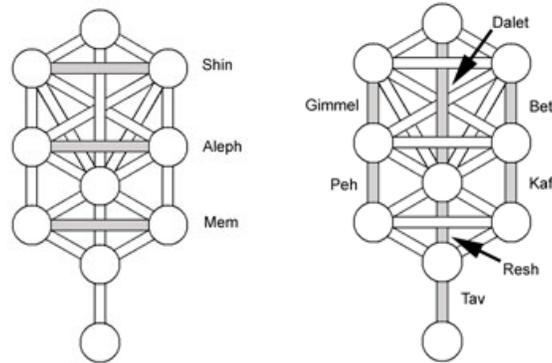


Below now are diagrams that show how one can find the modern *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* within the *Cube of Space*.

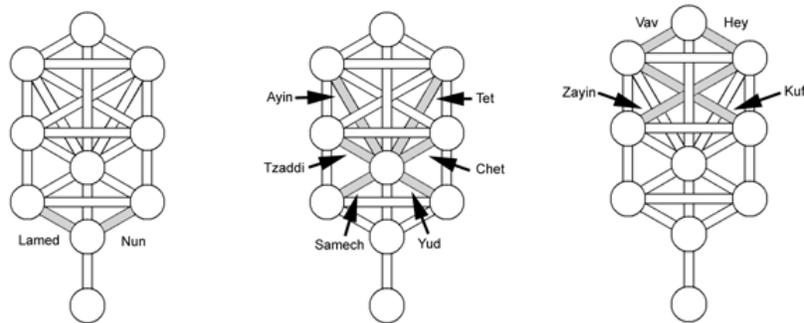


THE TREE OF LIFE

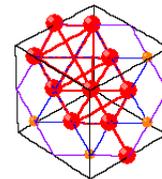
The *Cube of Space* model for creation that is described in the ancient *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) is a wonderful model, but its one defect is that when you compress a 3-dimensional model down to 2-dimensional paper, it can be hard to decipher. Thus, eventually, the 3-dimensional *Cube of Space* was replaced by the 2-dimensional *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*. Nonetheless, all the important components of the *Cube of Space* are still contained within the *Tree of Life*. For example, the three mother letters correspond to three horizontal paths on the *tree*, and the seven double letters correspond to seven vertical paths.



The remaining twelve plain letters correspond to the diagonal paths on the *tree*.



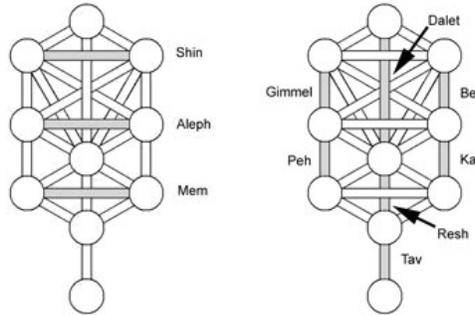
And lastly, there is a passage in the *Bahir* (*Bahir* 95) that suggests that the *tree* is contained within the cube. There is a way to divide the cube in half with a hexagonal cross section that can then be used to define the geometry of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, and I strongly suspect this geometry played a role in the final version of this model.



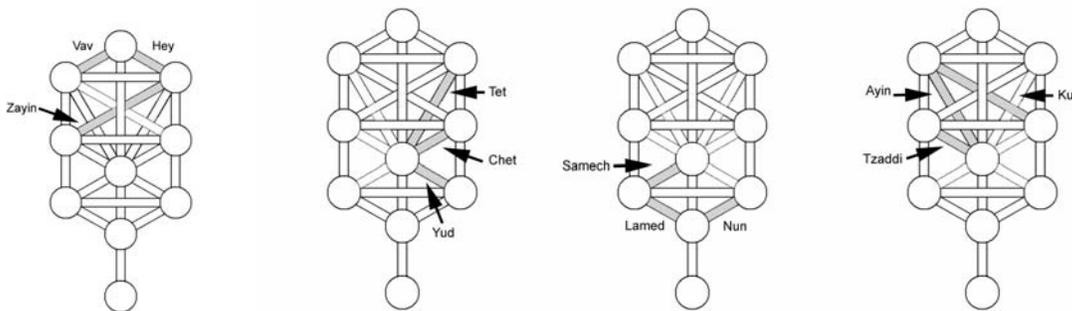
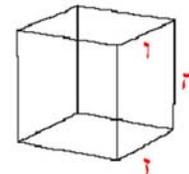
PATTERNS OF THREE

As stated before, the fundamental pattern of creation that appears in Jewish mysticism is found in *Ecclesiastes 7:14*, “God has made the one as well as the other.” This is a pattern of one thing opposite another coupled with a dynamic interaction between the two sides.

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, this pattern of three is represented by the opposites of *fire* and *water* with *air (steam)* representing the interaction between the two. Furthermore, in the transition from the *Cube of Space* to the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, the pattern of three occurs over and over again. For example, the three horizontal branches on the tree correspond to *fire (shin)*, *air (aleph)*, and *water (mayim)* with the fire of the brain on top, the air of the lungs in the middle, and the liquids of the abdomen at the bottom. Additionally, the seven double letters of the Hebrew alphabet are arranged in three columns, and when placed in alphabetical order on the tree, they give a pattern of right-left-center / right-left-center / center, again emphasizing the pattern of *Ecclesiastes 7:14*.



A less obvious pattern of three is found among the twelve plain letters. When their placement on the tree is viewed in alphabetical order, we see a pattern of center-left-right as we go clockwise around the tree. This mirrors the pattern used on the *Cube of Space* where the twelve edge letters were placed in a pattern of center-up-down that goes clockwise around the cube.



THE TEN SEFIROT

In the *Sefer Yetzirah* the new word “*sefirot*” is introduced with the phrase *eser sefirot belimah* that is usually translated as “ten *sefirot* of nothingness.” Subsequent to this, there has been much discussion over the centuries regarding the true definition of “*sefirot*.” It appears related to both the word for “book” (*sefer*) and the word for “number” (*safar*) as well as some others, and academic scholars generally agree that the word is really just a reference to the numbers 1 through 10 that correspond to the ten utterances through which *God* created the world. However, in this instance, I’m pretty sure all the academic scholars are wrong and I’m right!

In the *Bahir*, we find a statement that the word *sefirot* really means “declarations.”

“Why are they called *Sefirot*? Because it is written (*Psalm* 19:2), ‘The heavens declare (*me-SaPrim*) the glory of *God*.’”

(*Bahir* 125)

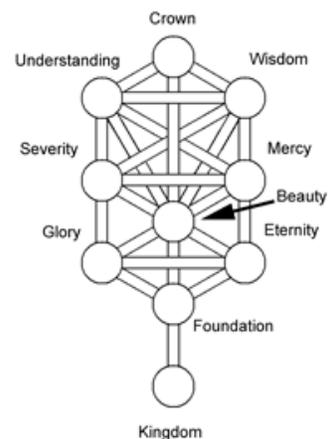
Furthermore, the *Talmud* suggests that the word that is translated as “nothingness” should really be rendered as “restraint” or “constraint.”

“R. Ila'a said: The world exists only on account of the merit of him who restrains himself in strife, for it is written: He hangeth the earth upon *belimah* (*Job* 26:7).”

(*B. Chullin* 89a)

In this passage, the rabbi suggests that the word *belimah*, which is usually translated as “nothingness” is actually related to *balam* (stop, restrain, constrain). Thus, the better translation of *eser sefirot belimah* is “ten declarations of constraint,” and this makes very good sense since the ten creative utterances from *God* created the world through separating things and creating restraints or boundaries to keep them apart. The ten *sefirot* are the same as the ten restraining utterances of creation.

Additionally in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the ten *sefirot* also correspond to the same directional markers that the three mother letters and seven double letters do. Thus, they were probably originally considered to be those letters of the alphabet that corresponded to *God*’s contribution to the creation. However, the *sefirot* were eventually separated from the letters, and there are good reasons as to why. For example, *Proverbs* 8 identifies *Wisdom* as the earliest of creations, and thus, by the time of the *Bahir* we find the meaning of the *sefirot* changing from letters and directions to other creative principles mentioned in the *Hebrew Bible*. Evolution and creativity are ongoing!



THE SEFIROT AND THE ALPHABET

Based upon the passages below, one can conclude that the ten *sefirot* represent not only the ten utterances with which *God* created the world, but also the primary elements of air, fire and water, and the six spatial directions plus center. One can also conclude from the *Sefer Yetzirah* that the three mother letters plus the seven double letters basically have the same meanings that the *sefirot* did originally. Thus, it appears that originally the ten *sefirot* were these ten special letters from the Hebrew alphabet, and this reconciles even more the *Biblical* assertion that *God* created the world with ten utterances with the *Talmudic* claim that the world was created with the letters of the alphabet. Below you will find the evidence for identifying the ten *sefirot* with particular letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and as noted elsewhere, *God* establishes a general framework for the world, but the rest of the creation comes from our experiences as individuals, and this contribution is represented by the remaining twelve plain letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

“1:14 These are the ten sefirot/declarations of constraint. Spirit/breath of the Living *Elohim* (*God*), spirit/breath from spirit/breath, water from spirit/breath, fire from water, ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:14)

“3:2 Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin*, a great and wondrous secret, covered and sealed with six rings, and out of them air, water, fire, and from them originated fathers (*yud-he-vav*), and from fathers, consequences.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:2)

“4:3 Seven doubles *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav*. Their foundation is wisdom, wealth, seed, life, dominance, peace, and grace.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:3)

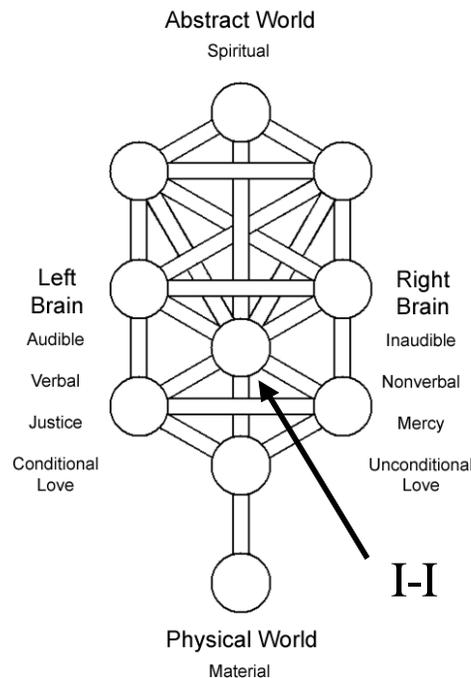
“4:4 Seven doubles *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav*. Ascent and beneath, east and west, north and south, and the Holy Temple dwelling in the middle, and it carries them all.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:4)

“5:1 Twelve plain, *hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamed-nun-samach-ayin-tzaddi-kuf*. Their foundation is conversation, reflection, walking, seeing, hearing, action, procreation, smelling, sleeping, anger, swallowing, laughter.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:1)

Sefirot	Elements & Directions	Hebrew Letters
breath	air	<i>aleph</i>
water	water	<i>mem</i>
fire	fire	<i>shin</i>
up	up	<i>bet</i>
down	down	<i>gimmel</i>
east	east	<i>dalet</i>
west	west	<i>kaf</i>
north	north	<i>peh</i>
south	south	<i>resh</i>
breath from breath	center/grace/Holy Temple	<i>tav</i>

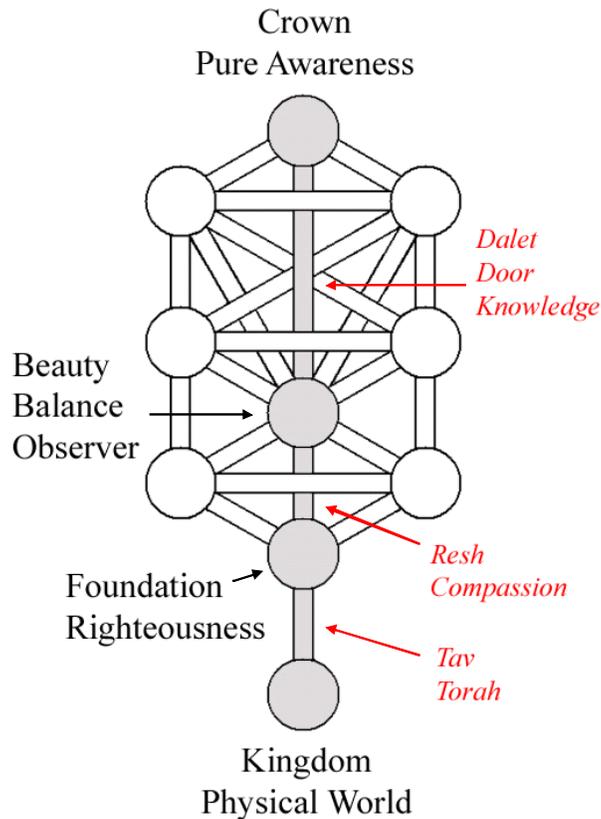
INTERPRETING THE TREE OF LIFE

The *Cube of Space* model for creation that we discussed earlier shows how the letters of the Hebrew alphabet correspond to the spatial directions of the universe, and it also shows how the three mother letters and the seven double letters correspond to the ten *sefirot*, the ten declarations through which *God* created the universe. In comparison, the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* is somewhat of a 2-dimensional unfolded cube that still contains within it all the basic features of the cube such as paths that correspond to the three mother letters, the seven double letters, the twelve plain letters, and the basic pattern of three (two opposites plus interaction between them). However, more so than the *Cube of Space*, the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* is also a psychological map that highlights our position as creatures that are both verbal and nonverbal and both physical and nonphysical. At the center of the tree is what I have designated as the I-I because at this point two identities are represented. There is first the “I” that is defined by all those things we identify with such as “I am male” or “I am old” or “I like math.” The second “I” is the unobserved observer, the awareness that is our true self. Additionally, as we move down the tree, our focus is more on the things our ego identifies with, but as we ascend the tree, we merge more and more with that ineffable oneness. This is even seen in Hebrew where the word for “I” is *ani* (*aleph-nun-yud*), and if we permute the letters of *ani*, then we change *ani* into *ayin* (*aleph-yud-nun*) which means “nothing.” A good exercise with the tree is to find one’s own place on it. For example, are you more left brained or right brained? Are you more spiritual or more material? The ideal is to find that point of balance at the “I-I.” However, collectively humanity throughout the world now seems to be far more left brained than right brained. We easily hear the audible voice of the TV, but few bother to listen anymore to the inaudible voice of the trees, the stones, and even the wordless thunder. Until we learn to use the other half of our brain, we will all be just a bunch of halfwits!



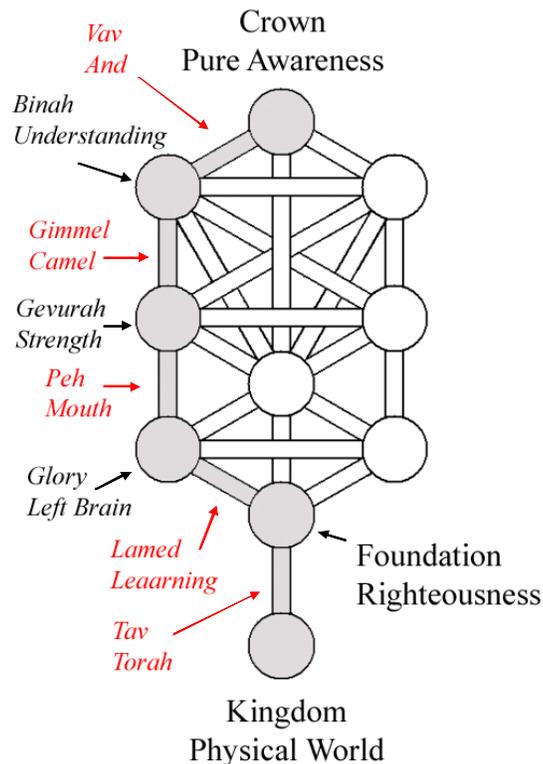
THE MIDDLE PATH

We can use the diagram for the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* as a map for transitioning from one state of consciousness to another. Furthermore, recall that the right side of the tree represents mercy and the right hemisphere of the brain while the left side represents severity and the left hemisphere of the brain. The middle path represents the balance between the two, and in our diagram below we'll trace the path from physical reality to pure awareness. We begin our ascent with *Torah* which I'll interpret broadly here as any good code of ethical behavior that will help you establish a good foundation. Following the establishment of good habits, however, we next need to develop compassion and a deep empathy and awareness of others. This will help us to go beyond just an awareness of ourselves, and it will prepare us for a larger reality. Also, this development takes us to Beauty (*tiferet*) which is really the balance point for the whole tree. However, if we want to continue into pure awareness without any objects of perception, then we need to focus our attention not on objects, but on that which perceives the objects. If we go to that place where knowledge is understood, then we will arrive at pure awareness. Furthermore, it matters not whether you remain, from the perspective of this world, in pure awareness for just an instant or for a lifetime. When you are in that place of "consciousness without an object," there is no time. Only from our side do time and other individual objects exist.



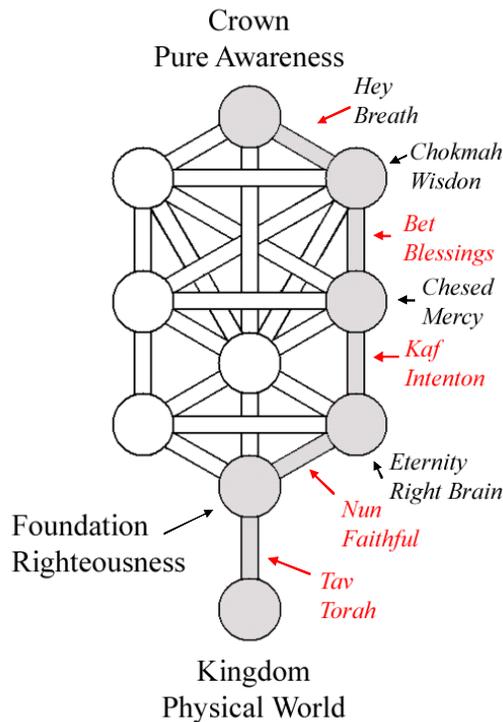
THE LEFT PATH

The left side of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* represents the left brain, and so ascension upon the tree through the left side is the path of logic and reason. Once we have established a good foundation by following ethical behavior (*Torah*), then we take the path to the left that begins with the letter *lamed* which means “learning.” In other words, left hemisphere activity begins with the accumulation of facts and details, and the *sefirah* of Glory (*Hod*) represents the basic functioning of the left hemisphere of the brain. Following this, though, is the letter *peh* which means “mouth.” To reach the next level of development we need to chew on what we’ve learned and digest it, and that makes our intellect strong and takes us to a point where we can judge for ourselves what is true and what is false. Continuing upward on our path, we next encounter the letter *gimmel* which stands for a “camel,” and just as a camel can live off of the fat and water stored within its body, so can we evolve to a point where we no longer need external teachers and guides. At this point, we are nurtured by our past development and we can create our own insights through the power of our own intellect. This then takes us to the next level of Understanding where we become creators of new insights into reality. And finally, the last step is represented by the letter *vav*. In Hebrew grammar, the letter *vav* represents the conjunction “and” which brings things into union. If, while in our state of high intellectual awareness, we realize that none of our thoughts can be separated from the awareness that perceives them, if we realize that the burning candle and flame are simply two sides of the same phenomena, then this exterior world will vanish and we can merge with pure, undifferentiated awareness. The highest level of understanding, though, is not this merger into pure awareness, but rather the understanding that, just as in a dream whether we see objects or not, it’s all just consciousness!



THE RIGHT PATH

The right path up the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* is the wordless path of the right hemisphere of the brain. Again, once we have established a foundation of good behaviors, we then proceed to the right along the path labeled with the letter *nun*. This letter stands for *neheman*, faithful, and we enter into the right hemisphere by focusing on those things that we seem to know prior to our engagement with reality using words. In other words, those primary sensations whose reality we accept as a matter of faith - the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens. These are the sorts of things we can experience without words and which help move us into the right hemisphere of the brain where everything exists at once and everything is eternal. From this vantage point, however, we continue upwards by focusing our mind on things such as love, goodness, and mercy. The letter *kaf* for this path stands for *kavannah* or “intention,” and that means we have to focus on our goal of love for others. Having reached this point, though, we can now become even more universal by extending our blessings to others both in thought and in deed. Mentally, think of people you know, quickly feel them surrounded by love and blessing, and then move on to others while having faith that the quantum interconnectedness of all things will deliver your blessing. And this will take us to the highest point of the right brain where we can access primordial Wisdom. At this point, we perceive higher truths even if we cannot verbalize them so well. The final step, however, is taken by focusing on the letter *hey* which is associated in *Genesis Rabbah* XII:10 with breath since the sound of *hey* is like the sound of an effortless exhalation. Thus, since breath is life, simply focus on the source of your living essence as you breathe, and this will take you into that essence of pure oneness.



THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT

In the time of the *Talmud* there were two forms of mysticism that were known as the *work of creation* and the *work of the chariot*. These two branches are discussed specifically in tractate *Chagigah* in the *Talmud*, and they are also succinctly described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation.

“MISHNAH THE SUBJECT OF FORBIDDEN RELATIONS MAY NOT BE EXPOUNDED IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE, NOR THE WORK OF CREATION IN THE PRESENCE OF TWO, NOR THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE, UNLESS HE IS A SAGE AND UNDERSTANDS OF HIS OWN KNOWLEDGE.”

(*B. Chagigah* 11b)

These prohibitions against discussion are likely due to the fact that most people will misunderstand without a one-on-one explanation. Also, it is generally understood that the *work of the chariot* is about meditation, and in the *Sefer Yetzirah* there is a very terse explanation of the *work of the chariot* that would probably catch the attention of only those who know.

“Ten declarations of constraint. Restrain your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking, and if your mouth runs to words or your heart to reflections, return them to their place. Thus, it is said, “And the living beings (*chayot*) ran and returned (*Ezekiel* 1:14),” and upon this word a covenant was cut.”

(*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:8)

Unlike many meditations, this one is probably most effective when done with eyes open because when we close our eyes, we are telling our minds that the material world is a distraction and this will lead to a never ending struggle with the senses. Instead, however, what one should do is to first focus on the process of our attention running toward objects of perception and then returning to that place inside us where the objects are known. It is common for people to interpret the act of perception in terms of this running and returning of attention to the perceived and then back to perceiver. The immediate benefit, though, of turning one’s attention away from objects and back to the observer is that, from our perspective, the observer cannot be observed directly, and, thus, it is experienced as having no component parts and consequently, one perceives only a *unity* that results in *peace* and *love*. Furthermore, rather than being a distraction, each perception, when followed back to the source of awareness, becomes a quick ride to this experience of *oneness*. Additionally, as one practices, one becomes more aware that even the concept of “running and returning” may be discarded. This happens when one realizes that everything takes place within consciousness, and, thus, there is no “running” from the perceiver followed by “returning.” Instead, all that exists is awareness, and as in a dream, both the perceiver and the perceived are composed of this awareness. At this stage, one realizes, as in *Psalms* 139:7-8, that there is a *presence* that is everything and that is there regardless of whether we experience *Heaven* or *Hell*, and while we can never know the totality, we can continue to expand our understanding (*Zohar* I:103b, *Pritzker*).

THE BIG BANG

Consider the following passage from the *Zohar* concerning the creation of the world:

“It is written: And the intelligent shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever (*Daniel*. 12:3). There was indeed a “brightness” (*Zohar*). The Most Mysterious struck its void, touching and not touching, and caused this point to shine. This “beginning” then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words “the holy seed is the stock thereof” (*Isaiah*. 6:13). Again there was *Zohar* (brightness), in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this “beginning” the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called *Elohim*, and this doctrine is contained in the words, “By means of a beginning (it) created *Elohim*.” (*Zohar* I:15a)

There are several things worth noting here and first and foremost is the correspondence between this 13th century description of creation and our modern understanding of the universe being created through the Big Bang. The similarities are striking! Next, notice how the instigator of creation is referred to simply as “Most Mysterious” and “Mysterious Unknown.” This is the author’s attempt to convey the ineffableness of that which created everything, and such ineffableness should not be surprising. This concept occurs in many mystical traditions, and even in higher mathematics it is well known that the so-called “set of all sets” (the collection of all collections) is a concept that leads to paradoxes and contradictions. In mathematics, we sometimes tend to sweep such troublesome things under the rug and not talk about them, but in mysticism the idea that the totality of all things is intrinsically unknowable is frequently acknowledged. Furthermore, in some of the ancient manuscripts of the *Zohar* that have survived, we are also introduced to the paradoxical nature of this creative totality by expressions such as “touching and not touching.”

Another thing to notice is that this expanded universe is called *Elohim*, a common Hebrew name for *God*. Thus, in the *Zohar* we often find two names used for *God*. The name *Yahweh* (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), which we don’t pronounce and for which we usually say “*Adonai* [Lord]” in its stead, is usually treated by the *Zohar* as a term for the innately unknowable *God*. On the other hand, *Elohim* is usually used to refer to the *God* that we give characteristics to such as “merciful” and “long suffering.”

And finally, there is a grammar problem that must be mentioned. The beginning of *Genesis* is usually translated as, “In the beginning, *God* (*Elohim*) created.” However, the verb for “created” is singular while the word *Elohim* (*God*) is plural. The *Zohar* resolves this grammatical inconsistency by translating the opening phrase of *Genesis* as, “With a beginning, the unknowable *God* created the knowable *God*.” And then the *Zohar* goes on to repeatedly tell us that, contradictory as it may be, the unknowable *God* and the knowable *God* are one and the same!

INSIGHTS

Consider the following:

“IN THE BEGINNING. R. Simeon opened his discourse with the text: And I put my words in thy mouth (*Isaiah* 51:16). He said: ‘How greatly is it incumbent on a man to study the *Torah* day and night! For the Holy One, blessed be He, is attentive to the voice of those who occupy themselves with the *Torah*, and through each fresh discovery made by them in the *Torah* a new heaven is created. Our teachers have told us that at the moment when a man expounds something new in the *Torah*, his utterance ascends before the Holy One, blessed be He, and He takes it up and kisses it and crowns it with seventy crowns of graven and inscribed letters. When a new idea is formulated in the field of the esoteric wisdom, it ascends and rests on the head of the “The Righteous One, the life of the universe”, and then it flies off and traverses seventy thousand worlds until it ascends to the “Ancient of Days”. And inasmuch as all the words of the “Ancient of Days” are words of wisdom comprising sublime and hidden mysteries, that hidden word of wisdom that was discovered here when it ascends is joined to the words of the “Ancient of Days”, and becomes an integral part of them, and enters into the eighteen mystical worlds, concerning which we read “No eye hath seen beside thee, O *God*” (*Isaiah* 64:3). From thence they issue and fly to and fro, until finally arriving, perfected and completed, before the “Ancient of Days”. At that moment the “Ancient of Days” savors that word of wisdom, and finds satisfaction therein above all else. He takes that word and crowns it with three hundred and seventy thousand crowns, and it flies up and down until it is made into a sky. And so each word of wisdom is made into a sky which presents itself fully formed before the “Ancient of Days”, who calls them “new heavens”, that is, heavens created out of the mystic ideas of the sublime wisdom. As for the other new expositions of the *Torah*, they present themselves before the Holy One, blessed be He, and ascend and become “earths of the living”, then they descend and become absorbed into one earth, whereby a new earth emerges through that new discovery in the *Torah*. This is implied in the verse, “For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I am making, rise up before me, etc.” (*Isaiah* 66:22). It is not written “I have made”, but “I am making”, signifying continual creation out of the new ideas discovered in the *Torah*.”

(*Zohar* I:4b-5a)

The bottom line of this very poetic discourse is that every insight we have literally creates a new world for us. Literally! And just think about this. When you were a toddler, at first you were not able to identify things such as parents, tables, chairs, and so on. However, bit by bit, you learned to put two and two together and see new things that you could not see before, and every time you do this, your world changes. Every time you do this, you literally create a new world! Even today, as I sit at the other end of this journey called life, every insight I have into mathematics or *Torah* immediately changes my world. Furthermore, this is what we are driven to do. While the rest of the universe is busy obeying the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics that demands that disorder in the universe must always increase, we tend to do the opposite. We are designed to always try to put the pieces of the puzzle together in order to know more, to create complexity, and every time we have an insight or “aha” moment, we become participants in the creative process.

SEVENTY INTERPRETATIONS

In my opinion, one of the most beautiful things about Judaism is its long standing tradition that every line in *Torah* has multiple interpretations, seventy, to be exact. Additionally, we say that every verse has four levels of interpretation – (1) The simple or plain meaning of the verse, (2) a meaning expanded by hints such as wordplay or number play in the text, (3) the symbolic or allegorical meaning, and (4) the secret, *Kabbalistic*, or mystical meaning of the text. Furthermore, this freedom to interpret has led to multiple insights that enrich us all.

The justification for multiple interpretations may have originated with a passage from *Jeremiah*. Below is that passage and a couple of comments from the *Talmud*.

“Is not my word like a fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

(*Jeremiah* 23:29)

“In R. Ishmael's School it was taught: And like in hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces: i.e., just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, so also may one *Biblical* verse convey many teachings.”

(*B. Sanhedrin* 34a)

The definitive number of 70, however, comes from a *Midrash* where it is noted that wine is a symbol for *Torah* and the numerical value of “wine” in Hebrew is 70.

“As the numerical value of *yayin* (wine) is seventy, so there are seventy modes of expounding the *Torah*.”

(*Numbers Rabbah* XIII:15-16)

Many have noted the similarity between *Talmudic* arguments and logic and the arguments of the law that are found in Supreme Court documents. However, some members of the court favor “originalism,” the doctrine that we cannot derive anything that was not the original intent of the founders. The problem, though, with originalism is that over time many situations will arise that the founders could never have foreseen. The sages of the *Talmud* seemed to understand this, and, thus, we have the following story about Moses being transported to the future to attend a class led by Rabbi Akiba where Rabbi Akiba deduces things from the *Torah* that Moses never even imagined!

“Moses went and sat down behind eight rows and listened to the discourses upon the law. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master (Rabbi Akiba) ‘Whence do you know it?’ and the latter replied ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai’ he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, ‘Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the *Torah* by me!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’.”

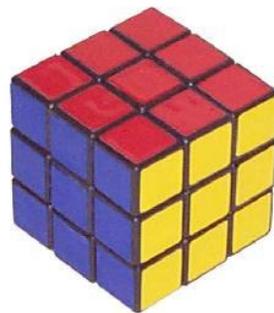
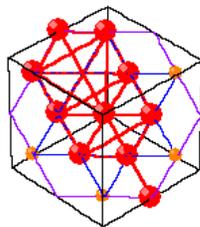
(*B. Menachot* 29b)

SOMETHING-FROM-SOMETHING CREATION

Something-from-something creation occurs whenever we make a permutation of things that already exist. For example, if you turn a dirty house into a clean house by picking things up off the floor and taking out the trash and washing the dishes and putting them away, then all you have done is to create a different permutation or arrangement of what was already there. Nonetheless, this new arrangement creates order out of disorder, thus fulfilling our biological mandate to create greater complexity. Furthermore, creating a new reality by simply rearranging the elements of the old reality is something we do everyday, and it is the easiest way to create a better world.

A good exercise that one should do occasionally is to make a list of everything you've done since waking up that would be an example of something-from-something creation. For instance, since I've gotten up, I've (1) put on clothes, (2) made and drank coffee, (3) tuned on the TV, (4) gone to the bathroom, (5) turned on the computer, overhead fan, and opened the shutters in my home office, and (5) practiced guitar. All of those are examples, of just creating different permutations of things that already exist, and I haven't even gotten around to any cleaning, yet, though I do intend to later do a little trimming and watering of the plants outside, more something-from-something creation. Also, as I frequently like to mention, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics states that entropy or disorder always increases, and in many ways our attempts to create different permutations of what's there are just our doomed-to-fail endeavor to go against the tide in order to temporarily create some order within chaos. We can create pockets of order that last for awhile, but the overall disorder never decreases.

Previously, in our essay on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, we introduced the *Cube of Space* as an early model for the universe that was used in Jewish mysticism, and we even indicated how the later *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* can be found as a pattern contained within a *Star of David* that is circumscribed within a hexagonal cross-section of the cube. Another enhancement that one could bring to this model would be to think of it like Rubik's Cube. In other words, the facelets of this cube can be arranged in any of 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 different possible permutations, and this gives us a model that illustrates not only the most basic geometry of the universe, but also its nature with regard to permutations and cycles.



SOMETHING-FROM-NOTHING CREATION

Typically, while we may often think of a deity as having created the universe out of nothing, we rarely think of ourselves as engaging in this type of something-from-nothing creation. However, this is incorrect. Every time we have an insight, we are engaging in something-from-nothing creation as that insight literally pops into our heads out of nowhere, and through that insight a whole new world is created that did not exist before. In other words, every time we have an “aha” moment, our reality changes as a result of this something-from-nothing creation. This type of creation is perhaps more difficult than something-from-something creation, but, nonetheless, it is the type of creation that every scientist and every artist knows quite well. Additionally, five specific steps that one goes through via the process of something-from-nothing creation are delineated in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. I translate those steps as follows:

- Decreeing – Every act of something-from-nothing creation begins with a declaration at some level of one’s intent. For example, my entire life changed the day I woke up and said, “It’s time to go to graduate school in mathematics!”
- Shaping – Once you have formed a clear intent, then the next step involves mulling things over in your mind.
- Combining – This is the step where our “aha” moment occurs. In every true something-from-nothing creation, there is always a moment when the pieces of the puzzle start to come together in order to reveal something new that had not existed before. This is very important. Every new insight we have creates an entirely new universe for us.
- Weighing – The process of weighing refers to attaching measureable characteristics to your creation. In other words, you are now making it real.
- Exchanging – This final stage is more subtle, but the bottom line is that we want to still be able to recognize objects even when the background changes. Thus, we have to learn when we are young to create this type of object permanence as we exchange one background for another.

Happy something-from-nothing creation!

THE FIVE SOULS

In *Genesis Rabbah*, the great rabbinic commentary on *Genesis*, the rabbis note that there are five different names for the soul. This is important because in later *Kabbalah* this develops into the doctrine that there are five souls for each person. The first is the *nefesh*. This is the lowest level that everyone is born with and it is the energy that keeps us alive. However, the main concern of the *nefesh* is itself. It is like a little kid that is always saying me, me, me! It's selfish, selfish, selfish! As it says in *Genesis 8:21*, "Man's heart is evil from his youth." The second soul is the *ruach*. I think of it as a moral soul that enters us in our teens around the age of responsibility. Suddenly, we can understand the difference between right and wrong, and we can be held accountable for our actions. Additionally, we begin to become more aware of others and we develop *rachamim*, compassion, for other living beings. The third soul is the *neshamah*, and it is that part of us that is always spiritually connected. Some people are able to readily embrace their *neshamah* and incorporate it into their lives, but there are probably many more that live their lives at a much lower level of enlightenment. The last two souls are so big that they cannot be contained within the body. The *chayah* is the living soul, and it represents an even higher state of spiritual evolution than the *neshamah*. It can surround our physical being, but it can't be contained within it. As I often say, blessed are those who can reach this level of understanding and have communication with this very evolved part of one's being! And finally, the last soul is the *yechidah*. This is the part of us that is always connected with *God* and that has never left that original unity.

