

# THE RED HEIFER AND REDISCOVERING THE FEMININE WITHIN JUDAISM

by

*Christopher P. Benton, PhD*

The *Torah* is replete not only with stories that reveal great spiritual truths, but also stories whose original meanings seem to have been lost over the passage of time. One such story is that of the *Red Heifer* found in *Numbers 19*:

*“And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ‘This is the ordinance of the Torah which the Lord has commanded,’ saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without spot, which has no blemish, and upon which never came yoke. And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may bring it forth outside the camp, and one shall slay it before his face. And Eleazar the priest shall take of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle of its blood directly before the Tent of Meeting seven times. And one shall burn the heifer in his sight - its skin, and its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall he burn. And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer. Then the priest shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp, and the priest shall be unclean until the evening. And he who burns it shall wash his clothes in water, and bathe his flesh in water, and shall be unclean until the evening. And a man that is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and lay them up outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall be kept for the congregation of the people of*

*Israel for a water of sprinkling. It is a purification offering. And he who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the evening. And it shall be to the people of Israel, and to the stranger who sojourns among them, for a statute forever. He who touches the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean. But if he does not purify himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean. Whoever touches the dead body of any man who is dead, and purifies not himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord, and that soul shall be cut off from Israel. Because the water of sprinkling was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean. His uncleanness is yet upon him. This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent, all who come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. And every open utensil, which has no covering upon it, is unclean. And whoever touches one who was slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. And for an unclean person they shall take of the ashes of the burnt heifer of purification for sin, and running water shall be put there in a utensil. And a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the utensils, and upon the persons who were there, and upon him who touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave. And the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day. And on the seventh day he shall purify himself, and wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at evening.’’*

*(Numbers 19:1-19)*

The purpose of this procedure is clearly to restore one from a state of ritual impurity to one of purity after having had contact with a dead body, but the procedure itself seems quite magical in nature. In this paper, though, we will identify elements of the feminine in this formula, and we will see how this practice