"THE BREATH OF (NISMATH) LIFE. It has five names: *nefesh*, *neshamah*, *hayyah*, *ruah*, *yehidah*. *Nefesh* is the blood: For the blood is the *nefesh* (life, *Deuteronomy 12:23*). *Ruah*: this is so called because it ascends and descends: thus it is written, Who knoweth the *ruah* (spirit) of man whether it goes upwards, and the *ruah* of the beast whether it goes downward to the earth (*Ecclesiastes 3:21*)? *Neshamah* is the breath; as people say, His breathing is good. *Hayyah* (living) because all the limbs are mortal, whereas this is immortal in the body. *Yechidah* (unique): because all the limbs are duplicated, whereas this is unique in the body."
(*Genesis Rabbah XIV:9*)

In the *Zohar* only the first three souls are discussed, the *nefesh*, the *ruach*, and the *neshamah*. Furthermore, it is useful to think of these souls as emergent properties. In other words, they represent levels of advancement and organization within our brains that occur once the conditions are right. Also, for the most part, everyone has a *nefesh*, and every adult has a *ruach* even though our moral soul is often lacking in various ways. However, not everyone develops a strong spiritual soul, a *neshamah*. Most people have at least a tiny *neshamah* if they have ever experienced things like love and oneness, but nonetheless, most of us can do better, and it is part of our purpose in life to keep growing, to continue to progress from *nefesh* to *ruach* to *neshamah* and to experience an ongoing connection with love and oneness. At the same time, though, the *Zohar* cautions that the ultimate goal is not to simply sit on a mountain top meditating once we've achieved that oneness (*Zohar II:176a*). Instead, the goal is to take that revelation and see how many wondrous, creative things we can make from it!

PROTECT THE GARDEN!

In *Genesis* 2:15, we read the following:

“And the Lord *God* took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to keep it.”

(*Genesis* 2:15)

What may not be evident to everyone regarding this passage is that the Hebrew verb *shahmar* that is translated in this verse as “keep” also means “protect” and “preserve.” As human beings, we are biologically driven to explore our environment and to develop a knowledge and understanding of the universe that grows ever more intricate with time. However, the danger in following our biological imperative to know and to understand is that, in the process, we can overwhelm the very environment that we depend on. And that is the situation we find ourselves in today where first we lied to ourselves about whether global warming was even real, and then we said it was real but lied about whether humans had any part in it, and finally we admitted it was real and caused by human activity, but we lied about whether we had the power to do anything about it. At some point, if we want to live, then we have to quit lying to ourselves! At some point, if we want to live, then have to take care of all the plants and animals that we depend on! At some point, if we want to live, then we have to prioritize sustainability! And that is a tall order for a species that has consistently chosen short term gain over long term survival. Nonetheless, if we are to endure on this planet, then we need to follow the advice that the rabbis left us in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*:

“When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first man, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him, ' Behold My works, how beautiful and commendable they are! All that I have created, for your sake I created it. Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My universe; for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you.”

(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* VII:20-21)

Protect the planet. Protect the plants. Protect the animals. Protect life so that we may continue to endure and to learn and grow!

ADAM GETS A DIVORCE

“AND HE DROVE OUT THE MAN (*Genesis* 3:24). R. Eleazar said: We do not know who divorced whom, if the blessed Holy One divorced Adam or not. We naturally suppose that “he” is the subject and “man” the object. The truth is, however, that “man” is the subject and the object is the accusative particle *et* (*Shechinah*), so that we render “and the man drove out *et* (*Shechinah*).” Hence it is written, “And God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden”, for the reason that he had divorced *et*, as we have explained.” (*Zohar* I:53b)

This passage requires some explanation, and when the explanation is done, you will be able to see just how remarkable it is! First, the Hebrew word translated as “drove out” is *vaygaresh*, and over the centuries commentators have seen this word as similar to *geirushin*, “divorce.” Consequently, they asked the question, “Who divorced whom?” To answer this question, the *Zohar* first makes some comments about the particle *et*. To begin with, in Hebrew this word exists only to let a reader know that what follows is going to be the direct object of a verb. Second, *et* is spelled *aleph-tav* in Hebrew, and *aleph* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet while *tav* is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Consequently, the spelling of *et* takes on the meaning of everything, all that exists, just as in English we sometimes mean this same sort of thing when we say that someone knew or did everything “from a to z.” Just as we use the letters “a” and “z” in English to represent the whole gamut of possibilities, so does the *Zohar* interpret *et* (*aleph-tav*) in a similar manner as referring to everything in creation. However, the entirety of the visible world, the creation, is also associated with the *Shechinah* by the author of the *Zohar*. The *Shechinah* is the feminine presence of *God*, and it represents the entirety of creation separated from that initial state of oneness. And next, after having established that *et* represents the *Shechinah*, the *Zohar* now wants to retranslate that sentence as, “And divorced *Shechinah*, the man,” or in other words, “The man divorced *Shechinah*.” But now the question is why? Why would Adam “divorce” the *Shechinah*? Presumably, this was done so that Adam could learn. Remember what it says in *Ecclesiastes* 7:14,

“This against this made the *Elohim* to the end that man should find nothing after Him.” (*Ecclesiastes* 7:14)

Also, recall this passage from the *Zohar* that we saw earlier:

“A man does not know what sweet is until he tastes bitter.” (*Zohar* III:47b)

Consequently, we enter into what the *Zohar* calls the “world of separation” in order to more fully learn and understand the nature of creation. We separate ourselves from *God* so that we can more fully understand what union with *God* is. Remember that it says in *Zohar* I:154a that, “Only through the disclosed can a man reach the undisclosed.” And as we see at the end of *Ecclesiastes* 7:14, that is the goal of all this struggle and separation. To reunite with *Divinity*. That man should find nothing after Him.

WHO CREATED THESE!

In *Genesis* 2:4, we read this:

“These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the *Lord God* made the earth and the heavens.”
(*Genesis* 2:4)

In this verse in English, we see the expression “*Lord God*.” The word that is rendered as “*Lord*” in English is actually *yud-hey-vav-hey* in Hebrew letters. This is the most sacred name in Hebrew for *God* that is never pronounced and usually “*Lord*” or the Hebrew word for *Lord* (*Adonai*) is written or pronounced in its place. Nonetheless, our Hebrew letters spell the name *Yahweh*, and many linguists believe this to be a reflexive form of the verb “to be.” In other words, “the one who causes creation” or “the *Creator*.” Consequently, when I see *yud-hey-vav-hey*, I usually translate that as “*Creator*” instead of “*Lord*.” Meanwhile, it is the name *Elohim* that is translated as *God* in this verse. *Elohim* is actually a plural word and literally means “*Gods*.” However, this is a word for many *Gods* that originated among the peoples that surrounded the Israelites in ancient Canaan, but when it appears in the *Hebrew Bible*, it usually refers to the one *God* of Israel. In the *Zohar*, though, the name *yud-hey-vav-hey* is often associated with the a *God* that is ineffable and can never be perceived while the name *Elohim* is associated with a deity that is at least partially perceivable and that we give characteristics to like just and merciful. However, the *Zohar* is also strongly non-dualistic in its understanding of reality, and thus, it frequently makes the point that the unknowable *God* and the knowable *God* are one and the same. It is only our limited understanding that is forced to separate this unity into two concepts, and the *Zohar* applies this to everything. The unknowable world and the world we know are actually one and the same, as the *Zohar* sees it.

There are many names for *God* in Hebrew, and my favorite comes from the *Zohar* and its commentary on a verse from *Isaiah*,

“Lift up your eyes on high and see: who hath created these?”
(*Isaiah* 40:26)

In the passage above, “*Who*” is the subject of a question, but in this passage below from the *Zohar*, “*Who*” is taken as the name of the *Creator*. *God* is the unanswerable question!

“R. Eleazar opened his discourse with the text: Lift up your eyes on high and see: who hath created these? (*Isaiah* 40:26). “Lift up your eyes on high”: to which place? To that place to which all eyes are turned, to wit, *Petah Enaim* (“eye-opener”). By doing so, you will know that it is the mysterious Ancient One, whose essence can be sought, but not found, that created these: to wit, *Mi* (*Who?*), the same who is called “from (Hebrew *mi*) the extremity of heaven on high”, because everything is in His power, and because He is ever to be sought, though mysterious and unrevealable, since further we cannot enquire. That extremity of heaven is called *Mi* (*Who*). (*Zohar* I:1b)

WHAT'S GOD DOING?

In *Genesis Rabbah* LXVIII:4, a Roman matron asks Rabbi Jose what *God* has been doing since the six days of creation. The rabbi answers her that since then *God* has just been sitting around doing matchmaking and pairing people together for marriage. Of course, the Roman matron thinks that she could do that just as well as *God*, and so she goes home and starts pairing her servants together for arranged marriages. However, by the end of the day all those newly weds have gotten into so many fights with one another that they are all battered and bruised, and consequently, the Roman matron admits to Rabbi Jose that *God* must indeed be great in order to be able to produce so many harmonious marriages. In response, Rabbi Jose says, “It (matchmaking) is as difficult before the Holy One, blessed be He, as the dividing of the Red Sea!”

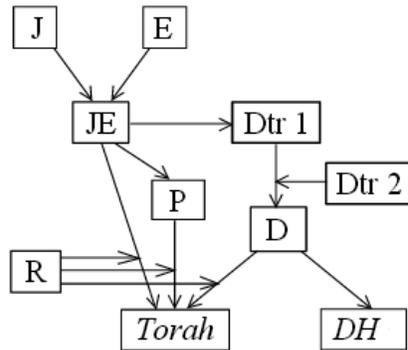
From this story I have two takeaways. The first has to do with intermarriage, and the bottom line is that I am not at all concerned about who someone else marries just so long as they are listening to that still, small voice within. I have much more confidence in that inner voice of *God* leading someone to the spouse they are meant to be with than I do in arrangements made by other people! The second takeaway, however, is more mathematical, and it involves what in mathematics we call *quotient structures*. In particular, a *quotient structure* is formed anytime we take a collection of separate pieces and suddenly perceive them as belonging together and being equivalent to one another in some way. For example, we do this when we look at the sets $\{2,4,6,8,\dots\}$ and $\{1,3,5,7,\dots\}$ and suddenly decide to call the numbers in the first one *even* and those in the second one *odd*. In this formulation, when we designate the numbers in the set $\{2,4,6,8,\dots\}$ as *even*, we momentarily no longer see the differences between those various numbers and instead we see them as all being equivalent in terms of having the property that we call *even*. Furthermore, since we like to think that we are dividing or cancelling out the differences between the individual numbers in each set, that is why we call this a *quotient structure*. To give a nonmathematical example, you can imagine that when you were very little it probably took some time before you were able to see and recognize that object that you call “chair.” Most likely, at first you learned to see the component parts of the chair, and then you had to learn that those parts go together to form a new whole, a new object called “chair, that now gives you a place to sit. In general, every time our brains put the pieces of some puzzle together in order to arrive at a new insight or understanding, we are forming a *quotient structure*, and as the *Zohar* suggests, every insight we have literally creates a new heaven and earth (*Zohar* I:4b-5a).

So what does this have to do with our story about marriage and matchmaking? Well, I like to think that since the creation, *God* has been helping us to “marry” one thought with another in order to help us arrive at new insights and understandings. Furthermore, it is at those moments of insight that we experience the “aha” moment, and the “aha” moment is often my daily experience of *God* because at that moment, everything else disappears. There are no words and there are no objects. There is only joy, unity, and a sense that I now know something that I will later put into words. To put it another way, every time we do something creative, whether it is intellectual, artistic, or spiritual, we participate with *God* in the act of *ex nihilo* creation. And that is what we are driven to do.

THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

Traditional statements of how the *Torah* came to be are usually statements like “*God* wrote the *Torah*” or “*Moses* wrote the *Torah*” or “the *Torah* existed before creation. However, for well over two centuries scholars have believed (more or less) in what is known as the *documentary hypothesis*. This hypothesis, based on various inconsistencies in the text, assumes that the *Torah* comes from four main sources labeled (J) Yawist, (E) Elohist, (P) Priestly, and (D) Deuteronomist. It is really a rather inevitable conclusion as one is faced with passages such as those found in *Genesis* 1:27 & 2:21-22 where first man and woman are created together and then later they are created one after the other, or as in *Genesis* 6:19-20 & 7:2 where first Noah is told to take two of every kind of animal into the ark and then later he is told to take seven pairs of each clean animal. Clearly, these instructions are inconsistent with one another!

The *documentary hypothesis* has undergone refinement and revision over the years, and currently the consensus seems to be that the *Torah* was rendered into its final written form during the Babylonian captivity (597-539 BCE) and that it may contain other fragments in addition to the usual J, E, P, and D. However, the one thing that is for certain is that one can hear many different voices within *Torah* and the *Hebrew Bible*. There are very progressive voices within the text, and there are also voices that call for harsh justice. There are voices of men, and there are voices of women which are sometimes heard through actions rather than words. There are many voices within *Torah*, but some like those that promote slavery, genocide, misogyny, and xenophobia are not the voices I want to follow. As with everything else, even the *Bible* contains both the blessing and the curse. Choose wisely.



J:	<i>Jawist/Yahwist</i>	(10th-9th century BCE)
E:	<i>Elohist</i>	(9th century BCE)
Dtr 1:	<i>Early Deuteronomist Historian</i>	(7th century BCE)
Dtr 2:	<i>Later Deuteronomist historian</i>	(6th Century BCE)
P:	<i>Priestly</i>	(6th-5th Century BCE)
D:	<i>Deuteronomist</i>	
R:	<i>Redactor</i>	
DH:	<i>Deuteronomist History</i>	Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings

THE MATHEMATICAL INEFFABLENESS OF GOD

By the time we finish *Genesis* and get into *Exodus*, it becomes increasingly clear that *God* is something that can be heard but not seen and that the name of *God* is something known to only a few. This may also be seen as the beginning of an image of *God* that is no image at all. This is the start of a doctrine that looks upon *God* as something intrinsically unknowable. Usually whenever there is something we don't know, such as is always case for those who work on the frontiers of science, there is generally a sense that our state of ignorance is a temporary condition. In other words, if we pursue the truth, then the truth will gradually reveal itself. Or so we like to believe. However, higher mathematics suggests that there are some things that can never be fully fathomed.

In the late 1800s, the field of set theory began to emerge within mathematics. Initially, a set was thought of as a synonym for the word "collection," and it was believed that any conceivable collection would therefore be a set. Also, one of the early developments of set theory was that the set of all subsets of some set will always be larger than the originally set. For example, if we start with a set of 2 objects such as $\{a,b\}$, then the set of all possible subsets consists of $2^2 = 4$ objects. In particular, $\{\{a\},\{b\},\{a,b\},\emptyset\}$ where \emptyset represents the null or empty set, the set that contains no objects. Furthermore, this result applies to infinite sets as well, and that means that in mathematics there exist infinities of different sizes! For example, if $\mathbb{N} = \{1,2,3,\dots\}$ is the infinite set of counting numbers, then the set of all subsets of \mathbb{N} is an infinite set that is even larger than \mathbb{N} . In other words, an infinity larger than infinity!

At first everything progressed rapidly and remarkably well in this new field of mathematics, but suddenly problems began to emerge when infinite sets became too large. For example, we may naively assume that we can talk about the set of all sets which we might also describe as the totality of all things. However, when try to do so, paradoxes and contradictions start to emerge. For instance, given any set we can always construct a larger set by looking at the set of all subsets of our original set, but if we start with the set of everything, then how can we possibly make something bigger than everything? This, in a nutshell, is what we call Cantor's Paradox, and it shows us that the totality of all things is paradoxical. Furthermore, mathematicians dealt with this paradox by creating axioms for set theory that allow for the existence of infinite sets, but that don't permit the construction of the set of all sets. In other words, the totality of all things is different and contradictory and it is intrinsically unknowable and excluded from set theory.

The ancient sage Rav Huna intuitively understood this truth when he said, "Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One. (*Genesis Rabbah* XII:1)" We can only see the parts, but never completely see the whole. This is also suggested in the *Zohar* where *Who* is used to refer to the inherently unknowable *God*, but *What* is used to represent the world of things that can be known. The *Zohar* suggests that we may spend a lifetime trying to understand the ineffable *Who*, but in the end we only know a lot more about *What*. As for *Who*, the *Zohar* asserts that "Everything is as baffling as at the beginning. (*Zohar* I;1b)"

THE PARTICLE AND THE WAVE

In quantum physics, all matter has a dual nature as both a particle and a wave. As a wave, matter extends forever in all directions, blending and interacting with other waves, and it doesn't exist exclusively at just one location. However, as a particle, every piece of matter has boundaries that lead it to occupy a definite locale. Furthermore, in its particle mode, each piece of matter is separate from every other piece, and while these two modes of being for matter appear to contradict one another, that is, nonetheless, what quantum physics says, and quantum physics is the most successful theory that physics has ever produced.

Human beings, at least experientially, also have both a wave mode and a particle mode. In our wave mode we feel connected with other people. Our boundaries in that mode are less well-defined, and it can be difficult to discern where we end and those that we are close to begin. In our wave mode we feel empathy, love, and oneness with the rest of creation. However, in our particle mode we often experience just the opposite. In our particle mode we feel keen separation between ourselves and others. As a particle, we are strongly aware of our boundaries and the differences between ourselves and “the other.” In our particle mode, we understand why the *Zohar* refers to this world as the *world of separation*.

In the *Talmud* and other parts of rabbinic literature, the rabbis seem to recognize these two modes of being, and they go on to say that it is sin that contracts us and causes us to lose that sense of oneness with the rest of the cosmos.

“Rab Judah said that Rav said: The first man extended from one end of the world to the other, for it is said: ‘Since the day that *God* created man upon the earth, and from one end of heaven to the other’ (*Deuteronomy* 4:32); as soon as he sinned, the Holy One, blessed be He, placed His hand upon him and diminished him. (*Psalms* 139:5)”
(*B. Chagigah* 12a)

Whenever we are in our wave mode, we feel connected, but connected with what? The wrong way to live is to connect ourselves with our own desires entirely at the expense of the welfare of others because ultimately their pain will also become our pain. In contrast to this is to see and merge with the *Divinity* that is present in all things. In particular, one should strive to always sense that unifying *Presence* that connects all things even while observing diversity. The *Zohar* refers to this as perceiving unity above while recognizing diversity below, and this is the right way to go through life. Contrary to this is to unite yourself with something in the *world of separation* (united below), but to separate yourself from the underlying spiritual oneness (divided above). As the *Zohar* expresses it:

“Herein consisted the sin of the primeval serpent who united below but divided above, and so caused the mischief we still lament. The right way, on the contrary, is to recognize diversity below but unity above, so that the black light (the awareness that illumines but is not seen) becomes wholly merged above and afterwards unified in respect of its diverse elements, and so is kept away from the evil power.” (*Zohar* I:12b)

STONE OF FOUNDATION

Within the vast mythic lore of Judaism are stories about the *stone of foundation* or *foundation stone*. This stone is first mentioned in *Isaiah*,

“Therefore thus said the *Lord God*, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation.”
(*Isaiah* 28:16)

As was customary among builders, it was natural to assume that something had to appear first that would act as an indispensable foundation for all that follows. This notion is expanded upon in the *Midrash* where the *stone of foundation* becomes the foundation for the entire universe.

“R. Jose b. Ilalafta said: Why was it called *Foundation Stone*? Because thereon began the foundation of the world.”
(*Numbers Rabbah* XII:4)

However, it is in the *Zohar* that this mythic element is presented with full force.

“This *foundation stone* was created before the world, to be the point from which the world evolved.” (*Zohar* I:72a)

““And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a *stone of sapphire*” (*Ezekiel* 1:26). This alludes to the “*foundation stone*” (*even shethiah*), which is the central point of the universe and on which stands the Holy of Holies.” (*Zohar* I:71b)

The Hebrew word for *sapphire* in the passage above has the same three-letter root as the word for *sefirot*, and thus, we can reinterpret the *stone of foundation/sapphire* as also meaning the *stone of sefirot*. Additionally, passages in the *Zohar* describe the *stone of foundation* as expanding in all directions in order to create the entire universe. Furthermore, *Zohar* scholar Daniel Matt points out that the phrase *stone of foundation* can also be translated as *stone of weaving*. It is the substance from which the universe is woven into existence. There are more references to this in the *Zohar* than we have space to cover, but analysis shows that the *stone* is the mythic equivalent of the *cube of space*.

<i>Cube of Space</i>	<i>Stone of Foundation</i>
letters of the cube used to create the world	used to create the world
related to the <i>sefirot</i>	related to the <i>sefirot</i>
contains <i>air, water, and fire</i>	contains <i>air, water, and fire</i>
represents the universe	represents the universe, the <i>palace of Elohim (God's house)</i>
provides a blessing	provides a blessing
the Holy of Holies is in the image of the <i>Cube of Space</i>	the Holy of Holies is built on the <i>Stone of Foundation</i>

HARD NONDUALISM VERSUS SOFT NONDUALISM

In the *Sefer Yetzirah* the fundamental elements of creation are seen as *air*, *water*, and *fire*, and these elements represent the presence of two opposites, water and fire, plus a third element, air or steam, that represents a dynamic interaction between the two poles. What is conspicuously left out of this element scheme, however, is *earth*, and this suggests that from the viewpoint of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that the physical world is derivative from these other elements. One might even liken this to a dream state where all the objects that are observed are simply different manifestations of consciousness. By the time of the *Zohar*, though, we begin to find very explicit statements regarding the oneness of all things, and, in particular, the *Zohar* espouses a philosophy of nondualism that ultimately sees separation as the illusion and oneness as the ultimate truth. Still, I like to make a distinction between what I call “hard nonduality” and “soft nonduality.”

By hard nonduality, I mean the belief that all that exists is consciousness and the various objective forms it may take on. In hard nonduality, rather than consciousness evolving from matter, it is the other way around. In other words, consciousness is primary, and matter is merely a particular expression of consciousness, and ultimately all is consciousness. One may readily accept that this is the truth of the dream state. In contrast to this, however, is what I call “soft nonduality” which begins by conceding that matter and duality are real and consciousness is an emergent property of matter. However, soft nonduality continues by asserting that even if duality is the real truth, our experience is, nonetheless, only of what presents itself during consciousness. In other words, even if matter and duality exist, it is still the case that everything we know takes place within our conscious awareness, and thus, from the perspective of the mind, all that exists is consciousness and nonduality! To put it another way, even if duality exists, our experience of it occurs only within consciousness, and in the realm of consciousness all things are only different manifestations of awareness, and so our experience of duality occurs in a way that is ultimately nondual. As a result, one may conclude that even if duality is true, one still has no choice but to live life as if it were nondual!

To live a nondual life, the first step is to start turning one’s focus back from the observed to the observer. If instead of focusing on what you are observing and getting either happy or sad from that perception, you should try focusing on the undifferentiated, unobservable awareness that underlies all perception. As you do this, you will begin to perceive more love and oneness. This is because the observer is not observable in the usual way, and as a result, we can never see it as having any parts (in spite of the fact that everything is a part of it!). Consequently, attempts to observe that which is indivisible only result in perceiving more unity within. And as one continues in this practice, one begins to experience everything more and more as just a manifestation of consciousness. This is expressed over and over again in the *Zohar* in ways such as the following:

“We have been taught that all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one, all is set in one balance, unvarying and eternal, as it is written: “I the Lord change not” (*Malachi* 3:6).”
(*Zohar* II:176a)

ONENESS IN THE ZOHAR

A constant theme throughout the *Zohar* is that of the oneness of all things. Initially, the *Zohar* proposes that there exists both a disclosed world and an undisclosed world. For example, the unpronounced *God* name *yud-hey-vav-hey* often represents the hidden realm while *Elohim*, which often represents a revealed *God* of action and attributes, represents the known world. Ultimately, though, the *Zohar* stresses that TETRAGRAMMATON (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) and *Elohim* are one and the same, and the undisclosed and the disclosed realities are all the same. Also, when “T” is connected with the unobserved observer, then it, too, represents the unknowable, and the *Zohar* considers this realization to be the whole point of creation. And lastly, this is hinted at the beginning of *Torah* where the *Zohar* I:7b interprets *bereshit* (In the beginning) as being composed of the letter *bet* which has a numerical value of 2 and *reshit* which means *beginning*. Thus, the *Zohar* says that the single *beginning* following the duality of 2 (*bet*) suggests that what appears to be duality is really unity. When this is realized, the “other side” vanishes.

“When it came to the lower creation, it gave a name to the creator, who was now discoverable, and said: “*Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.” Thus the first, which is the higher, remains shrouded in mystery, while the lower is disclosed, so that the work of the Holy One, blessed be He, should be ever both hidden and disclosed. Similarly, the holy name is also, in the esoteric doctrine, both hidden and disclosed.”
(*Zohar* I:39b)

“That point is called *Ani* (I) (*Leviticus* 19:30), and upon it rests the unknown, the Most High, the unrevealed One which is TETRAGRAMMATON (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), both being one.”
(*Zohar* I:6a)

“*Ani* (I) is sovereign over this world and of the world to come, all being dependent on it, whereas the other one (*aher*), the side of impurity, the other side, has rule only in this world and none at all in the other world; and hence, whoever cleaves to that *Ani* (I) has a portion in this world and in the world to come; but he who cleaves to that *aher* (the other one) perishes from this world and has no portion in the world to come.”
(*Zohar* I:204b)

“When mankind will universally acknowledge this absolute unity (of *Elohim* and *yud-hey-vav-hey*), the evil power (*sitra ahra*, other side) itself will be removed from the world, and exercise no more influence on earth.”
(*Zohar* 12b)

The only aim and object of the Holy One in sending man into this world is that he may know and understand that TETRAGRAMMATON is *Elohim*. This is the sum of the whole mystery of the Faith, of the whole *Torah*, of all that is above and below, of the Written and Oral *Torah*, all together forming one unity. The essence of the mystery of Faith is to know that this is a complete Name.
(*Zohar* II:161b-162a)

NOACH

(*Genesis 6:9-11:32*)

THE GOLDEN RATIO
THE TSOHAR

THE GOLDEN RATIO

In mathematics there is a sequence called the *Fibonacci sequence* that was discovered by Leonardo of Pisa (c. 1170 CE – c. 1250 CE) who was also known as Fibonacci. This sequence looks like the following:

$$1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, \dots$$

To generate this sequence, you always add the previous two terms together to get the next one. Thus, $1+1=2$, $1+2=3$, $2+3=5$, and so on. Furthermore, there is another sequence we can create by taking the ratios of consecutive terms of our *Fibonacci sequence*. That gives us the following,

$$\frac{1}{1}, \frac{2}{1}, \frac{3}{2}, \frac{5}{3}, \frac{8}{5}, \frac{13}{8}, \frac{21}{13}, \frac{34}{21}, \frac{55}{34}, \dots$$

If we write this in decimal form, then we get this sequence,

$$1, 2, 1.5, 1.\bar{6}, 1.6, 1.625, 1.615384615, 1.619047619, 1.617647059, \dots$$

It looks like these numbers are getting close to something, and indeed they are. They are getting closer and closer to $\frac{1+\sqrt{5}}{2} \approx 1.618034$, a number that is known historically as the *golden ratio*. The *golden ratio* occurs naturally in nature just like the number *pi*. However, the *golden ratio* is also believed to be the most pleasing ratio to look at, and while a formal geometric description of this ratio was first given by Pythagoras (c. 570 BCE – c. 495 BCE), its use in architecture goes back to the Great Pyramid (c. 2490 BCE). Additionally, ratios of *Fibonacci numbers* that approximate the *golden ratio* are used in both the construction of the *Ark of the Covenant* and of the *ark of Noah*. However, these measurements may have been chosen not because the Israelites were aware of the *golden ratio*, but because they simply felt it was a pleasing ratio to look at.

“And Bezalel made the ark of shittim wood; two cubits and a half was its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. $\left(\frac{2.5}{1.5} = \frac{5}{3}\right)$ ” (*Exodus 37:1*)

“The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. $\left(\frac{50}{30} = \frac{5}{3}\right)$ ” (*Genesis 6:15*)

Furthermore, the *Zohar* appears to use these measurements to conclude that *Noah’s ark* is equivalent to the *Ark of the Covenant*.

“*Noah’s ark* represented the *Ark of the Covenant* ... Your exposition is certainly the right one, as can also be deduced from the measurements of the ark.” (*Zohar I:59b-60a*)

THE TSOHAR

In *Genesis* 6:16 we read the following:

“A window shall you make in the ark.”
(*Genesis* 6:16)

The Hebrew word at the beginning of this verse is *tsohar*, and it is often translated as “window.” However, it is also sometimes translated as “light.” This uncertainty in translation is due to the fact that *tsohar* is a very ancient word in Hebrew and it appears only once in the *Bible*. Hence, a lack of context for its use is what makes translation of this word into another language rather difficult.

In the *Talmud*, we read this passage:

“A window shalt thou make to the ark. R. Johanan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, instructed Noah, ‘Set therein precious stones and jewels, so that they may give thee light, bright as the noon.’”
(*B. Sanhedrin* 108b)

In the passage above we see an association between windows, light, and gemstones, and this association is developed even further in the *Midrash*.

“A LIGHT (*TSOHAR*) SHALT THOU MAKE TO THE ARK (*Genesis* 6:16). R. Hunia and R. Phinehas, R. Hanan and R. Hoshai could not explain [the meaning of *TZO HAR*]; R. Abba b. Kahana and R. Levi did explain it. R. Abba b. Kahana said: It means a skylight; R. Levi said: A precious stone. R. Phinehas said in R. Levi's name: During the whole twelve months that Noah was in the Ark he did not require the light of the sun by day or the light of the moon by night, but he had a polished gem which he hung up: when it was dim he knew that it was day, and when it shone he knew that it was night.”
(*Genesis Rabbah* XXXI:11)

Over the centuries, tales of the *tsohar* grew to the point where it became a stone or jewel that contained a spiritual light that could provide healing, a connection to the spiritual realms, and prophetic glimpses into the future. This stone, according to folklore, was owned at various times by Adam, Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and even that champion of the *Zohar*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (*Zohar* I;11a-11b).

The tales of the *tsohar* mirror stories of how shamans around the world have used quartz crystals for centuries, and thus, I suspect that the *tsohar* is really a quartz crystal. However, most people seem to feel nothing if they handle a quartz crystal. Nonetheless, a select few will feel the crystal warm in their left palm, and then they will feel a thick, viscous light flow up their arm and into their skull. They will then feel an expansion of consciousness and a connection with things that are larger. However, too much of this energy may make a person feel irritable and like they are about to explode. Thus, be safe!

LECH LACHA

(*Genesis 12:1-17:27*)

GO TO YOURSELF!

GO TO YOURSELF!

Most translations of *Genesis* 12:1 look something like the following:

“And the Lord had said to Abram, Get out from your country, and from your family, and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”

(*Genesis* 12:1)

However, the phrase *lech lecha*, usually translated as something like “Get out,” can be more literally translated as “Go to yourself!” And this is pretty much how the *Zohar* translates it in *Zohar* I:78b,

“It is written *lech lecha* (lit. go to thyself), to give light to thyself and to all that shall follow thee from now onwards.”

(*Zohar* I:78b)

Consequently, we might say that the real journey for change and transformation is an inward journey to one’s self. However, the question that immediately arises now is who am I really? Who or what is my real self? When one first begins an inquiry into who one really is, one tends to first pull up various descriptions of oneself. For example, one might say things like, “I am male. I am old. I am educated.” However, these are only attributes that one currently possesses, and as such they are only temporary labels. For instance, “old” is not a label that I have carried until recently, and yet I feel like I have been the same me ever since I was young. Hence, if my true self hasn’t changed over the years even though my description of myself is always evolving, then it follows that my true self is more than just my verbal description!

To find the true self, one has to go beyond a verbal description of who they are, and to do so may seem at first very strange. It will seem strange because our society has become so dependent on the analytical left brain that it hardly recognizes anymore the activities of the non-verbal right brain. However, as I often say, if we use only one hemisphere of our brain, then we’re just a half-wit! The right hemisphere of the brain is experiential rather than verbal, and as a result, it communicates with us through images and feelings rather than words. Thus, one has to first move from listening to one’s brain “talk” about reality to letting one’s brain simply experience reality without comment. However, even these images are not one’s true self as they, too, are fleeting. Hence, one has to go still deeper, and as one goes beyond words and beyond temporary images and experiences, then eventually the only thing left that is unchanging and that can’t be discarded is your own pure awareness, that very consciousness that makes you alive. This is your true self. Thus, as you go throughout your day, develop the habit of being aware of your awareness. It may feel like a presence that is always there in the background, but eventually you will realize it is in the foreground and everywhere else, too. There is no place you experience where it is not. And as you focus more on your awareness, you will also experience more love and oneness, because there is no separation in this awareness. Furthermore, when you go beyond words, then there are no words like “my awareness” versus “your awareness.” All awareness is the same, and that awareness is our true self. Go to it!

VAYEIRA

(*Genesis* 18:1-22:24)

THE AFTERLIFE
THE HUSBAND IN THE GATES
ABRAHM LOVES ISMAEL!

THE AFTERLIFE

In the *Hebrew Bible*, there is no real description of an afterlife. Instead, when you die, you just go into the pit or grave (*sheol*) and that's it. Thus, it says in *Psalms* 6:5-6,

“Return, O Lord, deliver my soul. Oh save me for the sake of your loving kindness! For in death there is no remembrance of you. In *Sheol* (the grave) who shall give you thanks?”

(*Psalms* 6:5-6)

In contrast to this, the *Zohar* gives a very detailed description of the afterlife, and we find one such description in the *Zohar's* commentary on this *Torah* portion, *Vayera*. What leads to this commentary, though, is the fact that the *Torah* portion begins with Abraham being visited by three angels, and angels, of course, are from a different realm.

“When the soul departs this world she knows not by what path she will be made to travel; for it is not granted to all souls to ascend by the way that leads to the realm of radiance where the choicest souls shine forth. For it is the path taken by man in this world that determines the path of the soul on her departure. Thus, if a man is drawn towards the Holy One, and is filled with longing towards Him in this world, the soul in departing from him is carried upward towards the higher realms by the impetus given her each day in this world.’ ... If a man follows a certain direction in this world, he will be led further in the same direction when he departs this world; as that to which he attaches himself in this world, so is that to which he will find himself attached in the other world: if holy, holy, and if defiled, defiled.”

(*Zohar* I:99a-100a)

At this point in our history, we can't really know for certain what happens, if anything, after we die. However, what is said above certainly applies to our current lives! Whatever path we decide to walk upon determines what we will draw to us. If we want to be righteous, then we will attract people who are righteous, and if we want to steal and cheat, then we will likely find ourselves surrounded by thieves and cheats. Make the right choices!

Another *Zohar* passage close to the one above is the following:

“Man, however, whilst in this world, considers not and reflects not what it is he is standing on.” (*Zohar* I:99a)

Think about what this means. Ask yourself, “What do I stand on? What is my foundation?” A moment's reflection might convince you that the foundation of your existence is not any perceived object, but existence itself! In other words, your awareness, your essence, your life force, that is your real self. Focus on this, and you will discover a presence that will never leave you. And then you will say, “Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend up to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in *Sheol*, behold, you are there! (*Psalms* 139:7-8)”

THE HUSBAND IN THE GATES

We'll consider the following passages:

“Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.”
(*Proverbs* 31:23)

“But indeed, *Her husband is known in the gates* (*Proverbs* 31:23) – the blessed Holy One, who is known and grasped to the degree that each one opens the gates of imagination, according to the capacity to attain the spirit of wisdom. As one fathoms in his mind, so He *is known* in those *gates*. But can He be known accurately? No one has ever been able to grasp and know Him.”
(*Zohar* I:103b, *Pritzker*)

“For I am the *Lord*, I do not change.”
(*Malachi* 3:6)

“From my flesh will I see *God*”
(*Job* 19:26)

“That extremity of heaven is called *Mi* (*Who?*), but there is another lower extremity which is called *Mah* (*What?*). The difference between the two is this. The first is the real subject of enquiry, but after a man by means of enquiry and reflection has reached the utmost limit of knowledge, he stops at *Mah* (*What?*), as if to say, what knowest thou? What have thy searchings achieved? Everything is as baffling as at the beginning.”
(*Zohar* I:1b)

The context of this passage from *Proverbs* and the *Zohar* is that Abraham is sitting with his wife, Sarah, and thus, the *Zohar* commentary begins with *Her husband is known in the gates*. Furthermore, in the passage from *Proverbs*, “Her” refers to wisdom and the *Shechinah*, and “husband” refers to *God*. Also, the *Zohar* continues to say that our ability to know *God* depends upon our own imagination. The *Zohar* is noticing here the similarity between the Hebrew *sha'ar* for “gates” and the Aramaic *mesha'er* for “imagination.” And since *God* does not change, this suggests that knowing *God* requires change on our part, not *God's*! Continuing to the passage above from *Job*, this passage suggests that our body is really just an instrument for knowing *God*. As is indicated by *Ecclesiastes* 7:14, *God* created separation of one thing from another only so that we may realize that ultimately only *God* exists, “*To the end that man should find nothing after Him.*” Hence, it is ironic that it is only through this separation that we can eventually understand what we have been separated from. And if we are lucky enough to travel so far, then our own experiences and insights will eventually lead us back to *God*. However, on the other hand, we can also only go so far because the ultimate nature of *God* is unknowable. We can only know the parts, but not the whole (*Genesis Rabbah* XII:1 & *Job* 26:14). Consequently, the *Zohar* informs us that while we spend our lives trying to understand *Who* (the eternal question that cannot be answered), in the end we only know much more about *What*, those things that can be perceived.

ABRAHAM LOVES ISHMAEL!

Perhaps the most disturbing story in all of *Torah* is the one known as the binding of Isaac in *Genesis* 22. This is a story of child sacrifice that begins with an unusual request from *God* to Abraham.

“And He (*God*) said, Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.”

(*Genesis* 22:2)

Earlier in the *Torah* when told of the immanent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argues with *God* over this plan and asks if *God* intends to destroy the good along with the evil. And yet in this instance, Abraham raises no objections to *God's* order to sacrifice Isaac, and that is one reason why the story is so disturbing to people. Consequently, over the millennia people have tried to explain and rationalize this story, but no one has yet come up with an explanation that satisfies everyone. My particular impression is that this story was composed during a time in which child sacrifice was common among certain groups, and thus, the story is showing us an alternative to this practice by, at the last minute, allowing Isaac to be replaced by a ram. However, as with many other *Biblical* explanations, this is just a theory. The *Midrash*, though, provides this comment on the story.

“R. Johanan said: And He (*God*) said: Take now thy son (*Genesis*.22:2)-‘which one?’ ‘Thine only son.’ ‘Each is the only one of his mother?’ ‘Whom thou lovest.’ ‘I love them both: are there limits to one's emotions?’ Said He to him: ‘Even Isaac.’ And why did He not reveal it to him without delay? In order to make him even more beloved in his eyes and reward him for every word spoken, for R. Huna said in R. Eliezer's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, first places the righteous in doubt and suspense, and then He reveals to them the meaning of the matter.”

(*Genesis Rabbah* XXXIX:9)

This *Midrash* fills in the gaps in the conversation between Abraham and *God*, and it then explains that the conversation was drawn out in order make Abraham realize how much he loves Isaac, even though one could also argue that this just makes the sacrifice of Isaac all the more painful to Abraham. Nonetheless, the rabbis deduce from this a general principle that the righteous will often understand the meanings of certain actions only after the fact, and consequently, one should perhaps have some faith that things are unfolding as they should.

There is another lesson, however, that one could draw from this story, and it is one that I feel is very important. Namely, Abraham loves Ishmael! Through this conversation, we realize that Abraham considers Ishmael to be his son just as much as Isaac is, each son is the only son of their mother, and Abraham loves Ishmael as much as he does Isaac. Traditionally, Arabs are descended from Ishmael and Jews are descended from Isaac, and we should be brothers, not enemies. The bottom line is that I love and miss my brother!

CHAYEI SARAH

(*Genesis 23:1-25:18*)

CHILDREN OF THE EAST
INTENTION MATTERS
A NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE

CHILDREN OF THE EAST

In *Genesis 25:6* we read the following,

“But to the sons of the concubines, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, to the east country.”
(*Genesis 25:6*)

Based upon this passage, the *Zohar* concludes that all the wisdom of the east originated with Abraham. Furthermore, these offspring of Abraham are referred to in the *Zohar* as the *children of the east*.

“For the ancient children of the East were possessed of a wisdom which they inherited from Abraham, who transmitted it to the sons of the concubines, as it is written, “But unto the sons of the concubines that Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the country of the children of the East” (*Genesis 25:6*).”
(*Zohar I:100b*)

However, the *Zohar* also often warns against the study of the texts of the *children of the east* claiming that their authors had fallen back into idolatry.

“Be on your guard lest, *God* forbid, you be led astray from the worship of the Holy One, since all these books mislead mankind. ... In course of time they followed the track of that wisdom into many wrong directions.”
(*Zohar I:100b*)

Throughout the *Hebrew Bible* there is a constant trope about the dangers of idolatry and other religions. However, these days are not the same as those days, and simply because two religions may have different names for spirituality and different stories regarding the experience, that doesn't mean that they are not talking about the same thing! Consequently, I've been thinking more lately about *Proverbs 8:2*:

“She stands at the top of high places by the way, where the paths meet.”
(*Proverbs 8:2*)

The pronoun “she” refers to *Wisdom* in this chapter of *Proverbs*, and it is also identified in Jewish mysticism with the *Shechinah*, the feminine presence of *God*. Additionally, the Hebrew word for “way” in this passage is *derekh*, and this word refers to a road that is like a superhighway for everyone. In contrast, the word *netivah* that is translated as “path” above denotes a path that is for a single individual alone. Consequently, my modern interpretation of this passage is as follows. At the bottom of the mountain we have different religions that are the wide roads that people begin their journey to spirituality upon. However, once you reach a certain level, you have to let go of the modern idol of “dogma” and complete the journey through your own wisdom. Hence, I don't care what religion you started with. I only care if you are near the top.

INTENTION MATTERS

This *Torah* portion begins with the death of Sarah, and this leads the *Zohar* into a discussion of the reward and punishment for good and evil. In particular, this is one place where the compassion of both the *Talmud* and the *Zohar* really shines in that they both recognize the inherent imperfections of people and don't demand more of them than is possible. Thus, these sources of guidance demand punishment for wrong actions, but not for wrong thoughts. They recognize that we can't be expected to control all our thoughts all the time. Nevertheless, they do state that you will be rewarded for those good thoughts and intentions that you were not able to put into action. Also, while the *Zohar* does not want to punish people just for their thoughts, the text, nonetheless, cautions that one should cultivate only good impulses. Even if we aren't going to be punished for our bad thoughts, they will still attract an evil that could lead to our downfall just as good thoughts attract holiness and good things. So, watch your thoughts, and be grateful that you won't be held accountable for everything!

“Good intention is combined with deed, for it is said: Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. Now, what is the meaning of, That thought upon his name? Said R. Assi: Even if one merely thinks of performing a precept but is forcibly prevented the Writ ascribes it to him as though he has performed it. Evil intention is not combined with deed, for it is said: If I regarded iniquity in my heart, The Lord would not hear. Then how do I interpret, behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts? Intention which bears fruit the Holy One, blessed be He, combines with deed; Intention which does not bear fruit the Holy One, blessed be He, does not combine with deed.”

(*B. Kiddushin* 40a)

“In the judgement, good and evil actions are not weighed in the same way. No account is taken of evil deeds which a man is likely to perpetrate in the future, for so it is written, “for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is” (Genesis 21:17). But in regard to good actions, not only those already performed in the past are taken into consideration, but also those which a man is going to perform in the future; so that even if the present account would prove a man guilty, the Holy One in His bounty towards His creatures puts to his credit all his future good deeds, and the man is thus saved.”

(*Zohar* I:121b)

“For it is a dictum of our teachers that corresponding to the impulses of a man here are the influences which he attracts to himself from above. Should his impulse be towards holiness, he attracts to himself holiness from on high and so he becomes holy; but if his tendency is towards the side of impurity, he draws down towards himself the unclean spirit and so becomes polluted.”

(*Zohar* I:125b)

A NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE

Since Sarah dies at the beginning of this *Torah* portion (*Chayei Sarah*), Abraham purchases a burial cave for her that is known as the *Cave of Machpelah*. Furthermore, this leads to a discussion in the *Zohar* of what happens after you die, and the result is, in my eyes, a fascinating 13th century description of what today we would call a near death experience. For example, in the *Zohar's* version of such, the image of the tunnel is replaced by that of the cave, the light at the end of the tunnel comes from the *Garden of Eden*, and the being of light that one encounters is not Jesus, but Adam who notes that he broke one commandment and then asks how many you broke. The bottom line, though, is that to find all of these elements together in one book that was composed approximately 700 years before the concept was delineated, well, that is just fascinating!

“For Adam had made a cave near the Garden, and had hidden himself there with his wife. He knew it was near the Garden, because he saw a faint ray of light enter it from there, and therefore he desired to be buried in it; and there he was buried, close to the gate of the Garden of Eden. So it is that when a man is about to depart from life, Adam, the first man, appears to him and asks him why and in what state he leaves the world. He says: ‘Woe to thee that through thee I have to die.’ To which Adam replies: ‘My son, I transgressed one commandment and was punished for so doing; see how many commandments of your Master, negative and positive, you have transgressed.’ ... R. Yesa said: ‘Adam appears to every man at the moment of his departure from life to testify that the man is dying on account of his own sins and not the sin of Adam, according to the dictum, ‘there is no death without sin.’”

(*Zohar* I:57b)

“R. Judah said: ‘Abraham recognized the cave of Machpelah by a certain mark, and he had long set his mind and heart on it. For he had once entered that cave and seen Adam and Eve buried there. He knew that they were Adam and Eve because he saw the form of a man, and whilst he was gazing a door opened into the Garden of Eden, and he perceived the same form standing near it. Now, whoever looks at the form of Adam cannot escape death. For when a man is about to pass out of the world he catches sight of Adam and at that moment he dies.’”

(*Zohar* I:127a)

“We have learnt that after seven days the body begins to decay, and the soul goes in to its place. It (the soul) enters the cave of Machpelah, where it is allowed in up to a certain point according to its deserts. It then reaches the place of the Garden of Eden and meets the Cherubim and the flashing sword which is in the lower Garden of Eden, and if it is worthy to enter, it enters.”

(*Zohar* I:219a)

TOLDOT

(*Genesis 25:19-28:9*)

THE WELL OF NONDUALITY
WHEN YOU BECOME ENLIGHTENED, BUILD!

THE WELL OF NONDUALITY

Many see Isaac as the weakest among the patriarchs, as someone who was severely damaged psychologically by his father's attempt to sacrifice him. However, I like to look at Isaac in a more positive light. I see him as a necessary transition figure between Abraham and Jacob. In particular, Abraham initiated certain things, and Isaac preserved those things and set them on a firm foundation for the next generation. It's not the flashiest of roles to play in history, but it is, nonetheless, one that is very necessary.

In this *Torah* portion we find Isaac winning the favor of kings, consolidating his father's fortunes, and re-digging the wells that his father had dug and that the Philistines had later stopped up. And it's the re-digging of the wells that is the impetus for the following very mystical commentary from the *Zohar* on *Genesis* 26:19.

“And Isaac's servants dug in the valley, and found there a well of springing water.”
(*Genesis* 26:19)

“Observe that the “well of living waters” is a symbol within a symbol for guiding faith. There is the well which is the very source of the waters, and there is the well which is fed by that source of water. There are thus two grades, which are, however, really one with two aspects, male and female, in fitting union. The well and the issue of waters are one, designated by the name of “well”, it being at once the supernal never-ceasing fountain and the well that is filled by it. And whoever gazes at that well gazes at the true object of faith. This is the symbol which the patriarchs transmitted in digging the well, in such a way as to indicate that the source and the well are indissoluble.”
(*Zohar* I:141b)

The “well of living waters” is what we might call our awareness or our essence. It is that within us which makes us truly alive, and we could also describe it as the very source of our existence. Life flows from this awareness. In contrast to this source, though, is the well that receives the flow of awareness, and we could call that well the “world” because that well is filled with every object of consciousness that our awareness runs to.

We commonly think of our attention running first to one thing and then another, and this can cause us to create a model where we have awareness on one side, the world on the other side, and we imagine awareness “running” out to the world to observe and then “returning” to the center of consciousness with knowledge. However, deeper reflection may make you realize that awareness is there at every step, and that is easily seen by the fact that if we have no awareness of something or its effects, then it does not exist for us as an object of perception. It is very much like a dream where we readily understand that everything is created by consciousness and composed of awareness. However, unlike a dream, there are limitations on what we can do in our waking world. As I like to say, at birth we sign a license agreement to allow the world to change in only certain ways so that it has greater stability than a dream. Nonetheless, since everything is composed of awareness, by turning our attention to the source of awareness, we can realize that the well that gives and the well that receives are one and the same. There is only One.

WHEN YOU BECOME ENLIGHTENED, BUILD!

In this *Torah* portion, Isaac names the last well he digs *Rehoboth* which means a “broad place.” This word appears not only in *Genesis* 26:22, but also in *Proverbs* 1:20.

“Wisdom cries aloud in the street; she utters her voice in the broad places.”
(*Proverbs* 1:20)

Throughout *Proverbs*, wisdom refers to *Torah*, the feminine presence of *God* known as the *Shechinah*, and to an enlightenment or knowing that exists prior to creation. However, wisdom also refers to Solomon who was seen as the wisest person to have existed. In this regard, the *Zohar* tells us that after we have attained the level of wisdom or enlightenment equivalent to that of Solomon, we do not retreat to a mountain top to meditate for the rest of our lives. Instead, we build, we create.

“When a man has penetrated into the mystery of Wisdom and perfected himself therein, then Solomon tells him to “build his house” (*Proverbs* 24:27), i.e. to cultivate his soul in his body, so as to attain perfection. Hence, when Isaac digged and prepared the well in peace, he called it *Rehoboth* (wide places), and all was done in the right manner. Happy are the righteous by whose works the Holy One sustains the world.”
(*Zohar* I:141b)

This message appears elsewhere in the *Zohar* in a story about a hermit who visits the townsfolk and discovers all sorts of tasty confections made from wheat. The hermit thinks that since he knows of raw wheat, he therefore knows the essence of everything and that that is enough. However, he fails to understand that as long as he resides in this world, he is meant to be active and to create. Thus, if he fails to use his wisdom to create and to build and to make the world a better place, then he has missed the mark.

“Once there was a man who dwelt among the mountains and was a complete stranger to the ways of townsfolk. He sowed wheat, but knew no better than to consume it in its natural condition. One day he went down into a city, and there a loaf of good bread was placed before him. He asked what it was, and was informed that it was bread and was meant to eat. He ate it and liked it. “What is it made of?” he said. They told him “Wheat”. Later, he was given fine cake kneaded in oil. He tasted it, and again asked: “And this, of what is it made?” The same reply was made as before: “Of wheat”. Finally, he was treated to some royal confectionery, flavored with oil and honey. Once more he asked his question, and obtained the same reply. Then he said: “In sooth, I have all these at my command, because I eat the essential constituent of all, namely wheat.” Thus, through his untutored taste he remained a stranger to all these delicious flavors, and their enjoyment was lost to him. Even so it is with those who stop short at the general principles of knowledge because they are ignorant of the delights which may be derived from the further investigation and application of those principles.”
(*Zohar* II:176a-176b)

Life means movement which means creating. As long as we live, we must co-create.

VAYEZE

(*Genesis* 28:10-32:3)

THE SHEKINAH
SEX AND THE ZOHAR

THE SHEKINAH

The Hebrew word *Shekinah* refers to the presence of *God*. It is related to the Hebrew word *shin-kaf-nun* that means “to dwell,” and this is a reference to the spirit of *God* dwelling amongst us in a close and personal way. This word is not mentioned at all in the *Bible*. It was first introduced in rabbinic literature where it was argued that whenever the Jewish people go into exile, the *Shekinah* goes with them and it is then understood as “*God* in exile” with the people.

In the *Zohar* the *Shekinah* represents several things. Since the word has a feminine ending, the *Zohar* specifically portrays the *Shekinah* as representing the female aspect of *God*. Also, it is generally associated on the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* with the very bottom *sefirah*, “Kingdom.” This *sefirah* represents the physical world, the visible name of *God*, *God* in exile, and the ego or sense of “I” when it is attached to objects in the world and in “exile” from pure awareness. However, when we identify the “I” within us more with the observer than the observed, then the *Shekinah* is associated with the *sefirah* “Beauty” that is in the very center of the tree. At this point, balance has been restored by correctly associating the “I” with the perceiver instead of the perceived, and this is expressed symbolically as the marriage of the bride (*Shekinah*) and the groom (*God*).

There are two words in Hebrew for “I,” *ani* and *anokhi*. The latter word has a divine association probably because the ten commandments begin with, “I (*anokhi*) am the Lord thy *God*.” Also, the middle *sefirah* “Beauty” is associated with *ani* (*aleph-nun-yud*), but if you permute the letters of this word, then you get *ayin* (*aleph-yud-nun*) which means “nothingness,” another name for “Crown,” the top *sefirah*. Thus, when the ego becomes completely absorbed into the observer, we disappear into that oneness that contains all.

“It has been taught: R. Simon b. Yohai said: ‘Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of *God*, in that to every place to which they were exiled the *Shekinah* went with them.’”

(*B. Megillah* 29a)

“Whence do we know that the *Shechinah* accompanied Israel in exile? Because it says, ‘For your sake I was sent to Babylon (*Isaiah* 43:14).’”

(*Exodus Rabbah* XXIII:5)

“What Jacob really said was: “And I have not known *Anokhi* (I, the *Shekinah*, *Genesis* 28:16)”; as much as to say: “Behold all this revelation has been vouchsafed to me whilst yet I have not reached the stage of a knowledge of *Anokhi* (I) and of entering under the wings of the *Shekinah*, so as to attain perfection.”” (*Zohar* I:150a)

“*Anokhi*, I – mystery of all as one, in totality of all letters, in paths of *Torah* radiating from supernal mystery. Upon this depend upper and lower mysteries.”

(*Zohar* II:91a, *Pritzker*)

SEX AND THE ZOHAR

The *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* is a good model for the universe, but it is not a perfect model. Furthermore, one could argue that no perfect model is possible because if we did have a model that explained everything, then we would have a model that completely explains *God*, and that contradicts the fact that *God* is unknowable. As Rav Huna says in *Genesis Rabbah* XII:1, we can only know *God's* parts, but never the whole. Furthermore, when it comes to the shortcomings of this model, probably nothing is more messed up than its discussion of the genders, male and female.

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the oldest book of Jewish mysticism, *God* creates the world with the female principle as represented by the mother letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, and from these letters emerge the letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav* which are used to form the most sacred name for *God* (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) that is generally seen as a masculine or “father name” for *God*. I once wondered what would happen if we wrote *yud-hey-vav-hey* with the mother letters *aleph-mem-shin-mem*. Would this give us a “mother name” for *God*? Well, interestingly if we write this latter name as *aleph-mem / shin-mem*, then that actually spells “mother name” in Hebrew!

Almost every culture will tell you in some form or fashion that everything is born of women, but in the *Zohar*, as in the Adam and Eve story, it is suddenly the male that comes before the female. Consequently, men are associated in the *Zohar* with the right side of the tree which represents unconditional love while women are associated with the left side and conditional love. This seems completely backwards, and yet the model does work well on a physical level since the right arm is stronger than the left and men are stronger than women. Consequently, I sometimes wonder if these gender attributions should reverse when we ascend to non-physical levels just as all the nerves in the body cross from one side to the opposite side as they go to the brain. Regardless, the *Zohar* does occasionally hint at such a reversal either of male and female or their associated elements in the *Zohar* of water (right side) and fire (left side).

“In them “the stork has made her house” (*Psalms* 104:17). Why is it called here by the feminine form *hasidah* (stork, lit. filled with mercy)? The truth is that this upper world is really of the female principle, but we usually give it a masculine name (*hesed* / mercy), inasmuch as in its unfolding it is the source whence all beneficence and all light come forth.” (*Zohar* I:163a)

“Water originates from the side of severity (left side, *Geburah*) and issues thence.” (*Zohar* II:48a)

“From his right hand went a fiery law for them.” (*Deuteronomy* 33:2)

“Three mothers *aleph-mem-shin*, a great and wondrous secret, covered and sealed with six rings, and out of them air, water, fire, and from them originated fathers (*yud-hey-vav*), and from fathers, consequences.” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 3:2)

VAYISHLACH

(*Genesis 32:4-36:43*)

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In *Genesis* 32:7, Jacob is finally reunited with his brother Esau after the two of them having been apart for several years. But when they meet, Esau shows up with a contingency of four hundred men, “And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to your brother Esau, and also he comes to meet you, and four hundred men with him (*Genesis* 32:7).” Naturally, Jacob finds this show of force to be a little intimidating. The *Zohar*, however, derives a very interesting lesson from this large array of soldiers.

“And moreover “he cometh to meet thee”, and that not by himself, but having “four hundred men with him”. Why all these details? Because *God* always delights in the prayer of the righteous, and He crowns Himself, as it were, with their supplications. So we affirm that the angel in charge of the prayers of Israel, Sandalphon by name, takes up all those prayers and weaves out of them a crown for the Living One of the worlds. All the more, then, must we believe that the prayers of the righteous, in which *God* takes delight, are made into a crown for Him. Seeing that Jacob had with him legions of holy angels, it may be asked why he was afraid. The truth is that the righteous rely not on their merits but on their prayers and supplications to their Master. R. Simeon said: ‘The prayer of a congregation ascends to the Almighty, and He is crowned therewith, because it comprises many hues and directions, wherefore it is made into a crown to be placed on the head of the Righteous One, the Living One of the worlds; whereas the prayer of an individual is not many-sided and presents only one hue, and hence is not so complete and acceptable as the prayer of a congregation. Jacob was many-sided, and therefore *God* craved for his prayer, and hence it is written: “Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed”.’ R. Judah cited here the verse: “Happy is the man that feareth alway; but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into evil” (*Proverbs* 28:14).”
(*Zohar* I:167b)

In the *Talmud* in tractate *Taanit* (Fasts) we find several stories regarding prayers and fasts that are done in order to bring rain. Usually, the entire congregation will be called upon to pray and fast so that rain for the crops will arrive in a timely manner. However, at other times the leaders would call upon the services of local miracle workers who were renowned for their efficacy in successfully praying for rain. Consequently, that raises the question of which is more effective, the prayer of a group or the prayer of an individual? The *Zohar* provides an answer that it is the prayer of the group that is generally more effective for the simple reason that the variations in tone and emphasis that occur as we go from one person to the next result in a supplication that is far more nuanced and far more complete. Furthermore, even though Jacob is just one man, as an individual he is also seen by the *Zohar* as many-sided, and thus, his prayers are also effective.

The *Zohar's* point in this passage is subtle, but very important, and it can be applied to other situations as well. In society, a mix of different kinds of people and cultures is better than a monoculture just as a major chord in music is far more powerful and more harmonious than just a single note. Or as *Ecclesiastes* says in reference to a different kind of cord, “A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (*Ecclesiastes* 4:12).”

VAYYESHEV

(*Genesis 37:1-40:23*)

A TORAH MYSTERY

A TORAH MYSTERY

The *Hebrew Bible* contains hints of many things that go beyond the plain meaning of the text, and along those lines, there is a strong suggestion that there is more to the Joseph story than we realize. The first hint of this is that the “coat of many colors” is mentioned in only two places in the *Bible*, once in *Genesis 37* in connection with Joseph and then again in II *Samuel 13* in connection with Tamar, a daughter of King David. In the Tamar story in II *Samuel 13*, Tamar winds up being raped by her half-brother Amnon. This is the first hint that maybe Joseph, like Tamar, was abused by a relative. What clinches it, though, is that the Joseph narrative is oddly interrupted by the story of Judah and a different Tamar in *Genesis 38* where Judah has sexual relations with Tamar by the road to Timnath. Those familiar with *Biblical* exegesis can see this as a strong hint that we can substitute the name Joseph for Tamar in order to conclude that he was also a victim of misconduct. But the next mystery is who was the perpetrator? Some have speculated that Joseph’s father, Jacob, was the culprit. However, another possibility is Reuben as the abuser, and here is one argument that one might give in support of that: (1) Reuben is already identified as guilty of sexual impropriety in *Genesis 35* where he has sexual relations with Bilhah, his father’s concubine. Furthermore, Bilhah was also Rachel’s servant, and, thus, the name might be a code for Joseph. In other words, just as Bilhah belonged to Rachel, so did Joseph belong to his mother, Rachel. (2) Amnon was a half-brother of Tamar, and Reuben was a half-brother of Joseph. Thus, any half-brother to Joseph is a person of interest here. (3) Amnon was the oldest son of King David, and Reuben was the oldest son of Jacob. This, in particular, suggests that we can substitute the name Reuben for Amnon (4) Normally, Jacob’s inheritance would have gone to Reuben, the eldest son, but because of Reuben’s sexual improprieties, it was passed to Judah instead. Hence, in the Judah and Tamar story in *Genesis 38*, the name “Judah” could also be code for Reuben, the one who should have received Jacob’s blessing. (5) In *Genesis 37*, Judah suggests selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites while Reuben is absent. Possibly, this could have been an attempt by the brothers to separate Joseph from the continued abuse by Reuben. (6) And lastly, in the *Talmud (B. Megillah 25a)* it says that the story of Judah and Tamar can be read in Hebrew and translated into the current language in use, but that the stories of Reuben and Amnon can only be read, but not translated. Clearly, there is a cover up here! However, again it is not entirely clear what is being covered up and who the perpetrators. For example, another argument could be made that while Tamar symbolizes Joseph, Judah represents only Judah, and it may be the case either that Judah sexually abused Joseph or that the author is trying to tell us something else. Namely, that slavery is just as harmful and just as wrong as sexual abuse! During a time when slavery was commonplace, this would be a bold assertion to make, to say the least. Consequently, the author may have wanted to veil this assertion, but not so much that it couldn’t be found by later generations. And even if this is not the specific message intended by the text, it is, nonetheless, a good one to walk away with. It is always wrong to force your will upon another person!

MIQEITZ

(*Genesis* 41:1-44:17)

INEFFABLENESS AND IDENTITY REVISITED
I-I
THE CLEANSING POWER OF TORAH

INEFFABLENESS AND IDENTITY REVISITED

The *Zohar's* commentary on this week's *Torah* portion reiterates themes that we've previously commented on. For example, in "THE MATHEMATICAL INEFFABLENESS OF GOD" we previously discussed how higher mathematics suggests that the totality of all things is intrinsically unknowable. The *Zohar* suggests this, too, with its particular translation of *Ecclesiastes* 1:8 that emphasizes our inability to perceive the entirety of all things.

"Man's mouth cannot utter, nor his eyes see, nor his ear hear the entirety of things; and yet "there is nothing new under the sun" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:8)."

(*Zohar* I:195a)

Next, the *Zohar* again suggests that the most sacred 4-letter name for *God* (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) known as the TETRAGRAMMATON symbolizes that which is incomprehensible and beyond apprehension.

"Moses came to him (Pharaoh), not in the name of God (Elohim), but in the name of the Lord (TETRAGRAMMATON, *yud-hey-vav-hey*), a name altogether beyond his apprehension."

(*Zohar* I:195a)

And finally, we have this passage from the *Zohar*. In this passage, both "I" and the "kingdom of heaven" represent the *Shechinah*, the *presence*. Furthermore, as we've discussed previously, the key to a deeper spiritual understanding is to focus on the essence of the observer, the essence of "I." As one does so, one becomes centered and established in one's true self, and the exterior world known as *aher* (the other) vanishes as one realizes that the *presence* behind the "I" is the essence of everything. However, after realizing that essence, one should then use that understanding to help build a better world just as we read in *I Kings* 5 where Solomon first acquired wisdom and then built the Holy Temple.

"God thus admonished Israel to sanctify themselves, in the words: "Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (*Leviticus* 19:2). The term *Ani* (I) here signifies the kingdom of heaven. Confronting this is the kingdom of idolatry, which is termed "another" (*aher*), regarding which it is written: "For thou shalt bow down to no other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (*Exodus* 34:14). *Ani* (I) is sovereign over this world and of the world to come, all being dependent on it, whereas the other one (*aher*), the side of impurity, the other side, has rule only in this world and none at all in the other world; and hence, whoever cleaves to that *Ani* (I) has a portion in this world and in the world to come; but he who cleaves to that *aher* (the other one) perishes from this world and has no portion in the world to come."

(*Zohar* I:204b)

As I've said before, if we examine our experience, then the only thing that is inexplicable is our awareness itself. Everything else we know appears as an object of perception, but the awareness that we use to perceive does not itself appear as an object of perception in the same way as a chair or an emotion or a thought. Nonetheless, we do sense that we are aware, and the perceiver of objects is something we can direct our attention to. We can direct awareness back upon itself, and as we do so we experience unity because there are no divisions in that which cannot be perceived. Also, as we become more absorbed in this awareness, concepts such as the awareness existing only within ourselves begin to drop away. In its pure form, awareness is beyond concepts and categorizations.

In the *Zohar*, our sense of "I", the Sun, Heaven, Beauty, and the *Shechinah* united again with *God* all represent the same thing. Cleave to the "I," and you will understand.

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(*Zohar* I:204b)

"In them hath he set a tent for the Sun" (Psalm 19:5), because the Holy Sun (Tifereth, beauty, the "I," the heart/mind, the center of awareness) is as a tabernacle of all those supreme grades, and is as a light which has taken into itself all the hidden lights and the whole current of their extension, whereby Faith is manifested in the whole world. To grasp the Sun is equivalent to grasping all grades, because the Sun is a "tent" including all and absorbing all; and he in turn lights up all the shining colors below."

(*Zohar* II:137b)

"Herein consisted the sin of the primeval serpent who united below but divided above, and so caused the mischief we still lament. The right way, on the contrary, is to recognize diversity below but unity above, so that the black light (the unseen illuminating awareness) becomes wholly merged above and afterwards unified in respect of its diverse elements, and so is kept away from the evil power. It is therefore necessary for man to acknowledge that "God" and "the Lord" are one and the same without any cleavage whatever: "The Lord he is God" (I Kings XVIII, 39); and when mankind will universally acknowledge this absolute unity, the evil power (*sitra ahra*, other side) itself will be removed from the world, and exercise no more influence on earth."

(*Zohar* I:12b)

THE CLEANSING POWER OF TORAH

In *Proverbs* 10:2 we read, “Righteousness saves from death.” However, the Hebrew word for “righteousness” can also be translated as “charity,” and so the ancient rabbis also translated this as, “Charity saves from death.” Furthermore, the *Talmud* goes further to proclaim that, “Charity is equivalent to all other religious precepts combined (*B. Baba Bathra* 10a).” The *Zohar* then takes this equivalence even further by also declaring that *Torah* is equivalent to *charity*.

“The *Torah* is called the *tree of life* and is also called *righteousness*, as we read: “And it shall be *righteousness* unto us” (*Deuteronomy* 6:25). The word *zedakah* (*righteousness*) here may also have its literal meaning of “*charity*”. The two meanings, *Torah* and *charity*, are however, in essence identical.”

(*Zohar* I:199a-99b)

In the early days of Judaism, a purification ritual usually involved an animal or grain sacrifice, but both the *Midrash* and the *Zohar* see the *Torah* as the ultimate instrument for purification.

“Just as water purifies man from ritual uncleanness, as it says, ‘And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (*Ezekiel*. 36:25),’ So the *Torah* cleanses an unclean man of his uncleanness, as it says, ‘The words of the Lord are pure words (*Psalms* 12:7).”

(*Song of Songs Rabbah* I:19)

“The words of the *Torah* rise above all offerings.’ He replied: ‘This is truly so, and if a man studies the *Torah* it benefits him more than all sacrifices and burnt-offerings, and even though punishment has been decreed against him from above it is annulled. Therefore it is that words of the *Torah* are not susceptible to uncleanness, because it can itself purify those who are unclean.”

(*Zohar* III:80b)

Furthermore, through these equivalences we might also say that *charity* that is given with kindness is also cleansing, and the sages saw acts of loving kindness as even greater than charity (*B. Sukkah* 49b). However, in spite of the cleansing effects of charity, righteousness, acts of loving kindness, and *Torah*, one must still do these things with the proper motive and not misuse religion. Otherwise, we only spread poison!

“Sow according to your charity, but reap according to your kindness.”

(*Hosea* 10:12)

“R. Hananel b. Papa said: ‘What is meant by, Hear, for I will speak princely things? Why are the words of the *Torah* compared to a prince? To tell you: just as a prince has power of life and death, so have the words of the *Torah* potentialities of life and death. Thus Raba said; To those who go to the right hand thereof it is a medicine of life; to those who go to the left hand thereof it is a deadly poison.’” (*B. Shabbat* 88b)

VAYIGASH

(*Genesis* 44:18-47:27)

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Politicians and prominent officials seem to love to make public spectacles of prayer and their devotion. However, real prayer involves entering into the depths of inner silence. In this regard, *Psalm* 65:2 is often translated as, "Praise awaits thee, oh *God*," but it can also be rendered as, "To you, *Elohim (God)*, silence is praise."

"And Hanna spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard."
(*I Samuel* 1:13)

"It is incumbent on man to offer up prayer and supplication each day so as to unite himself with *God*. It has been laid down that in praying before his Master a man should not make his voice heard, as if he does so his prayer will not be accepted, for the reason that prayer does not consist in audible voice nor is the voice prayer. Prayer consists in another voice attached to the voice which is heard. It thus behoves man to pray silently, to pray with that voice that is inaudible. It is thus written: "and the voice (*veha-qol*, and the report, lit. the voice) was heard", where the term *qol* is written defectively, without a *vav*, pointing to the inaudible voice, like that of Hannah's prayer, of which it is written: "but her voice could not be heard" (*I Samuel* 1:13). The prayer which the Holy One, blessed be He, accepts is that which is performed with earnestness and devotion and proper concentration of the mind on the unity of *God*.' R. Eleazar said: 'The silent voice is the supernal voice from which all other voices proceed.'
(*Zohar* I:210a)

"And he said, Go out, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice."
(*I Kings* 19:11-12)

"The altar which is the innermost of all, the linking of faith, is called "a still silent voice"
(*Zohar* III:30b)

"Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord... and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice'-referring to the very innermost point, which is the source of all illumination."
(*Zohar* I:208b)

"My *God (Isaiah 25:1)*' refers to the still small Voice which is the first subject of interrogation, and is also the supernal Priest."
(*Zohar* III:193b)

"To you, *Elohim*, silence is praise."
(*Psalm* 65:2)

VAYECHI

(*Genesis* 47:28-50:26)

BESHERT

BESHERT

The Yiddish term *besher* literally means destiny, but it is generally used as a reference to one's true soulmate. In this context, I've met many couples in my lifetime whose unions certainly appear *besher* to me. These are people who function as a single unit rather than as beings that are separate from one another, and their happiness in their union is without measure. According to the *Zohar*, this is how our lives should be. As the *Zohar* says, we must simultaneously be both male and female, and we generally find our missing half through marriage and relationship. In broad terms, we need other people in order to complete ourselves, and in more particular terms, the *Zohar* stresses that a good mate is a gift from *God*, but we will merit such a gift only if we are righteous enough. More than anything else, I am grateful that in this lifetime I was finally reunited with my *besher*.

“R. Hiya discoursed on the verse: House and wealth are an inheritance from parents, but from the Lord is a prudent wife. (*Proverbs* 19:14). ‘When *God* gives a house and money to a man,’ he said, ‘sometimes he bequeaths the whole to his son, and therefore these things, although they are ultimately from *God*, may be called “inheritance of parents”. But the possession of a good wife comes to man only from *God*. For *God* mates couples before they are born, and when a man is worthy he obtains a wife according to his desserts.”

(*Zohar* I:229a)

“All the souls in the world, which are the fruit of the handiwork of the Almighty, are all mystically one, but when they descend to this world they are separated into male and female, though these are still conjoined. When they first issue forth, they issue as male and female together. Subsequently, when they descend (to this world) they separate, one to one side and the other to the other, and *God* afterwards mates them - *God* and no other, He alone knowing the mate proper to each. Happy the man who is upright in his works and walks in the way of truth, so that his soul may find its original mate, for then he becomes indeed perfect, and through his perfection the whole world is blessed.”

(*Zohar* I:85b)

SHEMOT

(Exodus 1:1-6:1)

THE EYE BEHIND THE I
WAS THERE AN EXODUS?
SILENT MOSES

THE EYE BEHIND THE I

For obvious mathematical reasons, I often like to refer to *Exodus* 3:14 as the “Pi passage” of the *Bible*.

“And *God* said to Moses, I AM THAT I AM; and he said, Thus shall you say to the people of Israel, I AM has sent me to you.”

(*Exodus* 3:14)

This is a remarkable passage! In this passage, *God* reveals to Moses his name as “*Ehyeh*,” I AM. It’s always surprised me, though, that moving forward we never see *God* referred to by this name again. Instead, the name spelled in Hebrew by *yud-hey-vav-hey* is the name that is never pronounced and that is most often used to refer to the *God* of the *Hebrew Bible*. However, there is a mathematical connection because the numerical value of *Ehyeh* is $aleph+hey+yud+hey = 1+5+10+5 = 21$, and the numerical value of the three distinct letters one finds in *yud-hey-vav-hey* is $yud+hey+vav = 10+5+6 = 21$. Thus, through *gematria* (ancient Jewish numerology) one could say that each name implies the other.

The expression I AM (*Ehyeh*) is usually used in connection with a noun such as in sentences like “I am smart” or “I am tall.” However, when I AM appears with no subsequent noun, then it can only mean pure consciousness, consciousness without an object. Furthermore, when we think about it, what is there in our experience that could correspond to *Divinity* except our own conscious awareness, that thing inside us that distinguishes us as being alive? It is as Saint Francis of Assisi once said, “What we are looking for is what is looking.” Furthermore, in *Zohar* I:204b we read, “Whoever cleaves to that *Ani* (I) has a portion in this world and in the world to come.”

In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation, the oldest extant book of Jewish mysticism, verse 1:8 describes a powerful but little understood meditation technique, “Restrain your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking, and if your mouth runs to words or your heart to reflections, return them to their place.” Normally, our attention runs towards those objects and thoughts we are looking at, but this verse suggests, instead, that we focus on the awareness that all these perceptions return to. Thus, to practice this technique, you do not need to sit in any posture or close your eyes. Instead, whenever you perceive something, turn your focus back to that which is doing the perceiving. As you do this, you will begin to experience more oneness and love because that which perceives has no perceivable parts. As you progress, you will begin to understand that there is no “running and returning” after all, because all that we know is always within consciousness. Also, you will notice that when you are absorbed in that Oneness that concepts such as “Oneness” and “me” and “my consciousness” all disappear. In that regard, all “Oneness” is the same. The Oneness within me is indistinguishable from the Oneness in you when you are One with it. And at the highest level you will see no difference between “I” and the “other” because, just as in a dream, all is consciousness and there is nothing experienced in your world that is apart from that consciousness.

WAS THERE AN EXODUS?

According to traditional *Biblical* timelines, Moses was born somewhere around 1525 BCE in Egypt during the reign of Ramesses II in the New Kingdom, and when he was 80 years old, he departed Egypt with over a million freed Israelite slaves. That is pretty much the traditional belief, but it suffers from one huge problem. Namely, there is no historical evidence, written or otherwise, that Moses or the *Exodus* ever existed. Additionally, it has been noted that it would be impossible for a million people to wander in the desert for forty years without leaving some sort of mark upon the environment. Hence, many scholars believe that the *Exodus* and the entire Moses saga are nothing more than a fiction. However, there are some other scholars, notably Egyptologist David Rohl, who believe that the traditional timeline is in error. More specifically, there seem to have been some much smaller groups of Semites and slaves who lived in Egypt during the earlier Middle Kingdom, and it may have been a rebellion of this group that led to the later tales of the Exodus. There even seems to have been a Semitic ruler with similarities to Joseph that lived during this earlier period. However, these theories are also currently not accepted by the mainstream body of Egyptologists. Nonetheless, as it often is with things that happened so long ago, it is difficult to say anything with certainty. So much is still unknown, and consequently, so many alternative explanations are still conceivable.

Much of the *Hebrew Bible* itself was put into written form during the Babylonian captivity that began around 597 BCE after the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar, and given the times, there was strong motivation for slanting things in certain ways for political reasons. First of all, popular tales of a much smaller captivity and slave rebellion in Egypt could have been magnified in such a way that voices for equal justice for foreigners, avoiding intermarriage, and following the commandments as a way to regain the land could provide the Jewish people with both hope and a sense of direction for the future. Additionally, criticizing the Egyptians would have been a safe way of criticizing the Babylonians while also providing plausible deniability. Furthermore, warnings in the written *Bible* about what *God* will do to people who don't support Israel would also serve as warnings to the Jewish people's Babylonian captors.

When faced with such uncertainties, I often ask myself which theory I would place my bet on if my life depended upon it, and in this case, I'm voting for the idea that the Exodus tale is based upon earlier oral stories of a much smaller slave rebellion in Egypt, and while I'm sure there was a leader to that rebellion, I also suspect that the Moses of the *Bible* is really a composite figure that reflects the political persuasions and other beliefs of story tellers who originally conveyed and embellished the original tales. For example, the traditional story of Moses being cast into a river in a basket of reeds echoes the origin story of Sargon of Akkad from a thousand years earlier. And finally, even the *Zohar* notes the similarities between Egypt, Babylon, and other captors.

“All the nations of the world and all their kings become powerful only on account of Israel. Egypt, for instance, did not rule over the whole world before Israel settled there. The same is true of Babylon, as well as of Edom (Rome).”

(*Zohar* II:6a)

SILENT MOSES

Various scholars have long pointed out that there is no good evidence outside of the *Bible* that the *Exodus* ever took place. Furthermore, it has been suggested that it would be impossible for over one million Israelites to have wandered the desert for over forty years without leaving some trace. However, some have suggested that a much smaller version of the *Exodus* may have occurred, and *Bible* scholar Professor Richard E. Friedman believes that it may be a smaller group of Levites that left Egypt behind. This theory is supported by the fact that in the *Biblical Exodus* it is only the Levites that have Egyptian names.

Likewise, there is no evidence that Moses existed, though even a small group of migrants from Egypt would likely have some leader. Still, there is a good chance that much of the Moses story is fiction such as the story of his birth which seems to be based upon a much older story of the birth of Sargon of Akkad.

“My mother, the high priestess, conceived; in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose over me.”

(Moses/Wikipedia)

Consequently, I believe that the Moses of the *Bible* is a composite of different versions that appealed to different political and philosophical factions, and the first version that appears in the *Bible* is the one I call “Silent Moses.” This is the Moses who cannot speak well and who must have his brother speak for him. This is the Moses who represents the silent right brain rather than the much more verbal left brain. And as a result, this is the Moses who receives visions from *God* without any filtering. In contrast to this is another Moses that is very verbose and that regularly orders people and groups of people to be executed. I call that version of Moses “Killer Moses.”

“Moses gazed into the clear mirror of prophecy, whereas all the other prophets looked into a hazy mirror.”

(*Zohar* I:170b)

“The altar which is the innermost of all, the linking of faith, is called “a still silent voice”, and in relation to this the other altar is called the “outer” one. The inner one is called “the altar of the Lord” and the other one “the altar of brass”. Said R. Abba: ‘When Moses built an altar (*Exodus* 17:15), he meant it to correspond to that inner one, and therefore he called it “The Lord is my banner”, because it was stamped with the sign of the holy covenant. This is the inner Altar, the “still silent voice”, and on this “fire shall be burnt continually”, that is, the perpetual Fire”

(*Zohar* III:30b)

“And after the fire a still small voice-referring to the very innermost point, which is the source of all illumination.”

(*Zohar* I:209a)

VAEIRA

(Exodus 6:2-9:35)

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Virtually everyone is familiar with the following verses from *Ecclesiastes*.

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”
(*Ecclesiastes* 3:1-8)

However, not everyone is aware that these verses give an explanation as to why bad things happen to good people and vice-versa. The response of *Ecclesiastes* to this question is that a large part of exterior reality is determined by chance as the cycles of nature keep bringing about change. With this, the *Zohar* agrees.

“R. Isaac discoursed on the verse: And they are turned round about by his devices, according to their work, etc. (*Job* 37:12). ‘This means’, he said, ‘that the Holy One, blessed be He, constantly turns the wheel of events, bringing hidden things to the top, and then again giving another turn and shaping things differently; and thus “by his devices” He is ever scheming and planning how to effect the change, and make a new pattern.’
(*Zohar* I:109a)

Thus, reality is capricious, and what we see as good or bad tends to naturally cycle from one to another just as night follows day and then back again. However, the *Zohar* also suggests that our actions can still influence the probabilities. In particular, if we live a good life, then that increases the likelihood that good things will happen to us, and if we live a bad life, then it is more likely that bad things will happen to us. However, none of this is for certain, and bad things still happen to good people, and good things still happen to bad people. Thus, nothing is for certain. Nonetheless, I know that if I am doing good most of the time, then I also feel good most of the time, and that is reward enough!

“So is the Holy One constantly reshaping His works, the instrument which constitutes His potter's wheel, so to speak, being the lower world Judgment Court. And all is done in accordance with man's works. If they are good, the wheel revolves to the right, making the course of events highly favorable to them; and however long the wheel revolves, punishment never settles on that side. Should men, however, turn to evil ways the Holy One imparts to His device a spin to the left, and all things now take a direction to the left, and the wheel gives to events a course unfavorable to the sons of men. So it goes on until they become penitent and retrace their evil ways. But the motive power of the wheel is centered in the works of man; hence the phrase, “by His device, according to their work (*Job* 37:12),” there being no permanency.”
(*Zohar* I:109b-110a)

BO

(*Exodus* 10:1-13:16)

GEMS OF THE ZOHAR

GEMS OF THE ZOHAR

In this section of the *Zohar* one can find several nuggets of stand-alone wisdom, and so I thought I would present a few below. This first one reminds us that we can't ignore our *shadow*, that part of us that consists of all the thoughts and feelings we try to suppress. Those things will eventually come out, and we don't want them to be destructive. Thus, instead of repression, we need to recognize our own negativity and not deny it, but embrace it in order to change it into something positive.

“As Job kept evil separate from good and failed to fuse them, he was judged accordingly: first he experienced good, then what was evil, then again good. For man should be cognizant of both good and evil, and turn evil itself into good. This is a deep tenet of faith.”

(*Zohar* II:34a)

The one place where the models within Jewish mysticism fall short is in their treatment of sexuality. Early Jewish mysticism knew that it is the female that gives birth, but in the later writings of the *Zohar* a more patriarchal outlook is given where the female comes out of the male. Also in the *Zohar*, the right side is usually seen as male and representing mercy, semen, and the color white while the left side is seen as female and representing judgment, blood, and the color red. However, the *Zohar* is occasionally inconsistent on this and other issues, and below it seems to concede that maybe the feminine principle and blood and red belong on the right side instead of the left just as the nurturing, intuitive brain is on the right and the verbal, analytical brain is on the left.

“It is even as we have been taught, that the Holy One made the blood a symbol of mercy, as if there were white in it, and therefore it says: “And when I passed by thee and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee: In thy blood live” (*Ezekiel* 16:6).”

(*Zohar* II:35b)

Next, we have the following *Zohar* passage:

“Man should always imagine that the fate of the whole world depends upon him.”

(*Zohar* II:42a)

In the *Talmud* in *B. Sanhedrin* 37a it says that when men make coins, they all look the same, but when *God* makes people, they all look different, and from this the *Talmud* concludes that everyone is obligated to say that the whole world was made just for them! In other words, the world that each of us experiences is different in ways from the world the next person experiences, and, thus, instead of saying that there is only one world, we could say that there are as many worlds as there are sentient beings observing them! And what you do with your world depends on you. The fate of the world you are creating is your responsibility, so create a beautiful world! And at the same time, remain humble!

“And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.” (*Genesis* 18:27)

BESHALACH

(Exodus 13:17-17:16)

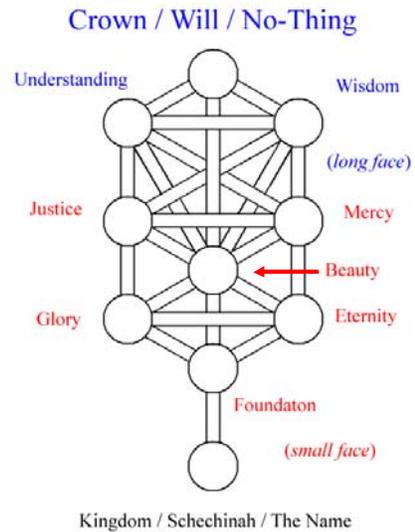
A LIGHT MEAL
NO-THING REALLY MATTERS

A LIGHT MEAL

The average person probably has a sense that there is more to their existence than just a physical body. We are all filled with thoughts and emotions and even feelings defined as “spiritual” that seem to both transcend and exist separately from the physical realm. Additionally, we’re nourished by these positives states of being just as much as we are nourished by physical food. The *Zohar* often uses terms like light and dew and *manna* to describe this heavenly nourishment. Additionally, in the passage below, the *Zohar* asserts that the nourishment derived from studying *Torah* is even more refined than the *manna* that was consumed during the *Exodus*. The *Zohar* also acknowledges that this type of food nourishes the spirit much more than it does the physical body.

“Every day dew from the Holy Ancient One drops into the “*Small Face*” (six lower *sefirot* on the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* that correspond to our usual world of perception) and all the holy apple-fields are blessed. It also descends to those below; and it provides spiritual food for the holy angels, to each rank according to its capacity of perception. It was this food of which the Israelites partook in the wilderness: ‘Each of them ate the food of celestial princes’ (*abirim*) (*Psalms* 58:26).’ Said R. Simeon: ‘Even at this time there are those who partake of similar food, and that in a double measure. And who are they? Fellows of the mystic lore, who study the *Torah* day and night. See now, when the Israelites went out of Egypt into the desert, uniting themselves with the Holy King, when the sign of the Covenant was manifested in them in its fullness, they were granted a more spiritual, more supernal food than the “unleavened bread” which they ate immediately after they left Egypt; for of the *manna* it says: ‘I will rain bread from heaven for you.’ It was indeed heavenly food, emanating from the sphere called “heaven”. But the sons of Wisdom, namely, the students of the *Torah*, derive their nourishment from a still higher region, the sphere of Wisdom, as it is written: ‘Wisdom keeps alive her owners (*Ecclesiastes* 7:12).’ ‘If that is so,’ asked R. Eleazar, ‘why are they more frail than ordinary men?’ R. Simeon replied: ‘That is a good question, and the answer is as follows. Ordinary food, by which the majority of people are nourished, is constituted of the elements of heaven and earth, and is therefore of a gross, material quality; the unleavened bread, which was eaten by the Israelites when they left Egypt, emanated from the sphere of “Judgment” and was somewhat subtler in quality; the *manna* was a still finer food, emanating from the sphere of “Heaven”, and was assimilated by the soul more than by the body-”angels’ bread”; but the food of those absorbed in the *Torah* nourishes only the soul and the spirit, but not the body, coming as it does from the sphere of “Wisdom”, from the highest and most glorious supernal region. Hence it is hardly to be wondered at that Wisdom’s children are more frail than other men, for they do not eat the food of the body at all.”

(*Zohar* II:61a-61b)



NO-THING REALLY MATTERS

In Judaism there are several different names for *God*. For example, the first name for *God* encountered in *Genesis* is *Elohim*, and this is actually plural (*Gods*) and it is a term that worked its way into Hebrew through other peoples living in *Canaan*. In *Exodus*, though, we are introduced to the more esoteric name *Ehyeh* (I AM), but this name is quickly replaced by *yud-hey-vav-hey* which is also known as the TETRAGRAMMATON or four-letter name for *God*. The name *yud-hey-vav-hey* is generally not pronounced, and so people say *Adonai* (Lord) in its place. Additionally, many linguists believe that *yud-hey-vav-hey* is just a reflexive form of the verb “to be.” In other words, the one who causes creation, or, more succinctly, the *Creator*. Other common names for *God* in Hebrew are *El Shaddai* (*God Almighty*) and *yud-hey-vav-hey Tzavaot* which is usually translated as *Lord of Hosts*, but which can be more deeply translated as *Creator of Multiplicity*. Additionally, we also have the *Shechinah*. This name for *God* doesn’t occur in the *Torah*, but it appears widely in rabbinic literature to represent a presence of *God* that is very close and personal. Also, in the *Talmud* and elsewhere it is stated that the *Shechinah* accompanies the Jewish people whenever they go into exile. Later, in the *Zohar*, the fact that *Shechinah* is a word with a feminine ending takes precedence, and the *Shechinah* is seen as a female aspect of *God* that has been separated from her husband and longs to be reunited in order to be complete. Yet another theme of the *Zohar* is that each of us is both male and female, and our two halves have to merge together before we can be whole. Going back to the names TETRAGRAMMATON/*yud-hey-vav-hey*/*Adonai* versus *Elohim*, the rabbis saw the former name as representing mercy while *Elohim* represents *God’s* justice. In the *Zohar*, though, TETRAGRAMMATON/*yud-hey-vav-hey*/*Adonai* usually represents the unrevealed aspect of *God* while *Elohim* represents a less concealed deity. In the passage below, however, TETRAGRAMMATON is used to represent a more comprehensible *God* while the completely unknowable *God* is represented by the Hebrew *Ayin* (nothing or no-thing), and the question here is over which version of *God* did the Israelites encounter, the knowable *God* or the unknowable *God*? Either way, the *Zohar* wants to make a point that, even if we don’t understand how, the two aspects of *God* are really one and the same. *Nirvana* is *samsara*, and *samsara* is *Nirvana*!

“Said R. Abba:’ What did the Israelites mean when they said: IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT (*ain*, lit. nothing; *Exodus* 17:7)? Were they so blind as not to know that He was in their midst? Did not the *Shechinah* encompass them and the clouds of glory surround them? Had they not seen the radiance of their King’s glorious majesty at the sea? It is, however, as R. Simeon explained, that they desired to know whether the Divine manifestation which they had experienced was that of the Ancient One, the All-hidden One, the Transcendent, whose designation is *Ayin* (no-thing), because He is above comprehension, or of the “Small Face”, the Immanent designated TETRAGRAMMATON. Hence the word “*Ayin*” (no-thing) is used here instead of “*lo*” (not). If so, it may be asked, why were they punished? Because they differentiated between these two aspects in *God* and “tempted the Lord”; for they said to themselves: “If it is the One, we shall pray in one way, and if it is the Other, we shall pray in another way.”” (*Zohar* II:64b)

YITRO

(*Exodus* 18:1-20:23)

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

In Judaism there are traditionally 613 commandments, but not everyone knows where that number 613 comes from. The answer, however, is given by the *Talmud* (*B. Makkoth* 23b) where it is explained that after *God* gave the first two commandments to the people, they asked that the rest be delivered through Moses since *God's* voice was too terrifying for them. Thus, since two commandments were given directly by *God* and since the numerical value of the *Torah* given through Moses is *tav-vav-resh-hey* = $400+6+200+5 = 611$, we have that $611+2 = 613$. And that's how the number 613 was arrived at!

Many people have tried to reduce the number of commandments to a smaller list of principles, and this has resulted in dictums like what is hateful to you don't do to others; charity is equivalent to all commandments combined; acts of loving kindness are even greater than charity; do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your *God*; and seek Me and live! A good exercise, though, is to compile your own short list of commandments that you are going to focus on. Whether they come directly from the *Torah* or from rabbinic literature or somewhere else, everyone needs a code to live by. Here's mine.

1. Treat other people the way you would like to be treated.
2. Give to charity.
3. Do random acts of kindness.
4. Greet people with a smile.
5. Use your brain.
6. Give thanks for what you have.
7. Choose life.
8. Be cheerful.
9. Don't be lazy.
10. Stay far away from a transgression.
11. Don't engage in risky behavior.
12. Make sure your heart is good.
13. Don't gossip.
14. Don't always insist on your full rights.
15. Listen to your spouse.
16. End each day on an inspirational note.
17. Don't embarrass people.
18. Plan for the generations to come.
19. Be honest.
20. Don't rejoice in the failure of others.
21. Don't be too quick to judge others.
22. Respect your elders even when they've lost their abilities.
23. Don't be filled with guile; be sincere in your dealings with others.
24. Think about how your actions will affect others.
25. Live joyfully with your spouse.
26. Listen to your own heart.
27. Be flexible.
28. Don't eat too much.
29. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
30. Don't just study; do good deeds.
31. Respect other people's property.
32. Respect another person's honor.
33. Take a walk after eating.
34. Pursue peace.
35. Don't follow the multitude to do evil.
36. Be slow to anger; control your outbursts.

MISHPATIM

(Exodus 21:1-24:18)

THE RIGHTEOUS GET TO GO NAKED!
REINCARNATION
KILLER MOSES
ABORTION

THE RIGHTEOUS GET TO GO NAKED!

According to the *Zohar*, almost everyone needs to wear some type of garment regardless of whether they are in the physical realm or a spiritual realm. Initially, Adam and Eve resided in such a spiritual realm, and they wore garments of light, *aleph-vav-resh*, but after the fall these garments of light were replaced by garments of skin, *ayin-vav-resh*, (*Zohar* II:229b) Also, when angels visited Abraham, they appeared in garments of physical bodies. The *Zohar* goes on to explain that these garments serve two purposes – they protect us from energies that may overwhelm us, and they also shield others from our energy that may overwhelm them. After death, the *Zohar* says that our physical bodies are replaced by more ethereal garments, and as we ascend to higher spiritual states, these garments are replaced by more appropriate garments. Ultimately, only the righteous are able to approach *God* without any protective garments. Additionally, *God* wears a garment of light (*Psalms* 104:2), the stories of the *Torah* are a garment for deeper truths, and the *Torah* itself is a garment for the *Shechinah*. Our physical and psychological garments become masks that we wear to present ourselves to the world, but after awhile even we tend to forget what is underneath the mask. Go to yourself!

“When they ascend into the higher Paradise they (the righteous) remove these garments and are clothed only in their own radiance, for there no garb is worn.”
(*Zohar* II:98b)

“For the angels in descending on earth put on themselves earthly garments, as otherwise they could not stay in this world, nor could the world endure them. Now, if thus it is with the angels, how much more so must it be with the *Torah* - the *Torah* that created them, that created all the worlds and is the means by which these are sustained. Thus had the *Torah* not clothed herself in garments of this world the world could not endure it. The stories of the *Torah* are thus only her outer garments, and whoever looks upon that garment as being the *Torah* itself, woe to that man-such a one will have no portion in the next world.”
(*Zohar* III:152a)

“The created *Torah* is a vestment to the *Shekinah*.”
(*Zohar* I:23a-23b)

“Happy is the portion of whoever is found worthy of those garments wherein the righteous are clad in the Garden of Eden. Those garments are made out of the good deeds performed by a man in this world in obedience to the commands of the *Torah*. In the Lower Paradise man's soul is thus sustained by these deeds and is clad in garments of glory made out of them. But when the soul mounts up on high through that portal of the firmament, other precious garments are provided for it of a more exalted order, made out of the zeal and devotion which characterized his study of the *Torah* and his prayer.”
(*Zohar* II:210a-210b)

“Raba said: Any scholar whose inside is not like his outside is no scholar.”
(*B. Yoma* 72b)

REINCARNATION

The *Torah* portion *Mishpatim* is about judgment, and the *Zohar* uses this as an opportunity to talk about some aspects of judgment after death. Also, whereas, the *Torah* says almost nothing about an afterlife, the *Zohar* discusses it extensively. The *Zohar* describes aspects of what today we might call a near death experience, it explains how there are different levels in the afterlife including not only different levels of hellish states but also different levels of spiritual states, it describes the purgatory that most souls pass through, and it also describes how our good deeds in this life create the garments we will wear in the lower spiritual realms while our spiritual attainment determines our appearance in the higher spiritual realms. Additionally, the *Zohar* talks in this section about reincarnation, a doctrine that is also discussed in the *Bahir* which was composed a hundred years prior to the *Zohar*. Consequently, reincarnation is now a standard doctrine within Jewish mysticism. Nonetheless, none of us among the living really know for certain what happens when we die. Also, I often think of something my mother used to ask me when I was a child. She would light one candle with another and then ask, “Is the second candle the same flame or a different flame?”

“What is the meaning of “generation to generation”? Rabbi Papias said: “A generation goes and a generation comes (*Ecclesiastes 1:4*).” Rabbi Akiba said: “The generation came” – it already came.”

(*Bahir* 121)

“Why is there a righteous person who has good, and [another] righteous person who has evil? This is because the [second] righteous person was wicked previously, and is now being punished. Is one then punished for his childhood deeds? Did not Rabbi Simon say that in the Tribunal on high, no punishment is meted out until one is twenty years or older. He said: I am not speaking of his present lifetime. I am speaking about what he has already been, previously. His colleagues said to him: How long will you conceal your words? He replied: Go out and see. What is this like? A person planted a vineyard and hoped to grow grapes, but instead, sour grapes grew. He saw that his planting and harvest were not successful so he tore it out. He cleaned out the sour grape vines and planted again. When he saw that his planting was not successful, he tore it up and planted it again.”

(*Bahir* 195)

“AND THESE ARE THE JUDGMENTS WHICH THOU SHALT SET BEFORE THEM. R. Simeon here introduced the subject of transmigration (reincarnation) of souls, saying: ‘Onkelos translates the above words as follows: “These are the judgments which thou shalt order before them”. In other words, “These are the orders of the metempsychosis; the judgments of the souls, by which each of them receives its appropriate punishment.” Associates, the time is now arrived to reveal diverse hidden and secret mysteries in regard to the transmigration (reincarnation) of souls.”

(*Zohar* II:94a)

KILLER MOSES

Moses enters the *Torah* as a humble man with a speech impediment who needs his brother to be his spokesman. However, this version of Moses is soon replaced by a much more verbose Moses who doesn't hesitate to kill people for their transgressions. I call this Moses "Killer Moses." Fortunately, most of the rabbis of the *Talmud* are far more reluctant to end human life or to execute a rebellious son.

"He who strikes a man, so that he dies, shall be surely put to death."
(*Exodus* 21:12)

"But if a man comes willfully upon his neighbor, to slay him treacherously; you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. And he who strikes his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death. And he who steals a man, and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death. And he who curses his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death."
(*Exodus* 21:14-17)

"And you shall set bounds to the people around, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that you go not up into the mount, or touch its border; whoever touches the mount shall be surely put to death. There shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live."
(*Exodus* 19:12-13)

"And while the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man who gathered sticks upon the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. And they put him in custody, because it was not told what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, The man shall be surely put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses."
(*Numbers* 15:32-36)

"You shall keep the Sabbath therefore; for it is holy to you; every one who defiles it shall surely be put to death. Whoever does any work in the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death."
(*Exodus* 31:14-15)

"If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not listen to them; Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place; And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."
(*Deuteronomy* 21:18-21)

ABORTION

The Jewish view of abortion is linked to the following story from *Exodus*:

“If men quarrel, and hurt a pregnant woman, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no further harm follows; he shall be surely punished, according to what the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.”

(*Exodus* 21:22)

From this passage we can deduce that the man who caused the pregnant woman to lose her fetus is not guilty of a capital crime because the penalty would be death, and, hence, it follows that the unborn fetus is not yet considered a person. On the other hand, the fact that there will likely be penalties for the man’s actions suggests that the fetus is also not inconsequential. And a result of this line of thinking is that in Judaism until the fetus is born it is considered just a limb of the mother, and, therefore, the mother’s life always takes precedence over that of the fetus. As one *Talmudic* rabbi expressed it, ‘But that is self-evident, for it is her body! (*B. Arachin* 7a).’ Also as a consequence, in the *Mishnah*, the first formal compendium of Jewish law, we find that late term abortions are permitted when the mother’s life is at stake.

“Mishnah 6: if a woman is in hard travail, one cuts up the child in her womb and brings it forth member by member, because her life comes before that of [the child]. But if the greater part has proceeded forth, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person’s life for that of another.”

(Mishnah *Oholot* 7:6)

Typically in Judaism abortion is permitted whenever the mother’s life is at risk. Furthermore, abortion is generally permitted if the fetus is known to have severe defects that would put an undue burden on the family. In this case, the fetus is seen as analogous to a thief that is pursuing one to rob one of one’s life and livelihood. Many in Reform Judaism also apply this principle to permit abortions in cases where the birth of the fetus would cause great psychological or financial stress. Also worth noting is that in spite of the commandment in *Genesis* 1:28 to be fruitful and multiply, this precept is seen in Judaism as applying only to women since the very process of pregnancy puts a woman’s health and life at risk. Consequently, in Judaism, pregnancy must be a choice.

My personal position abortion is simple – giving birth is the woman’s choice and only her choice. Granted that the fetus can eventually become a sentient person, but it is not that yet, and the impact that it will have on the woman’s life must be considered. Thus, I agree with the assessment in *Roe v. Wade* that until the fetus is viable on its own, it should, as in Judaism, be considered a limb of the mother. That is my opinion, but, nonetheless, there was one ancient rabbi of the *Talmud* who had a different opinion. In *Genesis* 9:6 we read, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” However, Rabbi Ishmael (*B. Sanhedrin* 57b) notes that the Hebrew *HaAdam b’Adam* can be translated as “the man within man,” and he interpreted this to mean an embryo and that the penalty for destroying it is death. Judaism always preserves the minority opinion.

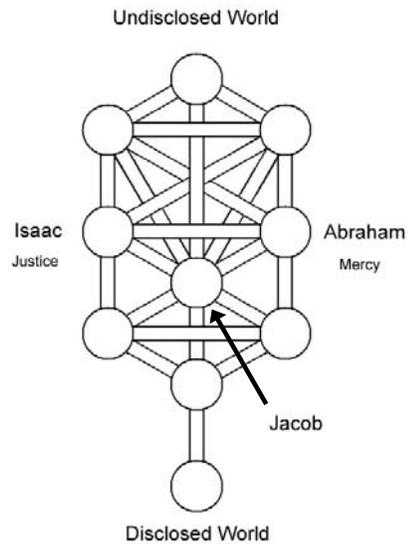
TERUMAH

(Exodus 25:1-27:19)

THE COMPLETE MAN
THE STAVES
A THREAD OF LIGHT
THE SUN
UNIFYING THE NAME

THE COMPLETE MAN

In the *Zohar*, terms like Who and Holy Ancient refer to the unknowable, undisclosed realm while terms like This, These, What, and Microprosopus refer to the knowable, disclosed realm. Additionally, Leah refers to the undisclosed realm since she was buried out of sight at the Cave of *Machpelah* while Rachel represents the disclosed world since she was buried by an open road. Also, Abraham represents Mercy since he was known for his hospitality, and Isaac represents Justice since he was bound at *Moriah*. In contrast to all of these extremes, though, is Jacob who is considered the complete man, the one who is perfectly balanced between justice and mercy and between the disclosed and the undisclosed. The goal is not to sit isolated on a mountain top, but to be perfectly balance at the center like Jacob.



“R. Simeon discoursed on the text: “Who is this (*zoth*) that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun and terrible as furnished with banners?” (*Song of Songs* 6:10). He said: ‘The words “Who” and “This” denote the two worlds: the “Who” symbolizing the most supernal sphere, the unknowable beginning of all things, and “This” a lower sphere, the so-called “lower world”; and these two are indissolubly linked together. ... “Jacob”, the “complete one”, who united the two worlds as one. He united them above, and he united them below ... For the whole longing and the most ardent desire of the lower world (symbolized by Rachel) is to be in all outer seeming like unto the upper world (symbolized by Leah). ... “Who” and “This” are termed “sisters.”’”
(*Zohar* II:126b)

“Moreover, all that concerned Leah is kept under a veil, as she typified the upper world, which is veiled and undisclosed; and this is another reason why Leah's death is not divulged like that of Rachel. It is in accordance, too, with this difference between the upper and the lower worlds that Leah was buried away from sight in the cave of *Machpelah*; whereas Rachel was buried by the open road.”
(*Zohar* I:158a)

“R. Simeon, we are told, explained thus the words, “And the middle bar in the midst of the boards shall pass from one end to the other.” ‘The middle bar’, he said, ‘signifies Jacob, the perfect saint, as we have pointed out on another occasion in connection with the characterization of Jacob as “a complete man, dwelling in tents” (*Genesis* 25:27). It does not say, ‘dwelling in a tent,’ but ‘dwelling in tents,’ which denotes that he unified the two ‘tents’ (of Severity and Mercy). The same implication may be found here: ‘The middle bar in the midst of the boards shall pass from one end to the other’, uniting them. Jacob was perfect in regard to both sides, the Holy Ancient and the Microprosopus, and also to the supernal Grace and the supernal Power, harmonizing the two.’”(*Zohar* II:175b)

THE STAVES

In *Exodus 25:27* we read the following:

“Opposite the border shall the rings be as places for the poles (staves) to carry the table.”
(*Exodus 25:27*)

As indicated above, the words “pole” and “stave” are synonymous. Furthermore, the *Zohar* takes this seemingly mundane verse and gives it a very mystical interpretation.

“R. Simeon explained the difference, and said: ‘It is written, “Close by the border shall the rings be, for places for the staves (poles)” (*Exodus 25:27*). The “border” is a secret place accessible only by one narrow path known to a few. It is, therefore, filled with gates and lit with lamps. This is the future world, which, being hidden and stored away, is called *misgereth* (border, lit. closed). The “rings” are the supernal chain of water, air, and fire, which are linked with one another and emerge from one another like so many rings of a chain. They all turn to the “border”, with which is connected that supernal stream which waters them, and with which they are thus connected. Further, these supernal rings are “places for the staves”, to wit, the lower chariots, of which some are from the side of fire, some of water, and some of air, so that they should be a chariot to the ark. Hence anyone who approaches should proceed only as far as the staves, but should not penetrate further, save those who are qualified to minister within, and to whom permission has been given to enter for that purpose.”

(*Zohar I:31a*)

In our experience of the world, those things that we perceive and know about we call objects of perception, and the only thing we have a sense of but don’t perceive directly is the awareness that is doing the perceiving. This is where the unknowable and the mystery lie within our lives, and the only escape from the world of objects is found by turning our attention away from objects and back to the source of our awareness. However, since this awareness cannot be perceived directly, we associate with it a certain emptiness, and our first attempts to be aware of awareness might result in a perception similar to contemplating an empty box. However, an empty box is not the real “emptiness” that we seek, and attempts of this sort to empty our minds will only leave us feeling “empty.” Hence, one must will oneself away from empty boxes to true emptiness by doubling down on one’s resolve to perceive the perceiver. When one begins to succeed at this, one will immediately feel unity because that which can’t be perceived has no parts to be divided into. One will also begin to realize that unity, love, and peace are all the same thing. At this point, one will have a dual perception of both the world and oneness, and this is when one is positioned at the staves that lie at the border between the known and the unknown. However, a few may go further by realizing that the objects of perception are themselves composed of consciousness and, thus, all we ever see is awareness, and that is when we enter into the Holy of Holies.

“The right way, on the contrary, is to recognize diversity below but unity above.”
(*Zohar I:12b*)

A THREAD OF LIGHT

In the *Talmud* we read the following:

“Resh Lakish says: To him who is engaged in the study of the *Torah* by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day, as it is said, By day the Lord will command his loving kindness, and in the night his song shall be with me (*Psalm* 42:9).”

(*B. Avodah Zarah* 3b)

In the *Zohar*, though, the word “grace” is changed to “light,” and it is seen as a reference to the primordial spiritual light that is reserved for the righteous.

“Moreover, whenever the *Torah* is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study, wherefore it is written: “The Lord commands His loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song is with me” (*Psalm* 42:9).”

The *Zohar* then goes on to say that another thread of the hidden light was responsible for the creation of the entire universe and how that which “does not vibrate” gave rise to “vibrations.”

“The primordial supernal point which issued from the absolutely hidden and unknowable, the mysterious Limitless (*En Sof*). Out of this unknowable issued a slender thread of light which was itself concealed and invisible, but which yet contained all other lights, and which received vibrations from That which does not vibrate and reflected light from That which diffused it not. This slender light in turn gave birth to another light wherein to disport and to conceal itself; and in this light were woven and fashioned six impressions which are not known save to that slender light when it goes in to hide itself and shine through the other light. The light which issues from the slender light is mighty and terrible, and it expands and becomes a world which illumines all succeeding worlds - a hidden and unknown world in which dwell six myriads of thousands of supernal powers and hosts.”

(*Zohar* II:126b)

For many *Kabbalists* the central question is how does something that is unknowable and inconceivable become known and conceived? To me, this question is the same as that which has been described as the central mystery of quantum physics. Namely, how does matter transition from its wave form, devoid of specifics and location, to its more measurable particle form? One answer, the *Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Physics*, is that it doesn't. Waves appear to collapse into particles, but that's really just an illusion. The totality of all things remains unchanged. Likewise, I give the same answer in this case. Everything is still whole and unbroken, and it is an illusion that anything is separate from the whole. I liken it to a dream where upon awakening it is easy for us to accept that all the objects we perceived were created by our own consciousness and were composed of consciousness. Similarly, in our waking state we can never separate the things we perceive from the perceiver. Everything is connected to the whole. Unbroken.

THE SUN

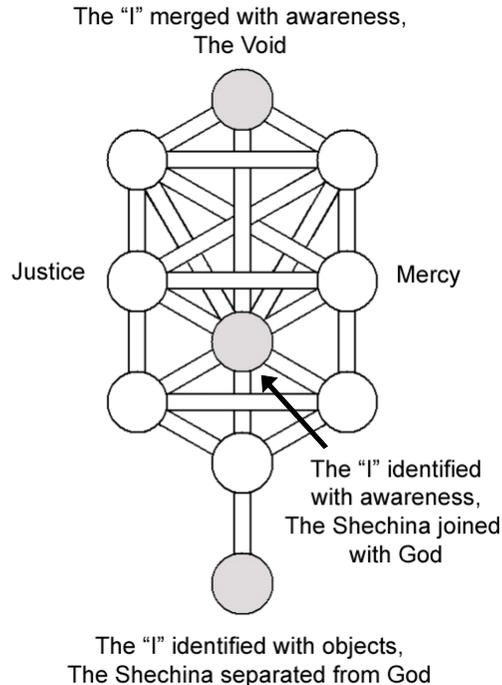
In the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, the center *sefirah* of *tiferet* stands for beauty, balance, and integration. It is also represented by the Sun. Additionally, it represents the *Shechinah* (the divine presence) reunited with *God*. In modern terms, it represents, the ego correctly identified with awareness rather than with objects of perception, and if one continues up the tree, then at the top we have the ego becoming completely immersed within awareness, and at that point there is neither self nor not-self nor a mixture of the two nor an absence of both. At that point one is beyond all concepts and all perception of external things.

In the *Zohar*, we read the following:

““In them hath he set a tent for the sun” (*Psalm 19:5*), because the holy sun (*tiferet*) is as a tabernacle of all those supreme grades, and is as a light which has taken into itself all the hidden lights and the whole current of their extension, whereby Faith is manifested in the whole world. To grasp the Sun is equivalent to grasping all grades, because the sun is a “tent” including all and absorbing all; and he in turn lights up all the shining colours below.”

As has been indicated, the Sun represents *tiferet*, or beauty and integration, and this is the point on the tree where the ego becomes less identified with exterior objects and more identified with the awareness that is aware of those objects. And just as the Sun is a “tent” that includes and absorbs all, so does awareness include and absorb all. One could continue up the tree and go completely beyond the subject/object dichotomy to merge into complete oneness (and at times you will do this!), but that is not really necessary because *tiferet* is the point of balance for this world. To be a complete human being, you must turn your attention back to your awareness because that is your true identity, not the ephemeral objects or emotions that lie in front of us. And as you focus more on this awareness you will come to see that everything is composed of this awareness. You will also feel more unity, love, and peace because the unobservable has no observable parts. And when you understand that all is awareness, the “other side” will disappear.

“Herein consisted the sin of the primeval serpent who united below but divided above, and so caused the mischief we still lament. The right way, on the contrary, is to recognize diversity below but unity above, ... and when mankind will universally acknowledge this absolute unity, the evil power (*sitra ahra*, other side) itself will be removed from the world, and exercise no more influence on earth.” (*Zohar I:12b*)



UNIFYING THE NAME

In *Gnosticism* we find the concept of the *Demiurge*. The *Demiurge* thinks it is the *Creator*, but there is a real, unchanging *Creator* that lies behind the *Demiurge*. In *Kabbalah*, this corresponds well to the relationship between *Elohim* and the TETRAGRAMMATON (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), and in my interpretation this also corresponds to the relationship between the ego, sense of “I,” and pure awareness. Furthermore in *Kabbalah*, the separation between *Elohim* and TETRAGRAMMATON is seen as an illusion, and uniting the two is called “unifying the Name.” The Name represents both *Elohim* and the creation, and the goal is to unite what we see with that which sees it.

“And he who, having come into this world, does not study the Torah to know Him - better were it for him that he had never been born; since the only aim and object of the Holy One in sending man into this world is that he may know and understand that TETRAGRAMMATON is Elohim. This is the sum of the whole mystery of the Faith, of the whole Torah, of all that is above and below, of the Written and Oral Torah, all together forming one unity. The essence of the mystery of Faith is to know that this is a complete Name. This knowledge that TETRAGRAMMATON is One with Elohim is indeed the synthesis of the whole Torah, both of the Written and of the Oral, for “Torah” stands for both, the former being symbolic of TETRAGRAMMATON and the latter of Elohim. The Torah being the mystery of the Holy Name, it is therefore called by two names, one of which is general, and the other particular. The general is complemented by the particular, also the particular by the general, both combining to form one synthesis. In the Torah we find, therefore, the synthesis of the Above and the Below, for the one Name, TETRAGRAMMATON, is above, while the other, Elohim, is below, one indicating the higher world and the other the lower. And therefore is it written: “Thou hast been shown to know that TETRAGRAMMATON is Elohim.” This is the essence of all things, and it is necessary that man should perceive it in this world.”

(*Zohar* II:161b-162a)

Even though TETRAGRAMMATON is usually identified with that which is unknowable, in at least one place in the *Zohar* it is listed as revealed. The *Zohar* is sometimes inconsistent in this way, and while I used to think of this as a fault, I now think of it as a feature. In particular, I think the *Zohar* wants us to realize that what we call truth is often only with respect to a given situation. Other situations may require different perspectives. Also, the undisclosed form mentioned below that is written with other letters may be a reference to *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, the three mother letters mentioned in the *Seferiah Sefer Yetzirah*. If we take the Father name *yud-hey-vav-hey*, and replace those letters with *aleph-mem-shin-mem*, then that literally spells “Mother name” in Hebrew!

“R. Simeon cited the following from the Book of Mystery. ‘The Divine Name has both a revealed and an undisclosed form. In its revealed form it is written TETRAGRAMMATON, but in its undisclosed form it is written in other letters, this undisclosed form representing the most Recondite of all.”

(*Zohar* III:146b)

TETZAVEH

(Exodus 27:20-30:10)

OVERCOMING THE OTHER SIDE

OVERCOMING THE OTHER SIDE

In *Kabbalah* the “other side” is often referred to as evil, but it also means the other side of that two-sided coin called “perception.” In other words, we usually think of awareness as one side of the coin and the world of thoughts and objects that we are aware of as the other side. However, the central teaching of the *Zohar* is that these two sides are actually one, and, thus, our two-sided coin is more like a Möbius band, that mathematical object which appears to be two-sided, but in reality only has one side. Thus, regarding this separation of the world from consciousness, the *Zohar* says the following:

“We have been taught that all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one, all is set in one balance, unvarying and eternal, as it is written: “I the Lord change not” (*Malachi* 3:6).”
(*Zohar* II:176a)

When we realize the oneness of things, the “other side” literally vanishes, ... and does not! It is not that we no longer perceive objects (though, the objectless state can be achieved!), but rather that our understanding of those objects changes. For example, when you awaken from a nightmare, you realize that the dream objects you saw were not as they appeared. The objects of the dream are still there in your mind, but upon awakening your perspective changes. You still prefer happy dreams of oneness, but, nonetheless, it is only through the experience separation that we can understand unity.

“Hence the perfection of all things is attained when good and evil are first of all commingled, and then become all good, for there is no good so perfect as that which issues out of evil.”
(*Zohar* II:184a)

“Then came R. Simeon and kissed the old man and said: ‘Nehorai is thy name, and light (*nehara*) dwells with thee indeed!’ Then he turned to the Companions, and said: ‘He revealeth the deep and secret things; and He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with Him’” (*Daniel* 2:22). Why does He reveal them? Because He knows what is in the darkness; for, were it not for darkness we would not know what light is. “And light dwelleth with Him.” What light is that? It is the light which is revealed out of darkness. And as to us, out of the darkness of the great wilderness this great light has risen to enlighten us.”
(*Zohar* II:187b)

“Only through the disclosed can a man reach the undisclosed.”
(*Zohar* I:154a)

And finally, it is our task to create unity between all things.

“For the children of Israel stand here below as emissaries of the Most High, ... to shed light upon the ways, to kindle the radiance of the heavenly fire, to draw all things that are below near to them that are above, in order that all may become a unity.” (*Zohar* II:181b)

KI TISA

(*Exodus* 30:11-34:35)

STONER MOSES

STONER MOSES

In general terms, organized religions are often viewed as an outgrowth of shamanism, and it is well-known that shamans would often use mind-altering substances. Even today we see substances such as peyote being used by the Native American Church, cannabis by the Rastafari, and psychedelic mushrooms and ayahuasca being used by a variety of indigenous cultures to the south of the United States. Also, two very mainstream religious groups, Judaism and the Catholic Church, still use a very potent, mind-altering drug during their liturgy – namely, alcohol! However, I strongly suspect that some of the ancient Israelites preferred cannabis and that they even managed to work their viewpoint into the *Torah*. Textual evidence that suggests cannabis use, but is not conclusive, comes from *Exodus 3:2*, *Exodus 30:23*, and *Exodus 34:29-35*.

Exodus 3:2 tells the story of the burning bush that appeared to Moses to not be consumed. The possibility of this bush being a marijuana plant is due to the well-known effect of time distortion that cannabis can cause, and as a result of this time distortion, that bush could appear to be taking forever to burn! In *Exodus 30:23* we find a more explicit reference to cannabis in the formula for the holy anointing oil. One of the ingredients is often listed in English as “sweet calamus,” but this translation is something of a guess. The ancient Hebrew literally translates as “fragrant reed,” but the identity of that reed is not known with certainty. However, the Hebrew in the text is *kaneh bosem*, and it is easy to see how this could have morphed first into *kanehbos* and then into *cannabis*. And finally, in *Exodus 34:29-35* we read the story of how when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his skin beamed with such light that a veil had to be put over his face in order not to frighten the people. All I can say is that when I was in my early twenties, there were times when my face was beaming with such a silly grin that I, too, could have used such a veil!

The above texts open the possibility of cannabis use in ancient Judaism, but to bolster the theory, it needs to be shown that there is evidence of the plant actually being used in that region. The earliest indications come from depictions of the Egyptian goddess of wisdom Seshat. Depictions of her appear on temples going back to Egypt’s Old Kingdom (2575-2130 BCE), and her image often shows a plant growing out of her head. The conventional explanation is that this plant is a papyrus, but the problem is that the leaf looks nothing like that of a papyrus. However, it does look very much like a modern depiction of a marijuana leaf. Also, an ancient coffin text says, “Seshat opens the door of heaven for you,” and this suggests psychoactive substances. Furthermore, the Ebers Papyrus (1550 BCE) mentions the specific use of cannabis to treat inflammation, and grains of cannabis pollen have been found on the mummy of Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE). Additionally, it’s just been recently discovered that psychoactive forms of cannabis were used in worship at an ancient temple at Tel Arad in Israel. This temple stood during the time of the First Temple in Jerusalem, and archeologists believe that the practices there are indicative of the practices at the First Temple. Hence, give me that old time religion!



VAYAQHEL

(*Exodus 35:1-38:20*)

A BEAUTIFUL MIND
CREATING SACRED SPACE

A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Consider now the following:

“Assuredly the man of discernment (*naban*) is of a higher degree than the wise man (*hakham*). Even a pupil who gives new ideas to his teacher is called “wise”. A wise man, then, it is true, knows for himself as much as is required, but the man of discernment apprehends the whole, knowing both his own point of view and that of others. The term “wisehearted” is used here because the seat of wisdom is the heart. As for the man of discernment, he apprehends the lower world and the upper world, his own being and the being of others.”

(*Zohar* II:201a)

The word that is translated above as “discernment” can also be translated as “understanding,” and the root of the word means “to build.” Furthermore, the type of activity referred to here is what today we would identify as functions of the left hemisphere of the brain. In contrast, though, to the man of discernment is the wise man who represents the activities of the less verbal, more experiential right hemisphere of the brain. The bottom line of this passage, however, is that the person who has developed his verbal, analytical understanding of why things are a certain way is superior to the person who hasn’t. The right brain experiences while the left brain questions and seeks to understand, and this is our biological imperative as human beings. As humans, our brains seek to know and to understand, and if we don’t develop this facility, then we have failed at our purpose. And that is why in the *Talmud* in *B. Kiddushin* 31a it says that ‘he who is commanded and fulfils the command is greater than he who fulfils it though not commanded.’ The *Talmud* sets the bar very low in that simply knowing that one should do a certain thing is the minimum in terms of left brain engagement. But at the same time, the left brain needs to be cognizant of the wisdom the right brain has to offer. Nonetheless, there are limits to understanding as the next *Zohar* passage below will indicate. Intellect can only take us to a certain point, a point at which we will experience great light and enlightenment, but after that we can only experience through the right brain, and beyond that it becomes completely merged with the undisclosed. The drop becomes the ocean. The flame becomes the burning candle.

“That heaven is supported by the supernal Holy Beasts, and itself is of an essence entirely undisclosed, beyond any attribute of color, whilst being itself the source and origin of all colors and all light. There is neither light nor darkness in it, but the souls of the righteous, as from behind a wall, discern the light which it sends forth and which illumines the supreme heaven, a light never ceasing, a light not to be known or grasped. ... Up to this point some hint is given by the holy names by which the Holy One, blessed be He, is called, but beyond this point the discernment even of the wisest cannot pierce, and it is altogether outside the range of our faculties, excepting for one gleam of light, too minute to be dwelt on. Happy is the portion of whoever can penetrate into the mysteries of his Master and become absorbed into Him, as it were. ... the mystery of the *En Sof* (Infinite, Illimitable).”

(*Zohar* II:213a-213b)

CREATING SACRED SPACE

“And Moses spoke to all the congregation of the people of Israel, saying, This is the thing which the Lord commanded, saying, Take you from among you an offering to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord; gold, and silver, and bronze, And blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair, And rams’ skins dyed red, and goats’ skins, and shittim wood, And oil for the light, and spices for anointing oil, and for the sweet incense, And onyx stones, and stones to be set for the ephod, and for the breastplate. And every wise hearted among you shall come, and make all that the Lord has commanded; The tabernacle, its tent, and its covering, its clasps, and its boards, its bars, its pillars, and its sockets, The ark, and its poles, with the covering, and the veil of the screen, The table, and its poles, and all its utensils, and the bread of display. The lamp stand also for the light, and its furniture, and its lamps, with the oil for the light, And the incense altar, and its poles, and the anointing oil, and the incense of spices, and the screen for the door at the entrance of the tabernacle, The altar of burnt offering, with its bronze grating, its poles, and all its utensils, the basin and its pedestal, The hangings of the court, its pillars, and their sockets, and the screen for the door of the court, The pegs of the tabernacle, and the pegs of the court, and their cords, The uniforms, to do service in the holy place, the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, to minister in the priest’s office. And all the congregation of the people of Israel departed from the presence of Moses. And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the Lord’s offering to the work of the Tent of Meeting, and for all his service, and for the holy garments.”

(*Exodus 35:4-21*)

We often think of the 2nd Law of thermodynamics as an arrow for time. This is the law that says that the amount of total entropy (disorder) in the universe is always increasing, and it provides a type of cosmic clock that distinguishes between past and future. However, even though entropy must always increase, the universe and, indeed, all living beings find ways to create pockets of order amidst the chaos. Whether we create that order ourselves or whether it is a work of beauty that has arisen spontaneously in nature, we often think of such beauty and order as sacred space, and as such, it stands in defiance of entropy. In the passage above from *Exodus*, human beings are attempting to create a sacred space, a tabernacle in the desert, and the commandment from *God* is that every person should participate in its construction by bringing whatever they are led by their heart to bring. Consequently, the end product is also a reflection of the many people that participated in its construction. Within the *Zohar*, we find an additional reason behind why everyone should participate. The work of the community as a whole often exceeds and is more nuanced than what just a single individual might accomplish.

“The prayer of a congregation ascends to the Almighty, and He is crowned therewith, because it comprises many hues and directions, wherefore it is made into a crown to be placed on the head of the Righteous One, the Living One of the worlds; whereas the prayer of an individual is not many-sided and presents only one hue, and hence is not so complete and acceptable as the prayer of a congregation.” (*Zohar I:167b*)

PEQUDEI

(*Exodus* 38:21-40:38)

UNIFYING THE NAME REVISITED

UNIFYING THE NAME REVISITED

“R. Jose then continued to discourse, citing the verse: “For the Lord God (TETRAGRAMMATON ELOHIM) is a sun and a shield; the Lord giveth grace and glory; no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (*Psalm* 84:12). “The “sun”, he said, ‘contains the mystery of the Divine Name TETRAGRAMMATON, wherein is the abode of rest of all the grades, whereas “shield” contains the mystery of the Divine Name ELOHIM; the same is indicated in “I am thy shield” (*Genesis* 15:1). The two together, sun and shield, constitute thus the mystery of the Divine Name complete: “the Lord giveth grace and glory”, so that the whole should merge into a unity.”

(*Zohar* II:224b)

In the Soncino edition of the *Zohar*, the sacred, unpronounced four letter name for *God* is often rendered as the TETRAGRAMMATON. Furthermore, the unpronounced name of *God* generally refers to the undisclosed part of reality while *Elohim* represents the visible *God* that acts and appears to have attributes, what Gnostics would call the *Demiurge*. Additionally, the Sun corresponds to the *sefirah* Beauty at the very center of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, and it also corresponds to our real self as the observer of our reality. In modern terms we might say that TETRAGRAMMATON represents our real, inner self while *Elohim* is a shield that corresponds to the *persona*, the outer mask that is worn. However, the message that the *Zohar* delivers over and over again is that the inner and the outer are one. Unity is the real reality. Awareness is both the seer and the seen!

“The Divine Name Sublime, the essence of the hidden and unrevealed, is never uttered, a name denoting the revealed being substituted for it. Thus the Name signifying the unrevealed is TETRAGRAMMATON (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), but that signifying the revealed is *Adonai* (Lord). The former is the way the Divine Name is written, the latter the way it is read. Thus it is throughout the *Torah*, which contains two sides: a disclosed and an undisclosed. And these two aspects are found in all things, both in this world and in the upper world.”

(*Zohar* II:230b)

Usually *Elohim* is used to represent the alternative to the unpronounced TETRAGRAMMATON, but since we routinely say *Adonai* (Lord) in place of this 4-letter name for *God*, in this passage *Adonai* is presented as the alternative. Also of note is that the *Torah* itself has an undisclosed aspect which must be sought.

“‘Who created these?’ (*Isaiah* 40:26)’ amounts to saying that the whole of creation springs from a region that remains an everlasting “Who?” (*Mi?*), in that it remains undisclosed.”

(*Zohar* II:231b)

Many tend to associate *Who*, the question that has no answer, with the highest *sefirah* on the left side of the tree since this represents the limit of verbal thought. However, it is best just to think of it as the unknowable unknown. Otherwise, you will very likely err.

VAYIQRA

(Leviticus 1:1-5:26)

STREAMING HOLINESS

STREAMING HOLINESS

Most of us have some sense of what holiness feels like, and if one doesn't, then just focus on your deepest sense of life or love instead. Either way, this holiness is characterized by a deep stillness and silence as well as an overwhelming feeling of unity and oneness. It is the silent "voice of the turtle" that issues from our innermost being (*Zohar* I:97b-98a). Also, a metaphor that is not uncommon is one that describes all of creation as streaming from this holiness within, and we indeed experience our world only through the silent awareness within. To become united with that awareness, however, is what the *Zohar* refers to as "uniting the Name," and this is what occurs when we realize the oneness of the world perceived with that which does the perceiving. One of the easiest ways to arrive at this is by focusing on the very source of that stream of thought and duality. With eyes wide open, just realize that everything you see exists in consciousness and is made of consciousness. Below now are a few related *Zohar* passages.

"R. Hiya cited here the verse: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, said the Lord" (*Isaiah*. 55:8). 'The Thought of God', he said, 'is the fountain-head of all, and from that Thought spread forth ways and paths in which the Holy Name might be found and fittingly established. From that Thought, too, issued the stream of the Garden of Eden to water all. On that Thought depend all beings above and below, and from that Thought come the Written and the Oral *Torahs*. The thought of man is also the fountain-head of his life, and from it stretch ways and paths to pervert his ways in this world and in the next. From that thought issues the defilement of the evil inclination to work harm to him and to all, and from it come error and iniquity and presumptuous sin, idolatry, fornication and bloodshed; wherefore it says, "my thoughts are not as your thoughts".'
(*Zohar* III:6b-7a)

""Know that the Lord is *God*": he has now to unify the Holy Name and to link these two names so as to make them one, and this is the true service of the Holy One, blessed be He."
(*Zohar* III:8b)

"And who are the true believers? Those who study the *Torah* and know how to unify the Holy Name in the fitting manner."
(*Zohar* III:12b)

"What is "holiness"? The supernal Place from which issues the source of the "deep stream".
(*Zohar* III:13a)

"R. Jose then discoursed on the verse: "My heart is towards the governors of Israel that offered themselves willingly among the people, bless ye the Lord" (*Judges* 5:9). 'If a man', he said, 'desires earnestly to pray that blessings should be poured on earth from above, he should concentrate his mind on that recondite Stream, the deepest recess of all, where is the very beginning of the union of Father and Mother (*Hokmah* and *Binah*).'
(*Zohar* III:26a)

TZAV

(Leviticus 6:1-8:36)

THE INNER ALTAR

THE INNER ALTAR

Below is a passage from the *Zohar*, from the section corresponding to the *Torah* portion *Tzav*, that reiterates many of the themes we've discussed already.

“The altar which is the innermost of all, the linking of faith, is called “a still silent voice”, and in relation to this the other altar is called the “outer” one. The inner one is called “the altar of the Lord” and the other one “the altar of brass”. Said R. Abba: ‘When Moses built an altar (*Exodus* 17:15), he meant it to correspond to that inner one, and therefore he called it “The Lord is my banner”, because it was stamped with the sign of the holy covenant. This is the inner Altar, the “still silent voice”, and on this “fire shall be burnt continually”, that is, the perpetual Fire, the Fire of Isaac. The proper name for this (Fire of Isaac) is *Adonai*, but when the priest puts wood on the altar we call it by the name of mercy, TETRAGRAMMATON; sometimes it answers to one and sometimes to the other.’ R. Simeon said that there were two, the inner supported on the outer and fed from it, the two being thus linked together.”
(*Zohar* III:30b)

This passage starts where we all tend to start –with an awareness of duality. Furthermore, within this duality framework, the *Zohar* states that we have an “inner altar” that corresponds to the physical, outer altar. The inner altar, however, is just the opposite of the outer altar in that the inner altar is found only within silence. As *Psalms* 65:2 may be translated, “To you, *God (Elohim)*, silence is praise.” The text continues to say that upon this inner altar a perpetual fire is burnt, the Fire of Isaac. This, however, now presents a bit of a problem for the framework that the *Zohar* has spent several words developing. To see the problem, first note that in the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* that the right side corresponds to mercy while the left side corresponds to judgment. Likewise, the right side corresponds to silence, the inaudible, while the left side corresponds to sound that can be heard, the audible. Additionally, the right side corresponds to water while the left side corresponds to fire, and herein lies the problem. The Fire of Isaac, which should belong to the left side, is being placed upon the inner altar which is found on the right side. However, this mixing of symbols is something the *Zohar* has to eventually deal with because the author knows quite well that *Deuteronomy* 33:2 says, “From his right hand went a fiery law for them.” Hence, fire on the right side of the tree has to be explained. Fortunately, that is not going to be all that difficult. As we continue with the text, we read that the name *Adonai* (Lord) corresponds to fire (left side) while *yud-hey-vav-hey*, the TETRAGRAMMATON, corresponds to mercy (right side). Usually in both rabbinic literature and *Kabbalah* we have TETRAGRAMMATON corresponding to mercy and *Elohim*, rather than *Adonai*, corresponding to justice. In this case, though, *Adonai* is used as the counterpart to TETRAGRAMMATON since that is what we say in place of this unpronounced name for *God*. Continuing in this text, fire is placed on the inner altar, and this is symbolic of sacrificing the world of objects on the altar of silence. In practical terms, this represents how every perception we have disappears into silence at the moment of perception. Every object we see is “sacrificed” on the altar of awareness, and the bottom line is that the two sides are forever linked. Objects only appear to exist separately from awareness, but the flame and the burning candle are always one!

SHEMINI

(Leviticus 9:1-11:47)

THE LETTER BET

THE LETTER BET

Within the vast field of Jewish mysticism one also finds a lot of lore about the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and this is only naturally since the *Talmud* in *Berachot* 55a says, “Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.” In particular, there has been a lot of commentary over the ages regarding the shapes of the letters, and below is one such commentary about the shape the letter *bet* which is also the very first letter of the *Torah*.

“The *bet* has two parallel lines and a third joining them. What do these signify? One for heaven, one for earth, and one for the Holy One, blessed be He, who unites and receives them.’ R. Eleazar said: ‘These represent three supernal and closely connected holy lights in which the whole *Torah* is comprised, and which provide the introduction to faith. Therefore to study the *Torah* is like studying the Holy Name, as we have said, that the *Torah* is all one holy supernal name. Therefore it commences with the letter *bet* which symbolizes the holy name with three bonds of faith.”



(*Zohar* III:36a)

There is a pattern here that goes back to *Ecclesiastes* 7:14:

“In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; this against this made the *Elohim* (*God*) to the end that man should find nothing after him.”

(*Ecclesiastes* 7:14)

This verse establishes the pattern of opposites, but a third element is needed to represent the interaction between opposites. This third element is represented by the firmament that is mentioned in *Genesis* 1:6 and elaborated on in *Zohar* I:32b.

“The lower waters call to the upper and drink them in through the medium of this firmament, because all the upper waters are collected in it.”

(*Zohar* I:32b)

Together these three represent the basic pattern of creation. All of creation is based upon a pattern of one thing opposite another coupled with a third principle that allows for interaction between the opposites, and the result is a dynamic world that incorporates both multiplicity and change. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, these three pieces of the pattern are represented by *air*, *water*, and *fire* where *water* and *fire* are the two opposites and *air* or *steam* represents the principle of interaction between the two. Furthermore, *air* corresponds to the Hebrew letter *aleph*, *water* corresponds to *mem*, and *fire* corresponds to *shin*, and these three letters are called the “mother letters” since all of creation is the result of this kind of interaction between opposites. Additionally, as we’ve mentioned elsewhere, *Ecclesiastes* 7:14 might be taken as the fundamental tenet of all Jewish mysticism. However, the final part of this verse is often overlooked. Namely, that the whole purpose of this duality is so that we might ultimately realize that there is nothing but *God*. Ironically, only by separating from *God* can we realize that we are missing *God*!

TAZRIA

(*Leviticus* 12:1-13:59)

A COUNCIL OF OPPOSITES

A COUNCIL OF OPPOSITES

“This against this made the *Elohim (God)* to the end that man should find nothing after Him.”

(*Ecclesiastes* 7:14)

“Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness (*Ecclesiastes* 2:3).’ Where’, he said, ‘is the great wisdom in this remark of king Solomon? Does not anyone, even one who has no wisdom himself, know that wisdom is superior to folly as light to darkness, and why, therefore, does Solomon say, ’Then I saw’? The truth, however, is that what is meant is that there is an excellence or profit to wisdom from folly itself, for if there were no folly, wisdom and its words would not be recognized. We have learnt that it is incumbent on a man when he learns wisdom to learn a little folly also, since there is a certain benefit to wisdom from it as there is to light from darkness. We have also learnt that this applies to the supernal Wisdom, for R. Simeon said to R. Abba: The supernal Wisdom does not illumine or become illumined save on account of the folly that arises from another place, and but for this it would have no superiority or excellence, and the profit of wisdom would not be discernible. So on earth, if there were no folly there would be no wisdom. Therefore did Rab Hamnuna the Elder, when he instructed the Companions in the secrets of wisdom, also give them a discourse full of folly, that wisdom might benefit therefrom. Therefore it is written: “More precious than wisdom and than honor is a little folly” (*Ecclesiastes* 10:1).’ R. Jose said: ‘This means that a little folly reveals and displays the honor of wisdom and the glory of heaven more than anything else. So the benefit of light is only felt from its contrast with darkness, and similarly white is only known and valued from its contrast with black.’ R. Isaac said: ‘It is the same with sweet and bitter: a man does not know what sweet is until he tastes bitter.’”

(*Zohar* III:47b)

In the opening quote above from *Ecclesiastes* we read that *God* made one thing opposite another for the sole purpose that we should realize that there is “nothing after Him.” In other words so that we may realize that ultimately it is only *God* that exists. Consequently, the only reason for this world of duality and separation and the constant interaction between opposites is so that we might eventually arrive at this momentous conclusion. The passage that follows from the *Zohar* fills in the details.

Among the lessons in our *Zohar* passage is one that emphasizes that we can only know something if we also know its opposite. In this regard, I often think about what it is like to be at one with the *Divine Presence*. If one is in a state of absolute oneness with that which is beyond conception, then all that one identifies with now must go away. Labels such as “old” or “male” or even my very sense of identity create a separation between self and the *Source of Life*. Hence, for an entity to be in complete oneness with the *Most Mysterious*, all sense of individuality must be sacrificed. And while the end result may be a peace beyond peace and a bliss beyond bliss, there is no individuality left to acknowledge it. Thus, it is ironic that only through separation can we know unity. As it says in *Zohar* I:154a, it is only through the disclosed that we can reach the undisclosed.

METZRA

(*Leviticus* 14:1-15:33)

IT'S TO DIE FOR!

IT'S TO DIE FOR!

The *Zohar* contains many themes that it keeps returning to, and one of those themes is an elaborate description of the afterlife. Elsewhere we have seen how the *Zohar* describes what we would call a near death experience, and now below is additional information on what happens immediately after death. For the usual person, the soul (which is usually described as female) immediately spends time in a type of purgatory where it is purified of its transgressions. After that, it begins to ascend to whatever level it merits. Regarding this, the *Zohar* says that the soul's garment in the lower paradise is woven out of the person's deeds while its garment in the higher paradise reflects its spiritual attainment. However, if a soul's attachment to the side of impurity is too strong, then it fails to ascend. In either case, though, it is the person's own actions that lead them to a particular outcome. Of course, we don't really know what happens. Hence, it's to die for!

“R. Eleazar said: ‘When a man is on the point of leaving this world, his soul suffers many chastisements along with his body before they separate. Nor does the soul actually leave him until the *Shechinah* shows herself to him, and then the soul goes out in joy and love to meet the *Shechinah*. If he is righteous, he cleaves and attaches himself to her. But if not, then the *Shechinah* departs, and the soul is left behind, mourning for its separation from the body, like a cat which is driven away from the fire. Afterwards both are punished by the hand of *Dumah* (*Angel of Death, Satan*). The body is punished in the grave and the soul in the fire of *Gehinnom* for the appointed period. When this is completed she rises from *Gehinnom* purified of her guilt like iron purified in the fire, and she is carried up to the lower *Garden of Eden*, where she is cleansed in the waters of Paradise and perfumed with its spices, and there she remains till the time comes for her to depart from the abode of the righteous. Then she is carried up stage after stage until she is brought near like a sacrifice to the altar. Hence it is written, “This shall be the law of the leper on the day of his cleansing: he shall be brought to the priest”, to wit, to the angelic Priest above. This is the fate of a soul which has not been defiled overmuch in this world, and which can yet be healed in this way; but otherwise, “that which is crooked cannot be made straight”.’” (*Zohar* III:53a)

“For it is a dictum of our teachers that corresponding to the impulses of a man here are the influences which he attracts to himself from above. Should his impulse be towards holiness, he attracts to himself holiness from on high and so he becomes holy; but if his tendency is towards the side of impurity, he draws down towards himself the unclean spirit and so becomes polluted.” (*Zohar* I:125b)

“Happy is the portion of whoever is found worthy of those garments wherein the righteous are clad in the *Garden of Eden*. Those garments are made out of the good deeds performed by a man in this world in obedience to the commands of the *Torah*. In the Lower Paradise man's soul is thus sustained by these deeds and is clad in garments of glory made out of them. But when the soul mounts up on high through that portal of the firmament, other precious garments are provided for it of a more exalted order, made out of the zeal and devotion which characterized his study of the *Torah* and his prayer.” (*Zohar* II:210a-210b)

ACHAREI

(*Leviticus* 16:1-18:30)

I AM WHAT I AM
NONBINARY SOULS

I AM WHAT I AM

In *Exodus* 3:14 (what I call the “Pi passage” of the *Bible*!) we encounter that famous revelation to Moses from *God* that *God’s* name is “I am that I am” (*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*). In translating this phrase, though, there are actually several options due to the fact that in *Biblical* Hebrew the present tense can also be translated as future tense and vice-versa. Thus, *Ehyeh*, “I Am,” can also be translated as “I will be.” Hence, we actually have four options for translation – “I am what I am,” “I will be what I will be,” “I am what I will be,” and “I will be what I am.” In the passage below from the *Zohar* it seems to make the most sense to translate this as “I am what I will be,” and in this case the first “I am” represents *God* as an undifferentiated whole, pure consciousness without any object or perception attached to that consciousness. However, the next part, “what I will be,” indicates all the creative things that will emerge from this unknowable whole. Following this is a reiteration that *God’s* name is “I Am,” but then shortly thereafter in *Exodus* 3:15 we are told that *God’s* name is the unpronounced *yud-hey-vav-hey* (the TETRAGRAMMATON). These two names, however, can be reconciled using *gematria* (Jewish numerology). For example, the numerical value of *Ehyeh* is *aleph+hey+yud+hey* = 1+5+10+5 = 21, and the numerical value of the three distinct letters in *yud-hey-vav-hey* is *yud+hey+vav* = 10+5+6 = 21. At the end of this passage, though, we read that Moses now knew both a disclosed and an undisclosed version of the Holy Name. Usually, we represent the undisclosed *God* that is beyond conception by TETRAGRAMMATON, the four-letter name for *God*, and we represent the disclosed *God* by *Elohim*, the *God* with attributes such as merciful and long suffering. In this passage, however, I Am represents the unknowable *God* and What I Will Be represents the revealed *God*. What is important, though, are not the names, but that life consists of both the observed and an observer. Focus your awareness on the unchanging observer!

“R. Eleazar then asked his father to explain to him the name *EHYEH ASHER EHYEH* (I am that I am (*Exodus* 3:14)). He said ‘This name is all-comprehensive. The first *Ehyeh* (I Am) is the comprehensive framework of all when the paths are still obscure, and not yet marked out, and all is still undisclosed. When a beginning has been made and the Stream has started on its course, then it is called *Asher Ehyeh* (That which I shall be), meaning: Now I am ready to draw forth into being and create all, now I am the sum total of all individual things. “That I am”: to wit, the Mother is pregnant and is ready to produce individual things and to reveal the supreme Name. We find it stated in the book of King Solomon that the *Asher* (That, Which, Who, What) is the link that completes the joyful union. Observe now how the divine utterance [In *Exodus* 3:14.] went from grade to grade to teach the secret of the holy name to Moses. First came *Ehyeh* (I Am), the dark womb of all. Then *Asher Ehyeh* (What I will be), indicating the readiness of the Mother to beget all. Then, after the creation had commenced, came the name *Ehyeh* alone (*Exodus* 3:14), as much as to say: Now it will bring forth and prepare all. Finally when all has been created and fixed in its place the name *Ehyeh* is abandoned and we have TETRAGRAMMATON, *yud-hey-vav-hey* (*Exodus* 3:15), an individual name signifying confirmation. Then it was that Moses knew the Holy Name, as it is both disclosed and undisclosed, and attained to an insight to which no other man has ever attained, happy is his portion!” (*Zohar* III: 65a-65b)

NONBINARY SOULS

Not too long ago most people tended to think of sexuality and gender in terms just two choices such as male or female and gay or straight. However, today it is becoming more common to think of both as existing along a multidimensional spectrum, and, thus, the term nonbinary has come into vogue. Nonetheless, as is often the case, progress is being held back by old attitudes, and I absolutely hate it when the justification for archaic views is taken from the *Bible*. In particular, opponents of same-sex relationships often quote the following passage:

“You shall not lie with men, as with women; it is abomination.”

(*Leviticus* 18:22)

Regarding this, there are a few points that must be made. First, there are some who argue that the context of this statement is that there were groups of idol worshipers in the region who regularly abused others sexually against their will and that this prohibition is addressing a specific group guilty of this abuse. Still others respond to this *Biblical* passage with statements of support for traditional marriage, but they fail to realize that in the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that traditional marriage meant (1) marrying either two sisters or your half-sister, (2) having sexual relations with your spouse’s handmaids in order to increase your offspring, and (3) having sexual relations with an unspecified number of concubines. Hence, definitions of marriage and sexuality have historically changed over time, and the fact that our understanding is changing once again is nothing new. It should also be mentioned that while *Leviticus* says that homosexuality is an “abomination,” the same Hebrew word is used in *Deuteronomy* 14:3 to describe the eating of non-kosher foods, and frankly, we don’t get that upset or ostracize someone when we catch them eating shrimp or pork. And lastly, the ancient rabbis knew that we would often have to change with the times, and, thus, they argued that this was okay.

“R. Simeon b. Lakish said: You must only listen to the judge in your own generation.”

(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:8)

“If they (the judges of the current generation) tell you that the right hand is right and the left hand left, listen to them, and even if they shall tell you that the right hand is left and the left hand right, listen to them.”

(*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:18)

Furthermore, Judaism likely has its own cast of sexually different characters recorded within its literature such as, for example, the relationship between Jonathan and David (*I Samuel* 20:17) or that between Rabbi Johanan and Resh Lakish (*B. Baba Metzia* 84a).

In the end, Reform Judaism approved of same-sex marriages because the rabbis realized, above all else, that it is a matter of simple human dignity, as stated in the *Talmud*.

“Great is human dignity, since it overrides a negative precept of the *Torah*.”

(*B. Beraqhot* 19b)

KEDOSHIM

(Leviticus 19:1-20:27)

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

Rabbi Akiba, the great *Talmudic* rabbi, felt that the central teaching of the *Torah* is found in *Leviticus* 19:18, “Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself,” and this seems very much in harmony with Rabbi Hillel’s own summation of the central message of the *Torah*,

“What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole *Torah*, while the rest is the commentary thereof. Now go and learn the commentary!”
(*B. Shabbat* 31a)

However, a question that has persisted throughout much of the rabbinic period is who is to be considered one’s neighbor? If we look at *Leviticus* 19:18 in its entirety, then the first part of this verse says, “You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people,” and this suggests that only fellow Israelites are being referred to as a “neighbor.” However, in *Genesis Rabbah* we find the following,

“Ben ‘Azzai said: THIS IS THE BOOK OF THE DESCENDANTS OF ADAM is a great principle of the *Torah*. R. Akiba said: But thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself (*Leviticus* 19:18) is even a greater principle.”
(*Genesis Rabbah* XXIV:7)

It is generally understood that Ben Azzai is making a statement about the equality of all human beings since we are all descended from Adam who was made in the image of *God*. Furthermore, for Rabbi Akiba to assert that “Love thy neighbor” is an even greater principle than that espoused by Ben Azzai, it must certainly be the case that Rabbi Akiba’s statement only adds on to and expands on that made by Ben Azzai. Therefore, Rabbi Akiba must be saying that the principle of “Love thy neighbor” applies to all human beings just as Ben Azzai’s statement was with regard to all human beings. A similar statement of universal equality was also made in the *Talmud* by Rabbi Meir,

“R. Meir used to say: The dust of the first man was gathered from all parts of the earth.”
(*B. Sanhedrin* 38a)

Furthermore, the word that is used in *Leviticus* 19:18 for neighbor is *re’a*, and that word is often used in the *Hebrew Bible* to represent all human beings as is the case in *Genesis* 11:3 (Tower of Babel). Furthermore, going back to *Leviticus* 19, in verse 34 it says “The stranger that sojourns with you ... you shall love him as yourself,” and that strongly suggests that we should love all people, not just those within our particular group.

It is certainly quite possible that the author originally meant *Leviticus* 19:18 to apply only to one’s fellow Israelite, but it is also true that each generation and its leaders are allowed to decide what the *Torah* means to them and how it shall be implemented in their time. Thus, while there may have been some logic in the past behind loving only people within your particular group, today it is just racist. Furthermore, this doesn’t mean that there aren’t people you should avoid or be wary of. It just means you should see both the underlying humanity and *Divinity* within everyone. It means don’t be a racist.

EMOR

(Leviticus 21:1-24:23)

SEEK ME AND LIVE

SEEK ME AND LIVE

Below we have a *Zohar* passage that once again alerts us to the limits of thought.

“(AND THE SON OF THE ISRAELITISH WOMAN BLASPHEMED THE NAME. (*Leviticus* 24:10)) R. Hiya quoted here the verse: “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing” (*Proverbs* 25:2). ‘This means’, he said, ‘that it is not permitted to a man to disclose mysteries which are not meant to be disclosed, and which the Ancient of Days has hidden, as it is written, “To eat sufficiently, but to conceal the Ancient One” (*Isaiah* 23:18). “To eat sufficiently” - until that place which is permitted, but no further.” (*Zohar* III:105b)

If we look at the verse that is quoted above from *Isaiah*, it is amazing to me how they take a seemingly inconsequential phrase such as “to eat sufficiently” and from that they deduce that there are limits to what one can know and experience.

“And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord; it shall not be treasured nor laid up; for her merchandise shall be for those who dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for fine clothing.” (*Isaiah* 23:18)

The situation here also reminds me of the *Zohar*'s comments on the staves mentioned in *Exodus* 25:27. In *Zohar* I:31a, the border that is referred to in *Exodus* 25:27 represents the limits of knowledge for most people. For the average person, the most that is achievable is to reside right on the boundary between the knowable and unknowable, and only a few can go any further.

“Opposite the border shall the rings be as places for the poles (staves) to carry the table.” (*Exodus* 25:27)

Of those who can go further, the following verse applies,

“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.” (*Proverbs* 25:2)

Also, from the *Talmud* we learn that not everything should be discussed. In particular, mystical knowledge of the creation should only be explained one-on-one so as not to be misunderstood, and journeys (chariot) through meditation require a prior, inner knowing by the student before a teacher is allowed to put that understanding into words.

“MISHNAH: THE SUBJECT OF FORBIDDEN RELATIONS MAY NOT BE EXPOUNDED IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE, NOR THE WORK OF CREATION IN THE PRESENCE OF TWO, NOR THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE, UNLESS HE IS A SAGE AND UNDERSTANDS OF HIS OWN KNOWLEDGE.” (*B. Chagigah* 11b)

BEHAR

(Leviticus 25:1-26:2)

CHARITY SAVES FROM DEATH

CHARITY SAVES FROM DEATH

“Happy, he said, is the man who does good with what he hath, because he arouseth good for the Community of Israel, to wit, with righteousness (*zedakah*, charity). Hence it is written, “Righteousness delivereth from death” (*Proverbs* 10:2). Why so? Because righteousness is the tree of life, and it rouses itself against the tree of death and takes those who are attached to it and delivers them from death. And what rouses it to do so? You must say, the charity which that man does; as it were, he performs it above also.” (*Zohar* III:111b)

The English word for “charity” comes from the Latin “*caritas*” meaning love. In contrast to this, the Hebrew word *zedakah* can be translated as either justice, righteousness, or charity. In particular, charity is seen as the just thing to do whether one wants to give or not. However, to fully understand the importance of charity, one must know a little bit about thermodynamics.

The second law of thermodynamics states that at all times the degree of randomness and disorder in the universe will increase. However, the puzzle this poses is that all life seems to exist in contradiction to this law. All living organisms are examples of complex structures that seem to defy disorder. However, if we look more closely at the process, we see that life is maintained by a constant flow of resources into the organism coupled with the ongoing expulsion of waste materials, and it is this very process that results in an overall increase in the disorganization of the universe while simultaneously letting the living achieve higher levels of organization. It is like a city which can only thrive as long as there is a constant flow of resources in and garbage out, and this is the insight that won Ilya Prigogine the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1977. This is also why charity is so important. The needed resources must flow to all in order for us to survive. Below now are some additional insightful comments on charity from the *Talmud*.

“Charity is equivalent to all other religious precepts combined.” (*B. Baba Bathra* 10a)

“R. Eleazar stated, Greater is he who performs charity than he who offers all the sacrifices, for it is said, ‘To do charity and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (*Proverbs* 21:3).’ R. Eleazar further stated, acts of loving kindness are greater than charity, for it is said, Sow to yourselves according to your charity, but reap according to your kindness (*Hosea* 10:12). If a man sows, it is doubtful whether he will eat the harvest or not, but when a man reaps, he will certainly eat. R. Eleazar further stated, The reward of charity depends entirely upon the extent of the kindness in it, for it is said, ‘Sow to yourselves according to charity, but reap according to the kindness.’ Our Rabbis taught, ‘In three respects are acts of loving kindness superior to charity: charity can be done only with one’s money, but acts of loving kindness can be done with one’s person and one’s money. Charity can be given only to the poor, but acts of loving kindness to both the rich and the poor. Charity can be given to the living only, acts of loving kindness can be done both to the living and to the dead.’” (*B. Sukkah* 49b)

BECHUQOTAI

(Leviticus 26:3-27:34)

HOW TO MAKE A GOD

HOW TO MAKE A GOD

Below is an astounding interpretation from the *Zohar* of the verb “to do” in *Leviticus* 26:3..

“AND YE SHALL DO (MAKE) THEM (*Leviticus* 26:3). After walk and “keep” have been mentioned, why does it also say “do”? Because he who “keeps” the precepts of the Law and “walks” in God's ways, if one may say so, “makes” Him who is above. Also it says, “You shall make them”, because the two aspects (of statute and judgment) are both aroused through you and join together so that the Holy Name is consummated.”
(*Zohar* III:113a)

It seems rather incredulous to say that we make *God*, but at the very least this seems to be a statement of the connections that exist between *God* and humanity with the conclusion being reached that *God* cannot be fully *God* without our participation and partnership. However, one also has to look deeper into this passage and inquire as to how we could possibly create *God*? In mystical Judaism recall that *yud-hey-vav-hey* and *Elohim* represent two different aspects of *God*. The former name represents *God* as an intrinsically unknowable concept or entity while the latter, *Elohim*, represents a *God* that is at least partially revealed. *Elohim* is the *God* that we assign attributes to such as love, mercy, and justice. Also, the former, since it is beyond conception, is also beyond both existence and nonexistence, and this unknowable principle is not something we can either make or change. We can only be aware of the mystery and to sometimes be absorbed into it. *Elohim*, however, is a different story. *Elohim* is the *God* we make by assigning specific attributes and stories to explain whatever holiness we have perceived, and different cultures will come up with their own stories to explain their understanding of *God*. And with regard to this, the *Zohar* suggests that all of these *Gods* are simply all different versions of *Elohim*. Thus, for example, a Jew might feel a holy presence and call it the *Shechinah* while a Christian may perceive the same presence, but interpret it within the context of their religion as the *Holy Spirit*.

“This Name TETRAGRAMMATON belongs only to Israel. Above all the other names is one which spreads and separates itself towards many diverse ways and paths, to wit, *Elohim*. This name has been transmitted to the beings of this lower world, and has been shared among the Chieftains and ministering angels who guide other nations. Hence we read: “And *Elohim* came to Balaam by night” (*Numbers* 22:20); “And *Elohim* came to Abimelech in the dream of the night” (*Genesis* 20:3); and the same is true of all the principalities and powers appointed over the nations--all are included in this Name, yea, even their objects of worship find a place therein; and so it is this name and aspect of the Divinity which reigns over the nations, but not the peculiar Name, for in that they have no part, since it reigns over Israel only: the one nation, the holy nation.”
(*Zohar* II:96a)

In conclusion, while *yud-hey-vav-hey* represents the unknowable *God* and *Elohim* represents the knowable *God*, remember that the *Zohar* frequently stresses that the most important thing to understand is that “*yud-hey-vav-hey* is *Elohim*!” (*Zohar* II:27a).

BAMIDBAR

(Numbers 1:1-4:20)

TORAH IS FREE!

TORAH IS FREE!

The *Talmud* tells the story of Rabbi Hillel who as a young man was very poor, but who, nonetheless, positioned himself atop a skylight to the House of Learning so that he could hear the discourses of the sages inside. The rabbis discovered his zeal to learn, and, thus, they brought him in from the cold and nourished him. As a bookend to this story we could also look at the teaching below from the *Midrash* that notes that the *Torah* was given in a place of fire, water, and wilderness, and that just as these things are free, so, too, *Torah* should be free. This argument, by the way, is typical of *Midrash* in that the rabbis have a point they want to make, and then they look for a way to justify their point. In this case, the point is that *Torah* study should always be free and open to everyone. The prooftext they use is a passage from *Isaiah* that suggests that the only qualification for attendance is an honest zeal and thirst to learn. Still, the bottom line is that if you are earnest in your desire to learn *Torah*, then the rabbis should assist you in whatever way they can.

“Our Rabbis taught: The poor, the rich, the sensual come before the heavenly court — They say to the poor: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah? If he says: I was poor and worried about my sustenance, they would say to him: Were you poorer than Hillel? It was reported about Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one *tropaik*, half of which he would give to the guard at the House of Learning, the other half being spent for his food and for that of his family. One day he found nothing to earn and the guard at the House of Learning would not permit him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the window, to hear the words of the living God from the mouth of Shemayah and Abtalion — They say, that day was the eve of Sabbath in the winter solstice and snow fell down upon him from heaven. When the dawn rose, Shemayah said to Abtalion: Brother Abtalion, on every day this house is light and today it is dark, is it perhaps a cloudy day. They looked up and saw the figure of a man in the window. They went up and found him covered by three cubits of snow. They removed him, bathed and anointed him and placed him opposite the fire and they said: This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.”

(*B. Yoma*35b)

“Our Sages have inferred from this that the *Torah* was given to the accompaniment of three things, fire, water, and wilderness. ‘Fire’; whence is this derived? From the text, Now Mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire (*Exodus* 19:18). And ‘water’; whence is this derived? For it is said, The heavens also dropped, yea, the clouds dropped water (*Judges* 5:4). And ‘wilderness’; whence is this derived? From the text, AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO MOSES IN THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI. Why was the giving of the *Torah* marked by these three features? To indicate that as these are free to all mankind so also are the words of the *Torah* free; as it is said, Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water (*Isaiah* 55:1).”

(*Numbers Rabbah* I:7)

NASSO

(Numbers 4:21-7:89)

THE MATHEMATICS OF THE PRIESTLY BLESSING
THE MENORAH PSALM
HALLELUJAH

THE MATHEMATICS OF THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

One of the most beautiful and profound parts of the *Torah* is the collection of three verses known as the *Priestly Blessing*.

The Lord bless you, and keep you;
 The Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
 The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
 (*Numbers 6:24:26*)

Even in English these words convey great beauty, but it's only when we look at these verses in Hebrew that we can uncover some of the mathematical patterns.

						ו	י	ש	מ	ר	ך		י	ה	ו	ה		י	ב	ר	ך									
			ו	י	ח	נ	ך		א	ל	י	ך		ו		י	נ	פ		ה	ו	ה		י	א	ר				
		ש	ל	ו	ם	ל	ך		ש	ם	ו	י	ו	י	ך	א	ל	י	ך		ו	י	ו	ה	ו	ה	י	א	ש	י

If we count the number of words in each verse, then we arrive at the arithmetic sequence 3, 5, 7 where the common difference between terms is 2. By itself, I would estimate only a 50% chance that this pattern was purposely created, but since there is another arithmetic sequence awaiting our discovery, the likelihood of at least one of these sequences being intentional is now far above 50%. Also, that second arithmetic sequence can be found by counting the letters in each verse, 15, 20, 25. This is another arithmetic sequence, but this time the common difference between terms is 5. Additionally, I suspect that in this blessing we are looking at a very ancient form of poetry that is based upon rhythm instead of rhyme.

If we look now at the middle word of each verse, then we read “*Adonai panav elecha*” which we can translate as “*God’s face to you,*” and that seems to be pretty much the central message of the *Priestly Blessing*. Also, this same phrase comprises the middle three words of the second verse, and thus, this is unlikely to be a coincidence.

Lastly, there is a long standing tradition that the world continues to exist because of the ongoing presence of at least 36 righteous individuals, and if we look at the middle letters of verses 1 and 3 (verse 2 has no middle letter since it has an even number of letters), then we see *lamed-vav* which numerically represents the numbers $30+6 = 36$. This suggests that it is the righteous that *God’s face* will shine upon, but of course, this occurrence of 36 may be just a coincidence. However, the number 36 also appears as the sum of the four letters highlighted in green above (the corner letters of the square formed by our middle words), $yud\text{-}hey\text{-}aleph\text{-}kaf = 10+5+1+20 = 36$, and so the appearance of this number here is looking more intentional. Finally, notice that the letters *lamed-vav* in orange in the middle look like a pillar, and as it says in the *Talmud*, “The world rests on one pillar, and its name is ‘Righteous’ (*B. Chagigah 12b*).”

There are additional patterns to be found in this blessing, but this is all that I can squeeze into one page!

THE MENORAH PSALM

Psalm 67 is traditionally known as the “*Menorah Psalm*.” This is because when we exclude the first verse, which is just introductory, we find that the *Psalm* has 49 Hebrew words which is the same as the number of days between Passover and Shavuot. Furthermore, these 49 words were often arranged upon a diagram of a *Menorah*, and they were then used to count the days from Passover to Shavuot. Also, if we now examine verses 2 through 8 of this *Psalm*, we’ll find some even more interesting patterns.

2. *God* be gracious to us, and bless us; and let his face shine upon us. Selah.
 3. That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.
 4. Let the peoples praise you, O *God*; let all the peoples praise you.
 5. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.
 6. Let the peoples praise you, O *God*; let all the peoples praise you.
 7. The earth has yielded her produce; and *God*, our own *God*, shall bless us.
 8. *God* shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him.
- (*Psalm 67:2-8*)

First, when we look at just the first verse above, we immediately notice a similarity between those words and the *Priestly Blessing* found in *Numbers 6:24-26*. As we’ll see, the *Menorah Psalm* is in many ways both a continuation and completion of the *Priestly Blessing*. A second thing to notice is that this *Psalm* exhibits a chiasmic structure. In other words, verses 2 & 8 express a similar theme (*God* blesses us), verses 3 & 7 both focus upon the earth, verses 5 & 6 are identical and stress the need for the people to praise *God*, and finally verse 5 contains the central meaning that *God* will judge righteously and that the people will offer joy and song in return.

A critical difference between the *Menorah Psalm* and the *Priestly Blessing* that can only be seen in the Hebrew, however, is that the *Priestly Blessing* uses *yud-hey-vav-hey* for *God* (In Judaism, this name is never pronounced and *Adonai* [Lord] is usually said in its place), while the *Menorah Psalm* uses the name *Elohim* for *God*. In rabbinic literature the rabbis generally say that *Adonai* represents *God’s* mercy while *Elohim* symbolizes *God’s* judgment. On the other hand, the *Zohar* usually uses *Adonai* to refer to the unknowable *God* while *Elohim* is used to represent the *God* that we assign characteristics to like being merciful and long suffering. In either case, however, *Adonai* and *Elohim* represent complementary opposites, and this again suggests that the *Menorah Psalm* is complementary to the *Priestly Blessing*.

Another thing that can only be seen in the Hebrew is that the sum of the numerical values of the final letter of each verse above is 206, and this is the same as the numerical value of the Hebrew letters that spell “*Let the peoples praise you*” in verses 4 & 6. Furthermore, the middle word in Hebrew of the middle verse above is “*amim*” which means “*peoples*.” Thus, while the *Priestly Blessing* is about *God* giving to us, the *Menorah Psalm* is about people giving back to *God* through joy, song, and praise. It’s the least we can do. Also, remember that *Psalm 65:2* can be translated as “*To you silence is praise*.” Enjoy silence!

HALLELUJAH

In the *Torah* the two most prominent names for *God* are *yud-hey-vav-hey*, for which *Adonai* (Lord) is usually substituted when vocalized, and *Elohim* which is essentially a word of Canaanite origin for *God* or *Gods*. In rabbinic literature, *Adonai* is seen as the name that heralds *God's* mercy while *Elohim* is the name that symbolizes *God's* justice. And in the *Zohar* a different dichotomy is presented as there *yud-hey-vav-hey* or *Adonai* usually represents the unknowable aspect of *God* while *Elohim* represents *God's* revealed aspects. However, another dichotomy that can be found in both the *Hebrew Bible* and rabbinic literature is the division between giving and receiving. In this context, *yud-hey-vav-hey/Adonai* (Lord) represents giving as in the *Priestly Blessing* (*Numbers* 6:24-26) where *yud-hey-vav-hey* shines His light upon us. Related to this blessing, though, is the *Menorah Psalm* (*Psalm* 67) that uses the word *Elohim* for *God* and then specifically speaks of returning praise to *God* (*Psalm* 67:4-6). This connection between *Elohim* and praising *God* is solidified by looking at the numerical values (*gematria*) of the words *Elohim* and *Hallelujah* (Praise *God*). Both these words have a numerical value of 86, and this suggests that while *God* gives everything to us, we need to close the loop by giving thanks to *God*. This need to give back to *God* is also highlighted in the *Midrash*.

“R. Jannai said: Usually when a person buys a pound of meat, how much trouble and labor he goes through before he has cooked it! I (*God*), however, cause the winds to blow for you, clouds to ascend, rain and dew to fall, make plants to grow and ripen, and prepare a table before every individual and supply the needs of every individual and every person sufficient for his wants; and yet you refuse to bring me the *omer*! ... R. Berekiah said: (*God* declared) I am your purveyor, and you will not let Me taste My own food so that I may know what it requires?”
(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:4)

“R. Joshua expounded: I, (says *God*) am your Keeper, and will you not give Me reward for My keeping? R. Berekiah expounded: I, (says *God*) am your Cook, and will you not let me taste of your broth, so that I may know what you require, whether dew or rain?”
(*Leviticus Rabbah* XXVIII:3)

The bottom line is that life has a source, and living beings need to give back to that source by at least being aware of it. As it says in the *Talmud*,

“To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One.”
(*B. Berachot* 35b)

There are many ways to give back to *God*. For example, we can praise *God* verbally out loud or in silence. We can also give back to *God* by giving to the poor which we should all do according to our capacity. However, in addition to giving to the poor, my favorite way to praise *God* is by merging my being into that sound of utter silence, that still, small voice within.

“To you, O *God*, silence is praise.” (*Psalm* 65:2, alternate translation)

BEHAALOTECHA

(Numbers 8:1-12:16)

TELL ME A STORY!

TELL ME A STORY!

Some *Torah* portions contain a lot of juicy material that just begs for commentary and great insights. However, there are also other *Torah* portions that simply contain things like genealogies, instructions for building something, or instructions on how to perform some ritual. *Behaalothekha* (*Numbers* 8:1-12:16) is more like the latter than the former. Thus, it might not be surprising that the *Zohar's* commentary on this portion reiterates its doctrine that every single word and letter of the *Torah* contains profound spiritual meanings.

“‘How precious’, he said, ‘are the words of the *Torah*, seeing that each particular word contains sublime mystical teachings, the *Torah* itself being designated the sublime general rule.’”
(*Zohar* III:149a)

Furthermore, it's not surprising that a few pages later in the *Zohar* we find this assertion,

“Said R. Simeon: ‘Alas for the man who regards the *Torah* as a book of mere tales and everyday matters! If that were so, we, even we could compose a *Torah* dealing with everyday affairs, and of even greater excellence. ... The stories of the *Torah* are only her outer garments, and whoever looks upon that garment as being the *Torah* itself, woe to that man, such a one will have no portion in the next world. ... Woe to the sinners who consider the *Torah* as mere worldly tales, who only see its outer garment; happy are the righteous who fix their gaze on the *Torah* proper Wine cannot be kept save in a jar; so the *Torah* needs an outer garment. These are the stories and narratives, but it behooves us to penetrate beneath them.’”
(*Zohar* III:152a)

This and other passages in the *Zohar* have led to a doctrine that every verse in the *Torah* has four levels of interpretation – (1) the plain meaning of the text, (2) hints through wordplay and number play of additional meanings, (3) the allegorical or metaphorical meaning of the text, and (4) the hidden, secret, or *Kabbalistic* meaning of the text. The first person to write a *Torah* commentary incorporating these four levels of interpretation is believed to have been Rabbi Bachya ben Asher (1255 CE – 1340 CE). Also, since the *Zohar* was composed in the 1200s by Rabbi Moses de Leon, Rabbi Bachya ben Asher belonged to that first generation of scholars to study this text.

There are two bottom lines to all of this. First, when studying the *Torah* one should always seek to uncover as many deeper meanings as possible. And second, if the stories of the *Torah* are merely outer garments that are meant to act as a buffer between us and deeper spiritual truths, then might not that also be true of the *Zohar*? As with the *Torah*, it behooves us to also find the deeper meanings within the stories contained within Judaism's most profound mystical texts!

SHLACH

(*Numbers* 13:1-15:41)

INTEGRITY MATTERS
THE COSMIC LANDSCAPE

INTEGRITY MATTERS

In *Numbers* 13 we read the story of the spies that Moses sent to the land of Canaan, and they came back and gave a less than truthful report. However, the opening of their report was truthful, and about that this is what the *Zohar* has to say.

“AND SURELY IT FLOWETH WITH MILK AND HONEY (*Numbers* 13:27): R. Isaac said that if a man wants to deceive he should first say something true so that he may be believed.”

(*Zohar* III:161a)

Furthermore, the *Zohar* goes on to say that the reason that the rest of the spies’ report was untruthful was because they felt that lying was in their best interests. In particular, they were leaders during the long trip of the Israelites through the desert, but when they arrive at the promised land they knew that society might be reorganized and they might lose their positions of prestige.

“ALL OF THEM MEN. They were all virtuous, but they were misled by a false reasoning. They said: If Israel enter the land, we will be superseded, since it is only in the wilderness that we are accounted worthy to be leaders, and this was what caused their death and the death of all who followed them.”

(*Zohar* III:158a)

Sadly, many of us still find ourselves in a similar position today. As is the case in many countries, we have leaders and those leaders don’t always tell us the truth. Most of the time it simply amounts to bending the truth to put themselves in a little more favorable light, but in recent years the lack of truth from government leaders has become very difficult to endure. And as is generally the case, most of these politicians are lying simply in an effort to keep their own jobs and all the perks that may come with it. It is common these days for politicians to look out only for their own fortunes, and even that is often just for the short run. The long term welfare of the country has become secondary to their own wants and desires, and few heed the advice of sages like Honi who illustrated the need to plan for generations seventy years into the future (*B. Taanit* 23a). Likewise, few take to heart the words of Hillel who said, “If I am not for myself, who is for me, but if I am for my own self only, what am I? (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14).” There is too little integrity and righteousness these days, and again, as Hillel said, sometimes the only remedy is to work to be righteous yourself – “In a place where there are no men, be a man (*Pirkei Avot* 2:5).” And finally, the *Talmud* reminds us that when we die, the first question we will be asked will be about our integrity, and one of the most important things we can do is to always strive to be truthful. Choose to do the right thing!

“Raba said, When man is led in for Judgment he is asked, Did you deal faithfully (i.e., with integrity; were you honest in business?), did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for salvation, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?”

(*B. Shabbat* 31a)

THE COSMIC LANDSCAPE

The *Zohar* returns from time to time to images of an afterlife that may or may not correspond to what actually happens when we die. At this point, we can only take these things on faith while also realizing that it is our actions in the here and now that are currently the most important. Nonetheless, much of what is said below also corresponds to what we can experience today. For example, the *Zohar* says that the *Torah* and the Holy Name are both simultaneously hidden and revealed. This corresponds to ordinary perception where the exterior world of objects is revealed, but the observer that observes all these things is still hidden. Our awareness still remains the essential mystery of our existence. Similarly, the *Zohar* speaks of a world that can't be known, a world in which *Divinity* can be sensed and is less concealed, and a world of objects where everything appears separate from everything else. Also, this is one of the few places in the *Zohar* where we explicitly encounter the phrase "world of separation" to describe our earthly existence. Again, we can find parallels to this in modern quantum physics where matter exists both as a particle that resides in a definite location, and also as a wave that contains all possible outcomes and that is linked to and connected to all other waves. At the very least, we experience both separation from others while also feeling connected with many others. Both realities coexist side by side, and paradox is the rule, not the exception.

“The Torah is both hidden and revealed, and the Holy Name is also hidden and revealed, as it is written, “The hidden things belong to the Lord our God, and the revealed things are for us and for our children” (Deuteronomy 29:29). The revealed things we may inquire into, but the hidden things are for the Lord alone. Hence men are not permitted to utter secret things and divulge them, save only the Holy Lamp, R. Simeon, since the Holy One, blessed be He, has concurred with him, and because his generation is distinguished both on high and below, and therefore things are divulged through him, and there shall be no such another generation till the Messiah comes. Now, as for your question. The Holy One, blessed be He, has three words in which He is enshrouded. The first is a supernal recondite one which is known only to Him who is concealed therein. The second one is linked with the first and is the one from which the Holy One, blessed be He, is known. The third is a lower one in which is found separation, and in this abide the celestial angels, and the Holy One, blessed be He, is both in it and not in it, so that all ask, “Where is the place of his glory?” Similarly man has three worlds. The first is the one which is called “the world of separation”, in which man both is and is not; **as we look at him he departs and vanishes**. The second is the world which is linked with the higher world, being the terrestrial Garden of Eden, while the third is a hidden recondite and unknowable world. Now the first world is a stepping-stone to the others, and did not man sin he would not have a taste of death when he is about to enter those other worlds and when the spirit is divested of the body. But as it is, the spirit has to be cleansed in the “stream of fire” to receive its punishment, and then it enters the terrestrial Garden of Eden, and it is furnished with a robe of light resembling its appearance in this world, and therewith it is equipped, and then its abode is there continually, and on New Moons and Sabbaths it attaches itself to the super-soul and ascends aloft. This is the essence of the matter, and so it is with all save the sinners who are cut off from all worlds if they do not effect repentance.” (Zohar III:158a-158b)

QORACH

(*Numbers* 16:1-18:32)

ANGER MANAGEMENT

ANGER MANAGEMENT

Life is full of opposites – bitter and sweet, hot and cold, night and day, war and peace, just to name a few, and one of the challenges of life is to both manage and harmonize these opposites. And this brings us to the topic of anger management. We normally see anger as the opposite of being calm or peaceful, and as one is growing up one has to learn how to control one's anger when it arises. Many people are taught when they are children to repress their anger, and that is usually preferable to any unlimited expression of that anger. Nonetheless, this can create a variety of problems for one as an adult. For example, many psychologists have long talked about how such repressions are incomplete as the anger will attempt over and over again to find its voice. In this way, anger can become a part of a person's *shadow*, that complex of feelings and emotions that a person habitually represses, and the *shadow* always tends to find a way to express its negativity. For myself, though, no good has ever come from expressing anger in its raw form.

In the *Zohar* anger is associated with the left side of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*, and kindness and mercy are associated with the right side. The *Zohar*, however, does not recommend repressing one's anger. The *shadow* cannot be ignored. Instead, the *Zohar* frequently says that the left side should be merged with the right side and also put under control of the right. What this means is that our sense of anger should not be ignored. Instead, it should be expressed, but expressed only with regulation from the side of kindness and love, and this is what can turn destructive anger into constructive assertiveness. Additionally, even worse than repressing anger is to claim that it is the path of peace. Don't lie that left is right and up is down and war is peace!

“NOW KORAH THE SON OF IZHAR THE SON OF KEHATH THE SON OF LEVI (*Numbers* 16:1). He who makes the right left and the left right, as it were, lays waste the world. Now Aaron represented the right and the Levites the left, and Korah sought to make the right and the left change places, and therefore he was punished. Further, the evil tongue was also found in him, and for that also he was punished. R. Judah said: The left should always be embraced in the right. Korah sought to change the order fixed both above and below, and therefore he perished both above and below.”
(*Zohar* III:176a)

“What is indicated here is that a man should always merge the left in the right, and all his actions should be controlled by the right. Thus we interpret, “all that thy hand findeth to do” of the left, and “that do with thy might” of the right. When a man is careful that all his acts should be towards the right side, and that he should include the left in the right, then God dwells within him in this world and brings him into the next world.”
(*Zohar* III:176a)

“All the words of Solomon have a deep inner significance. What is indicated here is that a man should always merge the left in the right, and all his actions should be controlled by the right. Thus we interpret, “all that thy hand findeth to do” of the left, and “that do with thy might” of the right.” (*Zohar* III:178a)

CHUQAT

(*Numbers 19:1-22:1*)

THE RED HEIFER
MIRIAM'S WELL

THE RED HEIFER

The ritual of the red heifer involves using the ashes of a young female cow that is entirely red in a ritualistic manner to restore a person to a state of ritual purity after coming into contact with a dead body. According to the rabbis, this is one of a handful of rituals for which we have no rhyme or reason for doing other than the fact that *God* said so! According to me, however, these rabbis were removed far in time from the era during which this ritual made sense to people, and consequently, the rabbis were completely clueless. And to me, the meaning and symbolism of the ritual is totally obvious!

Our ancestors knew nothing about germs, but they were keen observers of their world, and they realized that certain actions such as touching someone ill or even touching a dead body could lead to illness in the person who did the touching. In their understanding, the illness was a spiritual imbalance brought on by a state of ritual impurity which in turn was caused by physical contact with something impure. In the case of touching a dead body, the remedy was to sacrifice a red heifer along with cedar, hyssop, and “red stuff,” collect the ashes, mix them with water, and sprinkle them periodically upon the impure person until the requisite amount of time has passed for them to transition back to a state of ritual purity.

To understand this ritual, you have to understand that women are the bringers of life into this world and life is what can be used to counteract death. Thus, I claim that this ritual is rife with symbols of the feminine. First, a heifer is a young female cow. Second the color red represents blood which in turn represents both life (*Genesis* 9:4) and the monthly flow of a woman. Third, the cedar that is burned along with the red heifer is reminiscent of the way in which cedar is used in Native American ceremonies for purification, and additionally, most cedar has a red tint. As for the hyssop, it's generally believed that *Biblical* hyssop is different from the plant that we call hyssop today, but most agree that it was some sort of pleasing, aromatic plant, and one of the candidates for *Biblical* hyssop is some form of sage. Again, this is reminiscent of the use of aromatic herbs by Native Americans to help establish a state of ritual purity. Fourth, the Hebrew “*sh'nei tohlah'ah*” that is often translated as red stuff or crimson stuff is actually the name of a remarkable worm. The mother worm, when about to give birth, attaches itself to the bark of a tree where the mother's body will provide food for the offspring and the mother's back will provide a hard shell of protection. And at the moment of birth, the mother dies and releases a red dye that stains the backs of her offspring as well as some of the bark. I suspect that it is this stained bark that is included in the sacrifice of the red heifer. However, what is important is to realize how the story of this mother symbolizes the journey from death back to life that our ritual is meant to achieve. And finally, the fifth feminine element involved is the mixture of these ashes with water. Water not only is a traditionally symbol for *Torah*, it's also a symbol for the female as is seen in the story occurring next in this *Torah* portion about the death of Miriam and the loss of the spring of water that traveled with the people in the desert. The rabbis of the *Talmud* have designated this pool as “*Miriam's Well*,” and so water also represents both life and the feminine. The bottom line, though, is that death is cured by life, and women represent life since everything is born of woman!

MIRIAM'S WELL

In *Numbers* 20:1, we read the following,

“And the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there.”
(*Numbers* 20:1)

And immediately following verse 1 is this,

“And there was no water for the congregation; and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.”
(*Numbers* 20:2)

Because this verse about a lack of water immediately follows the news of Miriam's death, the rabbis of the *Talmud* imagined that there was a special well of water, *Miriam's Well*, that traveled with the Israelite people as long as Miriam was alive, and upon her death, the well also disappeared. Miriam was known as a prophetess (*Exodus* 15:20), and yet, compared to Moses and Aaron, we hardly hear a word from her in the *Torah*. Nonetheless, it is through Miriam's merit that the well of water travels with her (*B. Taanit* 9a). Furthermore, in rabbinic Judaism, water is probably the most common symbol for *Torah* due to passages like *Isaiah* 55:1 and *Deuteronomy* 32:2. Thus, you could say that Miriam carries *Torah* with her just as much as Moses does.

It is rather traditional to talk of *Torah* in terms of both the *written Torah* and the *oral Torah*. This distinction originates in the fact that the actual *written Torah* doesn't explain everything such as, for example, what types of work we are supposed to refrain from on the Sabbath, and consequently, it was assumed that Moses was also given an oral explanation on how to implement each commandment in the *Torah*. However, another distinction that I consider to be even more important is that between what I call the *Audible Torah* and the *Inaudible Torah*. By the *Audible Torah* I mean the actual written words, explanations, and commandments in the *Torah*. This is the *Torah* as given by the words of Moses. However, I believe that in contrast to this there is an inaudible, experiential *Torah* that is represented by Miriam and other female figures. Psychologists have long talked about the left hemisphere of our brain being more verbal while the right hemisphere represents non-verbal wisdom, and these brain hemisphere differences have traditionally been associated with male and female ways of being, respectively. Thus, I see Moses as representing a *Torah* of words while Miriam represents a *Torah* of non-verbal experiences. In particular, think of water not in words, but in terms of how it makes you feel and the life that streams back into you with each gulp. The *Audible Torah* is a written description of life, but water gives the actual experience of life. Miriam and Wisdom in *Proverbs* both represent threads of the *Inaudible Torah* that are embedded within the *Hebrew Bible*, and as it says in *Zohar* I:50b, “The audible voice issues from the inaudible.” Additionally, in *Genesis Rabbah* XIV:7, Rav Huna stresses the importance of balancing the male and the female. In other words, if you don't listen to both sides of your brain, then you're just a half-wit!

BALAK

(Numbers 22:2-25:9)

THE TRIAL OF BALAAM

THE TRIAL OF BALAAM

This *Torah* portion, *Balak*, tells the story of a great non-Jewish prophet named Balaam. Balak is king of the Moabite people, and he is greatly afraid of the military power of the wandering Israelites, and as a result he sends emissaries to meet with the prophet Balaam in hope that he can hire Balaam to pronounce a curse upon the Jewish people. However, Balaam repeatedly says that he can only say and do what *God* tells him to say and do, and it matters not how much gold or silver King Balak might offer to him. He, Balaam, will only do what *God* tells him to do. Also, worthy of note is that the *Torah* frequently uses the name *yud-hey-vav-hey* in reference to *God* in the Balaam story, and this suggests that Balaam was spiritually evolved enough to merit knowing this name. This stands in contrast to Pharaoh who did not know *God* in this way (*Exodus* 5:2).

The emissaries from King Balak keep pressing Balaam to go with them, and eventually, in *Numbers* 22:20, *God* gives Balaam permission to go meet with King Balak. However, at this point the story goes off the rails for several verses. In particular, in *Numbers* 22:21, Balaam saddles his ass in order to travel with the princes of Moab back to King Balak, and then in verse 22, *God* is angry with Balaam for doing so in spite of the fact that two verses earlier *God* gave Balaam permission to do this very thing! The story of Balaam's ass continues from *Numbers* 22:21 through *Numbers* 22:35, and throughout it is pretty much Balaam who is depicted as the real ass of the tale. Finally, in *Numbers* 22:35, an angel gives Balaam permission to go to King Balak even though permission had already been given in *Numbers* 22:20. To me, this is yet another example of the documentary hypothesis. In other words, *Numbers* 22:21-35 appears to be a different story about Balaam precisely because it is a different story. It is one designed to portray Balaam as a fool rather than as a righteous gentile, and if one omits these verses from the story in *Numbers* then a more favorable view of Balaam emerges. King Balak repeatedly tries to get Balaam to curse the Israelites, but Balaam just as adamantly says that he can only say and do what *God* tells him, and Balaam, in speaking *God's* wishes, winds up blessing the Jewish people instead of cursing them. At the end of *Numbers* 24, Balaam finally leaves King Balak and returns to his own abode, and with the verses about the donkey eliminated, the view of Balaam that emerges is one of a devout non-Jew who, nonetheless, knows *God's* most sacred name and who only follows *God's* will. However, the rabbis preferred to make Balaam an enemy instead of a man of *God*.

At the very end of this *story*, Balak finally finds a way to attack the Israelites by having women of Moab and Midian seduce them, and later in *Numbers* 31:16 the text suggests that it was Balaam who recommended to King Balak that he disrupt the Israelites in such a way. Consequently, this story of deceit and betrayal is what is carried forward by the rabbis of the *Talmud* and the *Midrash*, and it is they who, with all the maturity of an American politician, frequently refer to Balaam as simply "Wicked Balaam." However, does Balaam really deserve such condemnation? I can't help but think of *Proverbs* 21:2 that says that every man's actions look right in his own eyes. Consequently, it looks to me like some are trying to blame Balaam instead of taking responsibility for their own actions. Also, in *Pirkei Avot* 1:6 it says to judge all persons in the scale of merit. We are given two stories of Balaam, one good and one bad. I give him the benefit of the doubt.

PINCHAS

(*Numbers 25:10-30:2*)

THE IRONY AND FALLACY OF RACIAL PURITY

THE IRONY AND FALLACY OF RACIAL PURITY

This week's *Torah* portion is *Pinchas/Phineas*, and the opening has always been very problematical for me. In particular, last week's *Torah* portion concludes with *Phineas* impaling a Jewish man and his non-Jewish lover on a spear together, and then *Phineas*' reward for this extremely violent action is for *God* to elevate him to the priesthood and grant him *God's* covenant of peace. I almost want to create a protest sign that says, "*Midianite Lives Matter!*" However, what makes this passage even more onerous is that some modern day white supremacists take this passage as proof that *God* wants white people to preserve "racial purity." A great irony in that interpretation, however, is that the name "*Pinchas*" is believed by scholars to come from an Egyptian word that means "*Nubian*" or "*black man*." Thus, it's quite likely that the *Biblical* character that white supremacists have held up as their role model was actually a black man!

In the *Zohar's* commentary on *Pinchas*, the *Zohar* does what it usually does. It starts with a passage from the *Torah* portion and then it moves on to something completely different in order to make whatever point it wants, and in this case, it moves on to *Ecclesiastes* 9:10,

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your strength; for there is no work, nor scheme, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in *Sheol*, to which you are going."
(*Ecclesiastes* 9:10)

With regard to this passage, the *Zohar* emphasizes that we should continue to learn and build and create while in this world because such opportunities won't exist, at least in the same way, in the afterlife. To me this is what some of my friends might view as a "*usable truth*." Thus, my truth is that I should continue to learn and contemplate and expand in those areas in which I have some skill all the way up to the very end. This *Zohar* passage also reminds me of a passage from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:32 where the rabbis note that the reason we learn and then forget *Torah* is so that we can engage in lifelong learning. That puts, for me, a very positive and delightful spin on the experience many of us have of being more forgetful as we get older. In other words, because we do forget things as we age, we can also experience the joy of relearning them again! Both the importance and the joy of engaging in lifelong learning are yet another *usable truth* for me!

"The verse continues: "Because there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest". In that "might", however, there is work, namely, effort in this world, which is called "the world of work"; "device" in the world that depends on speech, "knowledge" of the "six sides", which are called "the world of Thought", and wisdom on which all depends. Hence a man who does not labor with his "might" in this world to bring it into "work and device and knowledge and wisdom", will eventually enter into *Gehinnom*, where there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom."
(*Zohar* III:220b)

MATTOT

(*Numbers 30-2:-32:42*)

THE ANGEL OF CORONAVIRUS

THE ANGEL OF CORONAVIRUS

At this stage we often have a double *Torah* portion, *Mattot-Masei*. This passage goes from *Numbers* 30:2 to the very end of *Numbers*. Unfortunately, there's no *Zohar* commentary on this *Torah* portion! It looks like at this point the author of the *Zohar* is running out of steam, and so he has commentary on only three of the last thirteen *Torah* portions. Nonetheless, here is something from earlier in the *Zohar* that provides Dr. Fauci like guidance for times of pandemic like in the year 2020.

“AND NONE OF YOU SHALL GO OUT AT THE DOOR (*Exodus* 12:22). The reason is found in the dictum of R. Isaac, that, when punishment impends over a place a man should not go out into the open, since, once the Destroyer is given leave, he does harm indiscriminately, and makes no distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous; therefore the people of *God* should hide themselves lest they be consumed in that vengeance which is the due of the Destroyer.”
(*Zohar* II:36a)

Well, the ancient sages knew nothing about germs and viruses, but, nonetheless, they knew that when the Angel of Coronavirus or other plague is roaming the streets, then it's not going to care who's been good and who's been bad. Thus, stay indoors!

Elsewhere, in *Numbers* 31, *God* apparently tells Moses to kill the Midianites, and then Moses is angry when his soldiers spare the women and children. However, he then seems to perhaps negotiate with them as he tells the troops that they have to kill the male children and the women who are not virgins, but they can spare the rest. Putting aside the violence and genocide, this portion of *Numbers* reminds me of *Isaiah* 48:17, “Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the Lord your *God* who teaches you for your gain, who leads you by the way you should go.” This is a typical translation of that verse, but I note that the very last verb is in future tense. Hence, you could translate “the way you should go” as either “the way you would go” or “the way you will go.” I like this because it suggests that even if we choose a different path for ourselves, then *God* or some inner guide will still help us. This viewpoint is also taken in the *Talmud* by *Rav Huna* who says, with respect to *Isaiah* 48:17, that one is allowed to follow the road he wishes to pursue. I liken this to my car's GPS when I'm driving. If I take a different turn than what my GPS (*God* Positioning System!) originally wants, then it simply says, “recalculating route.” It still continues to help me get to my destination.

Finally, I know that many are upset that Moses never got to go into the *Promised Land*, and so I thought I would share what I found in the *Midrash* about that. In *Deuteronomy Rabbah* II:6, it says that one reason we know that the stories in the *Torah* are true is because they record the bad along with the good. In particular, it says that since there is no revisionist history of Moses' sin and punishment, it is probably a true account. Interesting!

MASEI

(*Numbers 33:1-36:13*)

THE TORAH OF NATURE

THE TORAH OF NATURE

In its early days of Judaism the people lived close to the earth, and, as in most indigenous cultures, they were aware of its rhythms and cycles. They knew that “to every thing there is a season. (*Ecclesiastes* 3:1)” We see reflections of this even today in ancient holidays like *Sukkot*, the Feast of the Tabernacles, or in the late spring harvest festival that we now call *Shavuot* (Pentecost). However, by the time we reached the rabbinic period, I fear that much of this original knowledge had been lost. Nonetheless, we do find a few statements from the rabbis that suggest that a few remembered that sacredness can also be found outside of holy texts and that “The heavens themselves declare Your glory (*Psalms* 19:2).” In particular, I am pleased that in the *Talmud* (*B. Eiruvim* 10b) Rabbi Johanan states that if we hadn’t been given the *Torah*, then nature could still have taught us its basic principles. Likewise, in *Job* 35:11 we read, “Who teacheth us by means of the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wise by means of the fowls of heaven. (*Job* 35:11).” Again, this suggests that our ancestors had a different relationship with nature than we do today. Over the millennia Judaism has certainly evolved, and it has produced much lofty thought and literature. Much has been gained, but I feel that something has also been lost. There is an understanding of nature and a relationship with nature that many of my Jewish relatives have forgotten. Fortunately, many of my Native American relatives haven’t forgotten, and it is the experiential knowledge of my Native American ancestors added on to the analytical knowledge of my Jewish ancestors that has made me more complete and a sum that is greater than its parts. And as a reminder (not a proof!) of this, below are two images, one Jewish and one Native American, that possess the same type of symmetry. Each image may be reflected about either a horizontal or a vertical axis or rotated 180° to create what mathematicians call the *Klein 4-group*.

“R. Johanan observed: If the Torah had not been given we could have learnt modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, chastity from the dove, and good manners from the rooster who first coaxes and then mates.”
(*B. Eiruvim* 10b)

“WHEN YE COME (*Numbers* 34:2). What is written just before? Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you (*Numbers* 33:52). This bears on what Scripture says: Who teacheth us by means of the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wise by means of the fowls of heaven (*Job* 35:11).”
(*Numbers Rabbah* XXIII:9)

“When you shall besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by forcing an ax against them; for you may eat of them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you?”
(*Deuteronomy* 20:19)



DEVARIM

(*Deuteronomy* 1:1-3:22)

ALL POLITICS IS MIDRASH!

ALL POLITICS IS MIDRASH!

When I was much younger, I was taught that the purpose of *Midrash* was to simply fill in the gaps in the stories that we find in the *Torah*. When I got older, however, I realized that this is not always the case. Instead, *Midrash* is frequently used to promote various agendas (often political) that the rabbis may have, and the opening words of this week's *Torah* portion, *Devarim*, are a good case in point. This portion begins with the phrase "These are the words (*eleh devarim*, *Deuteronomy* 1:1)," and at the start of *Deuteronomy Rabbah* I:1, the great rabbinic commentary on *Deuteronomy*, we find the following:

"THESE ARE THE WORDS. Is it permissible for a Jew to write a Scroll of the Law in any language? The Wise have learnt thus: The difference between sacred books and phylacteries and *mezuzoth* is only that sacred books may be written in any language."

A few lines below this statement in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* I:1 we find the following:

"'God enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem (Genesis 9:27).' This indicates that the words of Shem may be rendered in the languages of Japheth; therefore have the Rabbis permitted sacred books to be written in Greek."

It's believed that the Jewish people are descended from Noah's son Shem and that the Greeks are descended from Japheth. Hence, at the very least the *Torah* may be translated into Greek in order to enrich and enlarge the descendants of Japheth, and other rabbis further believed it was permissible to translate *Torah* into any language whatsoever. However, one should not fail to notice that these rabbis have created a *Midrash* with a specific agenda in mind. Namely, since at the time of this *Midrash* there were many Greek Jews who could not read Hebrew, they wanted specific justification that it was okay to translate the *Torah* into Greek for them, what today we call the *Septuagint*. Of course, every translation is prone to two problems – leaving something out and adding something in. Something might get lost in translation, or someone might inadvertently add some belief of their own that is not really contained in the text. In particular, literal translations can also often miss the intended spirit of the text. For this reason in the *Talmud* in *B. Kiddushin* 49a, the rabbis wrote, "If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer."

A good example of the difficulties in producing an accurate translation is found in *Psalms* 65:2 which is usually rendered in English as "Praise waits for thee, O God." However, the word for "waits" can also be translated as "silence," and an alternate translation found in some books is "To you, O God, silence is praise." For me, this latter translation is much more relevant because my experience of what we refer to as *God* usually comes most strongly when I enter into silence. In other words, as I silence all the chatter in my brain, I am more easily able to feel a *Divine presence*, and the more I merge with this *presence*, the more love, oneness, and peace I feel. Thus, this latter translation has led to a spiritual exercise that is very important to me. But aside from that, the next time you see a *Midrash*, don't forget to ask yourself what the agenda is. The answer will often be very illuminating!

VAETCHANAN

(Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11)

THE GREAT RABBINIC TAKEOVER

THE POWER OF ONE

IT'S MOSTLY HOT AIR!

WHO IS A JEW?

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 1

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 2

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 3

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 4

THE GREAT RABBINIC TAKEOVER

In *Deuteronomy* 4:2 we read, “You shall not add to the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish nothing from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your *God* which I command you.” Well, we certainly blew that one! The rabbis have added tons of injunctions, but in retrospect it was inevitable. For example, the *Torah* says not to work on Shabbat, but it never defines what work is and so somebody had to define it! To further complicate things, after the destruction of the Second Temple, Judaism was in shambles, but fortunately the rabbis came up with a plan to save it:

STEP 1, LEGITIMIZE THE POWER OF THE RABBIS TO MAKE DECISIONS: In a famous *Talmudic* story (*B. Baba Metzia* 59a-59b) called the “Oven of Aknai” the rabbis debate Rabbi Eliezer over the purity of a particular oven. Basically, Rabbi Eliezer takes one point of view and all the other rabbis take the opposite point of view. Several miracles occur in support of Rabbi Eliezer’s viewpoint, but finally Rabbi Jerimiah says, “Ever since the *Torah* was given to us at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the *Torah* at Mount Sinai, ‘After the majority must one incline (*Exodus* 23:2).’” This passage from *Exodus* actually says to not follow the multitude to do evil, but the rabbis took this to also mean that one should follow the majority of rabbis to do good. Also, by stating that miracles no longer matter, this was additionally a swipe at the authority of that new religion on the block known as Christianity.

STEP 2: THE TORAH ALLOWS THE RABBIS TO ADD THEIR OWN INJUNCTIONS: In *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:18, the rabbis used a passage from *Deuteronomy* to argue their authority to add on to what the *Torah* says: “According to the law which they shall teach you (*Deuteronomy* 17:11).’ It does not say, “which the *Torah* shall teach you,” but “which they (the rabbis) shall teach you.” Nor does it say “according to the judgment which it shall tell you,” but ‘which they shall tell you.’ You shall not turn aside from the sentence which they shall declare to you to the right hand nor to the left. If they tell you that the right hand is right and the left hand left, listen to them, and even if they shall tell you that the right hand is left and the left hand right, listen to them.”

STEP 3: GOD LOVES THE RABBIS INJUNCTIONS MORE THAN HE DOES HIS OWN: “The injunctions of the Scribes are more beloved than those of the *Torah*, as it says, ‘For thy love (*dodeka*) is better than wine (*Song of Songs* 1:2).’ [‘Wine’ is a metaphor for the written *Torah*, and the Scribes are the lovers (*dodim*) of *God*.]” (*Song of Songs Rabbah* I:18)

STEP 4: A JUDGE OF THE CURRENT GENERATION CAN OVERRULE A JUDGE FROM A PREVIOUS GENERATION: “‘Unto the judge that shall be in those days’ (*Deuteronomy* 17:9).’ This indicates that the judge of your generation in his time is the equal of the judge of former times. It is similarly declared, Say not thou: How was it that the former days were better than these? (*Ecclesiastes* 8:10). R. Simeon b. Lakish said: You must only listen to the judge in your own generation.” (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:8)

THE POWER OF ONE

In quantum physics every piece of matter exists both as a particle and as a wave. As a particle, matter exists at a definite location in time and space, but as a wave, its boundaries are fuzzy and it extends throughout space and time. In a similar way, human beings possess psychologically both a particle mode of being and a wave mode of being. When we are in our particle mode, we are more keenly aware of both our individuality and our separation from others. However, when we are in our wave mode, it is less clear where we end and others begin. It's in our wave mode that we experience oneness, love, and empathy.

The *Zohar* refers to the physical realm as the “world of separation.” This is where we feel our particle mode most strongly. However, the *Zohar* also explains how we can use the *Shema* to experience oneness and switch from particle mode to our more connected wave mode. For example, in *Deuteronomy* 6:4 we read those iconic words, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” In Hebrew, this passage consists of just six words, and the *Zohar* says that when we recite these six words we should focus on God's oneness in all six directions. Likewise, the rabbinic response, “Blessed-be the-name-of-the-glory-of His-Kingdom for-ever and-ever,” also consists of six words in Hebrew, and in *Zohar* I:12a it says that we should likewise focus on establishing unity in the six directions of the physical realm as we recite this response. For me, however, it is not the actual saying of the words that is important, but rather the sense of oneness and unity. To me what is most important is that one should begin and end each day with an apprehension of the connectedness and oneness of all things. I see the words of the *Shema* as just a tool for getting there, and eventually the tool may no longer be necessary.

The *Zohar* also says that as we go about our day, we should be aware of this unity even as we are perceiving diversity.

“Herein consisted the sin of the primeval serpent who united below but divided above, and so caused the mischief we still lament. The right way, on the contrary, is to recognize diversity below but unity above, so that the black light becomes wholly merged above and afterwards unified in respect of its diverse elements, and so is kept away from the evil power.” (*Zohar* I:12b)

To me, when we attach ourselves to some object of perception without an awareness of the oneness of *Divinity*, then we have united below but divided or separated ourselves from above. In contrast, the correct stance is to always be aware of unity in the background while interacting with diversity. Also, I interpret the “black light” as a reference to our own awareness, that which illuminates everything else while itself remaining in the background, in the dark.

And finally, the *Zohar* is not in favor of just sitting on a mountain top once one has attained Oneness. Instead, after experiencing the One, we are meant to delight in exploring all the things we can create through the creative power that the One has bestowed upon else. Thus, live as creative a life as you can! (*Zohar* II:176a-176b)

IT'S MOSTLY HOT AIR!

In its commentary on this *Torah* portion (*Vaethchanan*), the *Zohar* mentions a verse from *Job*,

“For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow (*tsel*).”
(*Job* 8:9)

This in turn brings to mind the following verse from *Psalms*,

“Man is like a breath/vapor (*hevel*); his days are like a passing shadow (*tsel*).”
(*Psalms* 144:4)

And finally, we can link this verse with one in *Ecclesiastes*,

“Vapor of vapors, said Kohelet, vapor of vapors; all is vapor (*hevel*).”
(*Ecclesiastes* 1:2)

Most people are used to seeing this last verse translated as “vanity of vanities,” but the real meaning of the Hebrew word “*hevel*” is not “vanity” but “vapor.” In other words, much of life is like vapor or, in modern terms, a bunch of hot air, and it is lacking in substance. Furthermore, as in Plato’s allegory of the cave, it appears that the ancient rabbis saw things in this world as shadows or reflections that have their origin in some non-physical realm, and in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:3, they engage in a discussion regarding which shadows have substance and which ones don’t, and they conclude that most of what we see and experience are things that are caused by temporary conditions, and as a result, they are lacking in substance. This would include, for example, the anger that I might experience when someone is greatly exceeding the speed limit or otherwise failing to obey a traffic rule. This anger (if, indeed, it even occurs in me!) is just a fleeting condition caused by fleeting circumstances, and as such, it is lacking in substance. In contrast to this are those experiences that are reflections of more permanent conditions, and in my mind this includes things like love, charity, intellectual growth, and acts of kindness. The bottom line, though, is that we shouldn’t worry about things which are fleeting and impermanent. They don’t reflect the best that reality has to offer, and they don’t endure. Instead, focus on those things that are shadows or reflections of more enduring principles like justice, love, and making the world a better place. These are the things that matter and the things that will make a difference. And if no one else is doing good, then you do good! That’s how this all works!

WHO IS A JEW?

The question of who is a Jew is a confusing one these days as different groups within Judaism have different definitions as to who belongs and who doesn't. And, of course, it is an issue with political implications as well as religious ones. In the early history of Judaism, identity was identified more by tribe than by terms such as "Israelite," and tribal identity was determined by the father. However, the rabbis of the *Talmud* concluded one's Jewishness is through the lineage of the mother rather than the father, and their justification was *Deuteronomy 7:3-4* which suggests that the children will tend to follow the religion of their mother. Consequently, for two thousand years Jewish identity has been seen as passed down through the mother rather than the father. Thus, a Jew is either a convert or anyone who is born of a Jewish mother.

"And you shall not make marriages with them; your daughter you shall not give to his son, nor his daughter shall you take to your son. For they will turn away your son from following me, that they may serve other gods; so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy you speedily." (*Deuteronomy 7:3-4*)

"How do we know that her issue bears her status? Rabbi Johanan said on the authority of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai who explained, 'Because Scripture says, "For he will turn away thy son from following me (Deuteronomy 7:4)." Thy son by an Israelite woman is called thy son, but thy son by a heathen (woman) is not called thy son.'" (*B. Kiddushin 68b*)

Throughout the history of Judaism there have been many times during which the people have been scattered and there have been times of forced conversions, and these conversions raised questions once again about who is a Jew. On this question, Rabbi Solomon ben Simon Duran (1400 CE - 1467 CE) ruled that anyone who is matrilineally descended from a Jewish woman is still a Jew.

"One whose mother is Jewish, even for many generations, even if the father is Gentile, the child is Jewish, even to the end of the world." (*Rabbi Solomon ben Simon Duran*)

Back in the *Talmud*, though, we find yet another view of who is a Jew.

"R. Johanan said: He did indeed come from Benjamin (a *Benjamite*). Why then was he called 'a Jew' (a descendant of *Judah*)? Because he repudiated idolatry. For anyone who repudiates idolatry is called 'a Jew', as it is written, 'There are certain Jews (*Daniel 3:12*).'" (*B. Megillah 13a*)

In the *Book of Daniel*, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are considered to be Jews (descendants of *Judah*) even though they are really Benjamites (descendants of Benjamin). Consequently, the rabbis determine their Jewishness not by their ancestry, but due to not being idol worshippers. In other words, their Jewishness is a consequence of software rather than hardware! However, this is too subjective a criteria to apply in practice, but it could still be applied on an individual basis. Do I really sense *God*, or do I worship money and religious dogma? As I say too often, dogma is the new idol worship!

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 1

In *Deuteronomy 6:7* we are commanded to teach *Torah* to our children. Thus, here is some *Talmudic* advice for students.

“The world exists only by virtue of the breath coming from the mouths of school children engaged in their studies.” (*B. Shabbat 119b*)

“Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said, ‘What is the meaning of the saying, “Iron sharpens iron? (*Proverbs 27:17*)” This is to teach you that just as in the case of one iron implement sharpening another, so also do two students sharpen each other’s mind.’” (*B. Ta’anith 7a*)

“‘That brings forth its fruit in its season and whose leaf doth not wither (*Psalms 1:3*)’ — was explained by Raba as follows, ‘If he brings forth his fruit in its season (studies at fixed times), then his leaf will not wither (he will remember what he has learned).’” (*B. Avodah Zarah 19b*)

“Raba expounded in the name of Rabbi Sehora who had it from Rav Huna, ‘What is the meaning of the text, “Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished, but he that gathers little by little shall increase (*Proverbs 13:11*)?” If a man studies much at a time his learning decreases, but if he does not do so but instead “gathers little by little” his learning shall increase.’” (*B. Eiruvim 54b*)

“Rav Judah said in Rav's name, ‘One should never abstain from attendance at the House of Study even for a single hour, for lo, how many years was a particular passage taught in the House of Study without its reason being revealed, until Rabbi Hanina ben Akiba came and elucidated it?’” (*B. Shabbat 83b*)

“When scholars disseminate the *Torah*, you should modestly stay in the background so as not to compete with them.” (*B. Berachoth 63a*)

“He that repeats his studies a hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeats his studies a hundred and one times.” (*B. Chagiagah 9b*)

“If you will listen to the old, you will be able to listen to the new, but “if your heart turns away (*Deuteronomy 30:17*),” you will no more listen .” (*B. Sukkah 49b*)

“Ben Bag Bag said, ‘Turn it over and over again.’” (*Pirkei Avot 5:22*)

“A man should study even if he doesn’t fully understand, and understanding will come later.” (*B. Shabbat 63a*)

“This, too, did Raba say, ‘Let one by all means learn, even though he is liable to forget, yea, even if he does not fully understand all the words which he studies. As it is said, “My soul breaks for the longing that it has for Your ordinances at all times. (*Psalms 119:20*)”’” (*B. Avodah Zarah 19a*)

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 2

In *Deuteronomy 6:7* we are commanded to teach *Torah* to our children. Thus, here is the rest of our collection of *Talmudic* advice for students.

“Rabbi Hisda stated, ‘The *Torah* can only be acquired with the aid of mnemonic signs, for it is said, “Put it in their mouths.”’ (‘Now therefore write this poem for you, and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this poem may be a witness for me against the people of Israel (*Deuteronomy 31:19*).’)” (*B. Eirubin 54b*)

“Beruriah once discovered a student who was learning in an undertone (a subdued utterance). Rebuking him she exclaimed, Is it not written, “Ordered in all things and sure? (II *Samuel 23:5*)” If it is “ordered” in your two hundred and forty-eight limbs, it will be “sure.” Otherwise it will not be sure.” (*B. Eirubin 54a*)

“When asked how he could learn *Torah* from a heretic such as Acher, Rabbi Meir replied that when he finds a juicy pomegranate he eats the fruit and throws away the peel.” (*B. Chagigah 15b*)

“‘And he shall be like a tree transplanted by streams of water (*Psalms 1:3*)’ — Those of the school of Rabbi Jannai said ‘a tree transplanted,’ not ‘a tree planted,’ which implies that whoever learns *Torah* from one master only will never achieve great success. Said Rabbi Hisda to the rabbinic students, ‘I have a mind to tell you something, though I fear that you might leave me and go elsewhere. Whoever learns *Torah* from one master only will never achieve great success.’ They did leave him and went to sit before Rabbah, who, however, explained to them that the maxim only applies to lessons in logical deductions. But as to oral traditions, it is better to learn from one master only so that one is not confused by the variations in the terms used.” (*B. Avodah Zarah 19a-19b*)

“Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua said, ‘Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of your colleague as the reverence you have for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as your awe of Heaven.’” (*Pirkei Avot 4:12*)

“A man can learn well only that part of the *Torah* which is his heart's desire, for it is said, ‘But whose delight is in the law of the Lord (*Psalms 1:2*).’” (*B. Avodah Zarah 19a*)

“‘Which thou didst break, and thou shalt put them in the ark.’ Rabbi Joseph said, ‘This teaches us that both the second set of tablets and the fragments of the original tablets were deposited in the ark. Hence we learn that a scholar who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his must not be treated with disrespect.’” (*B. Menachoth 99a*)

“Intelligence imparts fragrance and relish to a man's words. When the wine goes in intelligence takes its leave. Wherever there is wine, there is no intelligence.” (*Numbers Rabbah X:8*)

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 3

In *Deuteronomy 6:7* we are commanded to teach *Torah* to our children. Thus, here is some *Talmudic* advice for teachers.

“Rabbi Johanan further said, ‘One who studies but does not teach it is like a flower in the desert whose fragrance is wasted.’” (*B. Rosh HaShanah 23a*)

“Rabbi Hanina said, ‘I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but from my students I have learned the most of all.’” (*B. Ta’anith 7a*)

“It was taught, ‘A disciple must not take a bath with his teacher, but if his teacher needs him, it is permitted.’” (*B. Pesachim 51a*)

NOTE: The type of baths being discussed here are the old Roman baths that were a source of health and hygiene in the ancient world. Today one might say that one should not go to a pool party with a student or maybe even be friends in the less formal settings of social media. The teacher/student relationship is not one between equals!

“The attentive one will read on his own, and if one is inattentive, put him next to a diligent one.” (*B. Baba Bartha 21a*)

“Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said in Rabbi Johanan's name, ‘It is a disgrace for a scholar to go out with patched shoes into the market place.’” (*B. Shabbat 114a*)

“Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba also said in Rabbi Johanan's name, ‘Any scholar upon whose garment a grease stain is found is worthy of death.’” (*B. Shabbat 114a*)

“A *tanna* recited before Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac, ‘He who publicly shames his neighbor is as though he shed blood,’ whereupon he remarked to him, ‘You say well, because I have seen such shaming, the ruddiness departing and paleness supervening.’” (*B. Baba Metzia 58b*)

“Raba further said, ‘The number of pupils to be assigned to each teacher is twenty-five. If there are fifty, we appoint two teachers. If there are forty, we appoint an assistant at the expense of the town.’” (*B. Baba Bartha 21a*)

“It was taught that Rabbi Akiba said, ‘It was not Rabbi Ishmael who laid down this ruling but that disciple, and the *halachah* (law) is in agreement with that disciple.’ Is not this self-contradictory? You first said, ‘It was not Rabbi Ishmael who laid down this ruling,’ from which it is obvious that the law is not in agreement with his view, and then you say, ‘The law is in agreement with that disciple which implies that it is also in agreement with his teacher, Rabbi Ishmael.’ Rab Judah replied in the name of Samuel, ‘Rabbi Akiba made that statement for the sole purpose of exercising the wits of the students.’” (*B. Eiruvim 13a*)

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL – PART 4

In *Deuteronomy* 6:7 we are commanded to teach *Torah* to our children. Thus, here is the rest of our collection of *Talmudic* advice for teachers.

“Rav Judah said in Rav's name, ‘Whoever fails to teach a point of law to his student is as though he had robbed him of his ancestral heritage, as it is written, “Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob (*Deuteronomy* 33:4).” It is an inheritance destined for all Israel.’”

(*B. Sanhedrin* 91a)

“There are four types of character among those who sit before the sages. They are typified by a sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. A sponge absorbs all, a funnel lets in at one end and lets out at the other, a strainer lets out the wine but retains the sediment, and a sieve lets out the coarse meal but retains the choice flour.”

(*Pirkei Avot* 5:15)

“When you wish to punish a student, hit him with nothing harder than a shoelace.”

(*B. Baba Bartha* 21a)

“Rabbi Jeremiah said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, ‘When two scholars are amiable to each other in their discussions in *halachah* (law), the Holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them.’”

(*B. Shabbat* 63a)

“If a student does not see a sign of blessing (i.e. progress) in his studies after five years, he never will.”

(*B. Chullin* 24a)

“Rabbi Tanhuma said, ‘Just as the spice-maker's chest (*migdaloth*) is full of all manner of spices, so a scholar should be full of Scripture, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *halachoth* (law) and *haggadoth* (parables).’”

(*Song of Songs Rabbah* V:18)

“Rabbi Isaac said, ‘It is for man's good that he learns *Torah* and forgets it, because if a man studied *Torah* and never forgot it, he would occupy himself with learning it for two or three years and then resume his ordinary work and never pay further attention to it. But since a man studies *Torah* and forgets it, he will not entirely abandon its study.’”

(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:32)

I love what I see as the optimistic tone of this last excerpt from the *Talmud* because to me the message is that the reason we forget things as we get older is so that we can engage in lifelong study. Never stop learning!

EIQEV

(Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25)

THE REAL MEANING OF KABBALAH
OPEN UP YOUR HEART

THE REAL MEANING OF KABBALAH

Quite often the word “*Kabbalah*” is used as a general reference term for Jewish mysticism, though many use it only for those writings in Jewish mysticism that date back from the present to roughly the year 1000 CE, approximately the time that this word first appeared in Jewish documents. It’s also explained that the word *Kabbalah* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to receive,” and in this context, *Kabbalah* is seen as a tradition that students have received from their masters for hundreds of years. However this passage from *Deuteronomy* gives to me a far clearer explanation of the word *Kabbalah*.

“And he humbled you, and let you hunger, and fed you with *manna*, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every utterance that comes forth out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.” (*Deuteronomy* 8:3)

In *Biblical Hebrew*, every letter is also a number, and, thus, every word has a numerical value. Furthermore, words that have the same numerical value are often seen as connected. With regard to this, I notice that in the verse above that the Hebrew word “*motzah*,” which can be translated as “utterance that comes forth out of,” has a numerical value of 137, *mem-vav-tzaddi-aleph* = 40+6+90+1 = 137, and this is also the numerical value of *Kabbalah* (*kuf-bet-lamed-hey* = 100+2+30+5 = 137). Furthermore, it is said that in the first chapter of *Genesis* that *God* created the world with ten utterances (see *Pirkei Avot* 5:1), and, thus, one could say that all of *Kabbalah* is simply an attempt to understand those ten utterances that resulted in the creation. In other words, all of *Kabbalah* is just an attempt to understand our universe and the creative process behind it!

Also mentioned above in *Deuteronomy* 8:3 is the word “*manna*.” In *Zohar* II:61b the author of the *Zohar* writes that *manna* was a refined food from Heaven that nourished the soul more than it did the body, and that the *Torah* is an even more refined food as it nourishes only the soul and the spirit, but not the body at all, and consequently, *Torah* scholars tend to be more frail physically. However, the important takeaway for me from this passage is the recognition that my being does indeed need spiritual nourishment as well as physical nourishment. And how does that spiritual nourishment occur? For me it seems to be connected to a delightful tingling sensation that I often feel at the top of my skull. Whenever I am engaged in creative thought and suddenly have an “aha” moment, that tingling sensation seems particularly active. Additionally, at such times I’ll feel as if a part of me extends a foot or two above my cranium like a bridge connecting me to higher realms. And then at other times I may feel what I can only describe as a healing light that enters through the top of my skull and spreads throughout my body. Then again, this light will often manifest, too, as a coded message, an influx that gives rise to an inner voice that may impart helpful guidance to me. However we may experience it, though, the bottom line is that we humans need emotional and spiritual nourishment just as much as we do physical nourishment, and we need to utilize the intelligence of our mind and experience the love in our soul just as often as we feed the physical. Unfortunately, too many people seem to go through life without fully developing either their intellect or that spiritual connection that they are heir to. And that is, indeed, a great pity.

OPEN UP YOUR HEART

Circumcision of the male genitalia has always been a difficult topic for many to discuss. It has a long tradition in Judaism and it is greatly stressed in the *Bible*, and yet its origins are shrouded in mystery. It is also a rite of passage that boys in many African nations still undergo as they transition to manhood, and while some will argue that the Jewish practice of circumcision at birth is more humane and less traumatic, others see the practice as a form of genital mutilation that is forced upon the newborn without its consent. What we now know from science, however, is that circumcision reduces the prevalence of certain diseases. In particular, studies suggest that male circumcision can reduce the risk of acquiring genital herpes by 28% to 34%, the risk of developing genital ulceration by 47%, and the risk of oncogenic high-risk human papillomavirus (HR-HPV) by 32% to 35%. Our ancient Hebrew ancestors knew nothing about germs or viruses, but they were keen observers of their world, and they probably noticed that circumcised men and their partners experienced fewer sexually transmitted diseases than uncircumcised men. Consequently, they would have seen this as a clear message that *God* prefers circumcision.

In *Deuteronomy* 10:16, we are told to, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked.” This commandment to circumcise the heart is found in only three places in the *Hebrew Bible* – *Deuteronomy* 10:16, *Deuteronomy* 30:6, and *Jeremiah* 4:4. In the first reference in *Deuteronomy* the rationale is that we will become less stiff-necked, and in the second reference in *Deuteronomy* the reason given is so that we may more completely love God. In each instance, though, there is a sense that some barrier or evil is being removed so that love may shine forth more clearly.

The reality of the human condition is that by the time we reach adulthood, we tend to have entire bodies that are “stiff-necked” in one way or another. Every stress and injury that we have ever felt leaves its scar upon us either physically or mentally, and one might spend the rest of their life trying to release all the trauma that’s been embedded and suppressed within the body. It is a daunting task! However, a good place to begin is with the heart, and, thus, I recommend the following simple exercise.

Certain feelings tend to universally be associated with certain parts of the body. For example, energy and sexuality are expressed by the pelvis, spiritual and intellectual things are associated with the head and what’s above, and emotions such as love and pride are felt in the region of the heart, specifically in the center of the chest. Thus, to remove “the foreskin of your heart,” begin by focusing on the center of your chest and let yourself be aware of those feelings of love that arise from that location. If necessary, begin with someone or something in particular that you love. However, once you’ve found that love, let it spread throughout your being. Start by loving yourself. Next, think of the various people you know and visualize them being surrounded by your love. However, touch them only lightly with your mind as you want to neither smother them or control them. Just pass a brief blessing onto them, and then move on. End by feeling the entire world bathed in love. This will begin to remove the foreskin of your heart, add precious love to the world, and then you can move on to other tensions to be healed!

REEH

(Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17)

THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE
THE POOR WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU

THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE

In *Deuteronomy* 11:26 we read that *God* has set before us the blessing and the curse, the blessing if we obey the commandments and the curse if we don't. A similar sentiment appears in *Deuteronomy* 30:19 where we are told that the blessing and the curse, life and death, have been put before us, and we should choose life.

When it comes to the commandments, I must admit that I am guided more by the ethical dictums of the rabbis than I am by specific *Torah* commandments such as don't marry Aunt Margie. That last one isn't something I really need to be told! Instead, I often focus on things like *Pirkei Avot* 1:12 where it says to pursue peace, and also the following famous passage from the *Talmud*:

“Hillel said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole of the *Torah*, while the rest is just commentary. Now go and learn the commentary!’”
(*B. Shabbat* 31a)

Every day in this world we have to make choices between the blessing and the curse, between the good and bad, between life and death. However, I believe these choices appear not only in the world around us, but even within the *Torah* itself! Within the *Torah* and the rest of the *Hebrew Bible*, we find many words that have uplifted and inspired humanity for millennia. However, we also find within the *Torah* examples of xenophobia, misogyny, slavery, and genocide, just to name a few. Thus, when we read the *Torah*, we also have to make choices regarding which voices we are going to follow, those voices that we feel reflect the *Divine* or those that reflect the perennial faults, fears, and prejudices of humanity. Even the rabbis of the *Talmud* seemed to understand that religion could be both a blessing and a curse and that it could be used in both good and bad ways, and thus, they wrote the following:

“Hananel b. Papa said: What is meant by, ‘Hear, for I will speak princely things.’ Why are the words of the *Torah* compared to a prince? To tell you that just as a prince has power of life and death, so have the words of the *Torah* potentialities of life and death. Thus Raba said, ‘To those who go to the right hand thereof it is a medicine of life; to those who go to the left hand thereof it is a deadly poison.’”
(*B. Shabbat* 88b)

Hence, as you go through life, you will be presented with many choices, some easy and some difficult. However, with all of these choices, do your best to choose wisely. Choose life. And sometimes it will be what is best for your life, and other times it may be what is best for others. Again, choose as wisely as you can.

THE POOR WILL ALWAYS BE WITH YOU

In *Deuteronomy* 15:11 we are told,

“For the poor shall never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor, and to your needy, in your land.”
(*Deuteronomy* 15:11)

These sentiments are echoed, too, in *Deuteronomy* 24:21 where we are told,

“When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow..”
(*Deuteronomy* 24:21)

Likewise, in *Proverbs* 19:17 we read,

“He who gives kindly to the poor lends to the *Lord*; and that which he has given will he pay him back.”
(*Proverbs* 19:17)

When we take all of these commandments together, two things become clear to me. First, we have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to the rest of society as well. Whether poverty is the result of exterior circumstances or a consequence of one’s own misguided actions, the fact remains that the poor will always be with us, and we have a social responsibility to help care for them. Second, the quote above from *Proverbs* reminds us that one of the ways in which we can give to *God* is by giving to others.

There are many good charities out there that help a lot of people, but my favorite is my local food bank. I like food banks for two reasons. First, everyone needs to eat, and second, a very high percentage of each dollar collected usually goes directly to feeding people. In my case, I have just a few dollars automatically taken from my checking account each month and sent to the food bank. It’s an amount so small that I never miss it, and yet it is large enough to provide about thirty-five meals each month. And at the end of the year, I always give several hundred dollars more to my local food bank. However, this last contribution is not entirely altruistic. Every dollar I give to the food bank is generally one less dollar that I have to pay in state taxes. This, however, is an instance of government working at its best. When a government makes it to your benefit to be charitable, then everyone wins! I also think about how there may occasionally be times that are so bleak and so dark that the only joy possible is the joy that we create by giving to others. When there is otherwise no joy, we can create some by giving to others.

In conclusion, the importance of charity and giving is so great that the *Talmud* says that even the poor must engage in it. Thus, be a giving person!

“Mar Zutra said: Even a poor man who himself subsists on charity should give charity.”
(*B. Gittin* 7b)

SHOFTIM

(Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9)

SEEK JUSTICE

SEEK JUSTICE

In *Deuteronomy* 16:20 we read that iconic line, “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” A few things, though, should be pointed out regarding this. First, in Hebrew the words for justice, righteousness, and charity are all related, and thus, all of these things should be pursued. By contrast, in English the word for charity comes from the Latin *caritas* which means “love.” Hence, English speaking countries tend to think of charity as an act of love while in Judaism it is considered a duty and a righteous act.

The next thing to point out is that there aren’t many commandments from either the *Torah* or rabbinical injunctions that require us to actively pursue something, and in fact, I can only think of two things we are required to pursue, justice and peace.

“Justice, justice you shall pursue.”
(*Deuteronomy* 16:20)

“Seek peace, and pursue it.”
(*Psalms* 34:15)

“HILLEL USED TO SAY: BE THOU OF THE DISCIPLES OF AARON, LOVING PEACE AND PURSUING PEACE,”
(*Pirkei Avot* I:12)

At its core justice is about fairness, and the Hebrew word for peace (*shalom*) also means “wholeness.” Thus, we should always pursue fairness and wholeness in everything we do.

At the very end of *Deuteronomy* 19 we find once again that infamous phrase “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” Most people probably see this as a harsh form of justice, and they often reply with a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” However, two things should be understood about this. First, ever since the rabbinic period this passage has been understood as referring to monetary compensation for damages. This is because if a toothless man knocked out your tooth, then it would be impossible to do a literal “tooth for tooth.” And second, notice that our verse from *Deuteronomy* doesn’t say “two eyes for an eye” or “one eye for two eyes.” In other words, the punishment should perfectly match the crime. Justice should be neither too severe nor too lenient. It should only be fair. However, at the same time in cases where neither innocence nor guilt can be verified, we should rule on the side of mercy. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

“JUDGE ALL MEN IN THE SCALE OF MERIT”
(*Pirkei Avot* I:6)

In the end, play fair and seek peace.

KI TEITZEI

(Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19)

JOHNNY YUMA WAS A REBEL!

JOHNNY YUMA WAS A REBEL!

In *Deuteronomy* 21:18-21 we read the following,

“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not listen to them; Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place; And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”

(*Deuteronomy* 21:18-21)

At first glance it would appear that all teenage sons should be executed because, frankly speaking, is there really any teenager who is not rebellious? However, the rabbis of the *Talmud* quickly picked up on several items that limited the scope of this edict. In particular, the most obvious thing to notice is that the verses specify a rebellious son and not a daughter. Thus, these verses immediately apply to only half the teenage population. Also, it is a principle of Jewish law at this time that minors are not responsible for their actions. Hence, the teenager in question must have reached puberty but not yet be a man who is no longer under the jurisdiction of his parents, and the rabbis estimated that there exists only a three month window between such puberty and adulthood. Thus, this further narrowed down who could possibly be a rebellious son. The rabbis of the *Talmud* next noted that the son must be both a glutton and a drunkard, and the rabbis interpreted this as meaning that he eats meat and drinks wine, and this limited even further who could qualify as a rebellious son. Finally, the rabbis noted that when it says in verse 20 that “he will not obey our voice,” that the word for voice is singular and not plural. From this the rabbis gathered that the parents of the son must sound exactly alike, and furthermore, in order for them to sound exactly alike, they must also be identical in appearance. From here the rabbis ruled that it’s impossible for a man and a woman to look exactly alike, and since this is a requirement for a son to be classified as rebellious, it therefore follows that there never has been and never will be a rebellious son in Israel!

The rabbis went on to say that the verses in *Deuteronomy* 21:18-21 were given simply to teach us an abstract point of law. However, the reality, in my opinion, is something much grander. Namely, that time and time again, the rabbis take a very harsh law of Moses and turn it into something far more compassionate in practice. For example, whereas Moses was far too quick to execute someone for violating the Sabbath, many rabbis of the *Talmud* wanted to eliminate capital punishment altogether. Be like the rabbis of the *Talmud*.

“R. TARFON AND R. AKIBA SAY: WERE WE MEMBERS OF A SANHEDRIN, NO PERSON WOULD EVER BE PUT TO DEATH.”

(*B. Makkoth* 7a).

KI TAVO

(Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8)

LIKE WATER, LIKE TORAH

LIKE WATER, LIKE TORAH

In the *Midrash*, we find *Torah* compared to water, wind, honey, milk, and oil. In particular, we can think of the “land of milk and honey” as also being a land of *Torah*.

“The Rabbis say: The *Torah* is compared to five things, water, wine, honey, milk, and oil. Whence to water? For it is written, ‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water (*Isaiah* 55:1).’ Whence to wine? For it is written, ‘And drink of the wine which I have mingled (*Proverbs* 9:5).’ Whence to honey and milk? For it is said, ‘Honey and milk are under thy tongue (*Song of Songs* 4:11).’ Whence to oil? For it is said, ‘Thy name as ointment (oil poured forth (*Song of Songs* 1:3).’ Just as oil is at first bitter but in the end sweet, so too are the words of the *Torah*; at first a man has to labor in them, but in the end he benefits by them, as it is said, ‘And though thy beginning was small, yet thy end should greatly increase (*Job* 8:7).’ Another explanation: Just as oil gives light to the world, so too do the words of the *Torah* give light to the world.”
(*Deuteronomy Rabbah* VII:3)

Of these associations, perhaps the most commonly encountered one is the comparison between *Torah* and water. Thus, here are just a few of the similarities that one finds in the *Midrash*.

- Just as rain water comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the *Torah*; a man learns two *halachahs* (laws) today and two tomorrow, until he becomes like a flowing stream.
- Just as water has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the *Torah* has no taste unless one labors at it
- Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the *Torah* leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly.
- Just as with water a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, “Give me a drink of water,” so with the words of the *Torah*, a great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, “Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter.”
- Just as water makes plants grow, so the words of the *Torah* nurture everyone who labors over them as they require.
- Just as water purifies man from ritual uncleanness, as it says, “*And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (Ezekiel 36:25),*” so the *Torah* cleanses an unclean man of his uncleanness, as it says, “*The words of the Lord are pure words (Psalms 12:7).*”

(*Song of Songs Rabbah* I:19)

NITZAVIM

(Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20)

THE OVEN OF AKNAI
YOU GOTTA HAVE HEART!

THE OVEN OF AKNAI

This is a very important story from the *Talmud* (*B. Baba Metzia* 59a-59b) that everyone should know. See how many lessons you can find within it!

“We learnt elsewhere: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean; and this was the oven of *Aknai*. Why the oven of *Aknai*? — Said Rab Judah in Samuel's name: It means that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake, and proved it unclean. It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: ‘If the law agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!’ Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. ‘No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,’ they retorted. Again he said to them: ‘If the law agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!’ Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — ‘No proof can be brought from a stream of water,’ they rejoined. Again he urged: ‘If the law agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,’ whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: ‘When scholars are engaged in a legal dispute, what have ye to interfere?’ Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: ‘If the law agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!’ Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: ‘Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the law agrees with him!’ But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: ‘It is not in heaven.’ What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the *Torah* had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the *Torah* at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline. R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed with joy, he replied, saying, ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.’ It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. Said they, ‘Who shall go and inform him?’ ‘I will go,’ answered R. Akiba, ‘lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.’ What did R. Akiba do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black, and sat at a distance of four cubits from him. ‘Akiba,’ said R. Eliezer to him, ‘what has particularly happened to-day?’ ‘Master,’ he replied, ‘it appears to me that thy companions hold aloof from thee.’ Thereupon he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed his seat and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes. The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, the dough in women's hands swelled up. A *Tanna* taught: Great was the calamity that befell that day, for everything at which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was burned up. R. Gamaliel too was travelling in a ship, when a huge wave arose to drown him. ‘It appears to me,’ he reflected, ‘that this is on account of none other but R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus.’ Thereupon he arose and exclaimed, ‘Sovereign of the Universe! Thou knowest full well that I have not acted for my honor, nor for the honor of my paternal house, but for Thine, so that strife may not multiply in Israel! ‘At that the raging sea subsided.’”

(*B. Baba Metzia* 59a-59b)

YOU GOTTA HAVE HEART!

Notice that we can reduce the number 30 to 3 just by doing $3+0 = 3$. Consequently, this is one reason why I like to think of *Deuteronomy* 30:14 (i.e. 3.14) as yet another “pi passage” in the *Hebrew Bible*. The other and more important reason for giving this passage a special designation, though, is the magnificence of its message. Thus, let’s take a closer look at this verse.

“But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.”
(*Deuteronomy* 30:14)

The “word” that is referred to hear is the word of *Torah*. Also, the word *Torah* means “instruction,” and so this passage is saying that there are common instructions that are embedded within the hearts of all of us. Furthermore, it’s interesting that the very first letter of *Torah* is the Hebrew letter *bet* (ב) and the last letter is *lamed* (ל), and *lamed-bet* (בל) is the Hebrew word for “heart.” Thus, the *Torah* itself literally resides within a heart! Now let’s look at some related passages from *Ecclesiastes*.

In *Ecclesiastes* 1:1 we read, “The words of *Kohelet*, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” The rabbis understood *Kohelet* to be just another name for Solomon. Additionally, they said (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* I:2) that the name “*Kohelet*” comes from the verb “*hikahel*” that means “to assemble.” In other words, Solomon was called “*Kohelet*” because he would often assemble the people in public in order to teach them. He also assembled the teachings in such a way that people could easily understand them, or as the rabbis put it (*Song of Songs Rabbah* I:8), “He made handles for the *Torah*.”

Next in *Ecclesiastes* 3:11 we read, “He has set the mystery of the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work which *God* has made from the beginning to the end.” The Hebrew word that is translated as “world” in this passage is “*olam*,” and it has a dual meaning of “world” or “eternity,” space or time. Furthermore, the spelling of the word *olam* in this passage is unusual as it is spelled *ayin-lamed-mem* without the customary letter “*vav*.” This does two things. First, it makes the spelling identical to a word that means “hidden” or “concealed,” and that is why our translation above also contains the word “mystery.” And second, the numerical value of *ayin-lamed-mem* is $70+30+40 = 140$. However, this is also the numerical value of *hikahel* meaning “to assemble,” $hikahel = hey-kuf-hel-lamed = 5+100+5+30 = 140$. Hence, this allows us to expand the meaning of *Ecclesiastes* 3:11 even further to conclude that there is something hidden within each of our hearts that assembles all of space and time for us while also hiding an even larger reality from our comprehension.

One bottom line is that all our brains come equipped with instructions on how to assemble and comprehend the world that we land in as infants, and these instructions include ideas of good and evil that are fairly universal. And yet, by allowing us to see this *world of separation*, the *world of oneness* initially remains hidden from us. Nonetheless, whenever you are in trouble or need anything, you need look no further than the instructions within your own heart!

VAYEILECH

(Deuteronomy 31:1-31:30)

MOUNTAIN DEW

MOUNTAIN DEW

In the 1800s, a French elocution teacher, François Delsarte, began a study of people's gestures and expressions from all walks of life and from all races, and he found many things that are universal. For example, all people smile when they are happy and likewise look the same when they are angry. From these observations he noted that every part of the body can be divided into three. For instance, the groin area of the body expresses energy and sexuality, the chest area expresses emotion, and the head and above are used to indicate lofty thoughts and spirituality. His observations went on to become the foundation for modern dance in its early days. Interestingly, we find a similar scheme in the *Zohar* where spirituality is seen as "higher" and physicality is seen as "lower," and movement from lower to higher and back again is reminiscent of the raising and lowering of kundalini. Furthermore, light, stream, dew, and *manna* are all used as metaphors for this higher spiritual energy that can stream into us through the top of our heads.

"R. Simeon said: 'What is the most perfect hymn? One that is addressed both by the lower to the higher and by the higher to the lower, and which then combines the two. From whose example do we know this? From this song of Moses. First the lower addresses the higher in the words, "For I will call on the name of the Lord", and again, "Ascribe greatness to our God", the reference being to the Most High King. Afterwards he traces the degrees from higher to lower, as it is written, "righteous and upright". Finally the knot of faith is tied in the words "he is". This should be the example for every man in arranging the praises of his Master. At first he should ascend from the lower to the higher till he carries the honor of his Master to the place whence issues the stream of the most recondite fountain. Then he draws it downwards from that moistening stream to each grade in turn down to the lowest grade, so that blessings are drawn to all from on high. Then he has to knit all firmly together with the knot of faith, and this is the man who honors the name of his Master by unifying the Holy Name. Of such a one it is written, "Them that honor me I will honor" (I *Samuel* 2:30)." (*Zohar* III:285a)

"At that hour holy dew dropped down from the Hidden Most Ancient One and filled the head of the Lesser Countenance, the place which is called "Heaven". From this dew of the supernal holy light the manna descended, and in so doing dispersed itself into flakes and became solidified "as thin as the hoar frost on the ground" (*Exodus* 16:14)." (*Zohar* II:62b)

"Ordinary food, by which the majority of people are nourished, is constituted of the elements of heaven and earth, and is therefore of a gross, material quality; the unleavened bread, which was eaten by the Israelites when they left Egypt, emanated from the sphere of "Judgment" and was somewhat subtler in quality; the manna was a still finer food, emanating from the sphere of "Heaven", and was assimilated by the soul more than by the body - "angels' bread"; but the food of those absorbed in the Torah nourishes only the soul and the spirit, but not the body, coming as it does from the sphere of "Wisdom", from the highest and most glorious supernal region. Hence it is hardly to be wondered at that Wisdom's children are more frail than other men, for they do not eat the food of the body at all." (*Zohar* II:61b)

HAAZINU

(Deuteronomy 32:1-32:52)

HEY HEY HEY!
THIS IS THE END

HEY HEY HEY!

In ancient Judaism the alphabet was also the number system, and this opened the door for much mystical play involving words and letters. For example, words with the same numerical value are often seen as related, and this practice of Jewish numerology is referred to as *gematria*. This is a Hebrew word of Greek origin, and it has the same Greek root as the word *geometry*. Both words are derived from the Greek word *geometria*, “to measure.”

In addition to analyzing the numerical values of letters and words, the shapes of the Hebrew letters are also often given interpretive meanings. For example, the letter *bet* is open on the left, but closed above, below, and on the right, and this is interpreted as meaning that there are limits regarding what humans may successfully inquire about. In particular, we cannot know with certainty what the so-called heavenly realms are like (above), what happens after we die (below), or what happened before creation (the closed right side). We can only know and deal with what is immediately before us. Also, the letter *bet* is the first letter of the *Torah*, and consequently, creation is often thought of as beginning with the letter *bet*.



“R. Jonah said in R. Levi's name: Why was the world created with a *bet*? Just as the *bet* is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind.”

(*Genesis Rabbah* I:10)

The letter *bet* also stands for *berachot*, blessings and benedictions, and, thus, the world is also seen in the *Midrash* as having been created for a blessing. Additionally, *bet* is the number 2, and creation begins with duality.

“The *Bet* then entered and said: O Lord of the world, may it please Thee to put me first in the creation of the world, since I represent the benedictions (*Berakhoth*) offered to Thee on high and below. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: Assuredly, with thee I will create the world, and thou shalt form the beginning in the creation of the world.”

(*Zohar* I:3a-3b)

Another *Midrash*, though, describes the world as being created with the letter *hey* (*Genesis Rabbah* XII:10), and the reasoning is that the letter *hey* sounds like an exhalation. Thus, for *God* to create the world was no more difficult than it is to exhale. In the *Zohar*, though, a time is spoken of when creation will proceed through the letter *vav* connecting the top of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* to *Binah* (understanding, left brain). This suggests that in the future our analytical left brain may finally find its direct connection to divinity.



“We have learnt that this world was created with *hey* and the future world with *vav*. From the Head of the King the streams issue forth to *Binah* (understanding, left brain), and thence they flow to all corners until finally they are collected in the place called the Great Sea (*Shechinah*, the physical world).” (*Zohar* III:298a)

THIS IS THE END

In this *Torah* portion Moses is reaching the end of his journey, and he begins to summarize the journey his people have been on and what they should do going forward. In many ways Moses is creating an ethical will, a document in which he passes what he has learned on to the next generation, and the *Zohar* recommends that we do the same. Also, in many ways one could call this book of mine my own ethical will in which I am attempting to pass on what I've learned, and one always wonders who will listen and who will understand? Perhaps, no one, or perhaps those few who already sense what I am trying to say, perhaps they will understand. Well, whether people understand or not, the need to express oneself and to pass on one's understanding still exists.

““I am one hundred and twenty years old this day”, etc. (*Deuteronomy* 31:2). From this we learn that one in whom resides divine wisdom, when his time arrives to depart from the world, should reveal that wisdom to those among whom is the holy spirit. If he does not, we apply to him the words, “Withhold not good from them to whom it is due when it is in the power of thine hand to do it” (*Proverbs* 3:27).”
(*Zohar* III:267a)

Below is a summary of some of the things I've learned in my lifetime:

1. The totality of all possible things is intrinsically unknowable and paradoxical. It both exists and doesn't exist. And that is what I call *God*. In Judaism it is represented by the four-letter name, the TETRAGRAMMATON, *yud-hey-vav-hey*.
2. There is another *God* which is the *God* we create in our own image. This is the *God* that has attributes, and the *God* we create may appear different from the *God* that other people create. In *Kabbalah* the *God* we create is called *Elohim*.
3. Nonetheless, the *God* we create is meant to point us toward the unknowable *God* that is beyond creation, beyond both existence and nonexistence. Consequently, the *Zohar* states repeatedly that the *Elohim* and *yud-hey-vav-hey* are one.
4. The unknowable *God* corresponds to our own awareness, that life force we are aware of but cannot see. An easy way to attach oneself to *God* is by turning one's awareness back on itself and trying to perceive the perceiver, the unseen self within, and when you merge with this self, all concepts of self and not-self will disappear as you become one with the unknowable *God*. Also, if you have trouble doing this, then try following any perception back to the place where it is known. Do this with eyes open, and you will find the observer, and then the goal is to always simultaneously be aware of the known and the unknown.
5. Develop your analytical left brain as much as you can. The ability to analyze and understand matters.
6. Align, also, with your right brain in whatever way you can. The non-verbal wisdom of the right brain precedes the words of the left brain.
7. Have a good code of ethics and live by it.
8. Treat people with kindness and justice just as you would like to be treated..
9. Give to charity, frequently study, and frequently do good deeds.
10. Be a creator and realize that the impulse for any change must come first from you!

VEZOT HABERACHAH

(Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12)

DEEDS VERSUS STUDY
WHERE IS GOD?

DEEDS VERSUS STUDY

There has been an ongoing question over which is more important – good deeds or study. The conclusion seems to be that good deeds are more important, but even better is to understand why.

“Once they had a discussion in the house of ‘Aliyath ‘Arim at Lydda on the question: Which is more important, study or action? R. Tarfon maintained that action was more important; R. Akiba maintained that study was more important. They took a vote and decided that study was more important, because it leads to action.”

(Song of Songs Rabbah II:38)

“MINGLED WITH OIL (*Numbers 7:19*) alludes to the *Torah*, the study of which must be mingled with good deeds.”

(Numbers Rabbah XIII:15,16)

“This represents good deeds; as we have learned: Not study, but its practical application, is the principal thing.”

(Numbers Rabbah XIV:10)

“These are the things the fruit of which man enjoys in this world, while the principal remains for him for the future world: Viz., honoring one's parents, the practice of loving deeds, and making peace between man and his neighbor, while the study of the *Torah* surpasses them all.”

(B. Kiddushin 40a)

“STUDY IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING, BUT DEED; WHOEVER INDULGES IN TOO MANY WORDS BRINGS ABOUT SIN.”

(Pirkei Avot 1:17)

“ANYONE WHOSE DEEDS EXCEED HIS WISDOM, HIS WISDOM IS ENDURING, BUT ANYONE WHOSE WISDOM EXCEEDS HIS DEEDS, HIS WISDOM IS NOT ENDURING.”

(Pirkei Avot 3:9)

“ONE WHOSE WISDOM EXCEEDS HIS DEEDS UNTO WHAT IS HE TO BE COMPARED? UNTO A TREE THE BRANCHES WHEREOF ARE MANY AND THE ROOTS FEW, SO THAT WHEN THE WIND COMES, IT UPROOTS IT AND OVERTURNS IT UPON ITS FACE.”

(Pirkei Avot 3:17)

“R. Johanan further said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: The service of the *Torah* is greater than the study thereof. For it is said: Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat, who poured water on the hands of Elijah. It is not said, who learned, but who poured water. This teaches that the service of the *Torah* is greater than the study thereof.”

(B. Berachot 7b)

“R. Hanina said: He who is commanded and fulfils the command, is greater than he who fulfils it though not commanded.”

(B. Kiddushin 31a)

“He who occupies himself only with *Torah* study acts as if he had no God.”

(B. Avodah Zarah 17b)

WHERE IS *GOD*?

I looked for *God* in the rituals of my house of worship, but *God* was not there.

I went to the leaders of my house of worship, but sometimes they did not want to leave their comfort zone, and when they didn't, *God* was not there.

I then went to the great academic scholars of my religion, but they only wanted to discuss what their fellow scholars agreed they should discuss, and *God* was not there.

Finally, I turned my attention to my own awareness, a flame that consumes without consuming ...

And deep within the fire of that awareness, a still small voice ...

And *God* was there.

-Christopher P. Benton, PhD

Christopher Benton is a bluetick hound from parts unknown that grew up Deepinthehearta, Texas. He is 100% bluish on his mother's side, and after many adventures and misadventures, he even became an adult and obtained a master of science degree and a doctor of philosophy degree in mathematics from the University of Houston. He currently lives in Arizona in The Valley of the Sun with his wife, Susan. Doc Benton's favorite pastimes are eating tasty food, streaming quality TV, becoming one with the universe, having his prostate examined once a year, and curling up every evening with a good math book to read. He also regularly reclines in a comfortable, ergonomic chair and travels through space and time with his girl, Susan, by using this "layback machine." Furthermore, Doc regularly travels in his space-time machine back to Austin, TX, in the mid-seventies so that Willie Nelson can get to spend some time on Doc's bus! $\emptyset = U$

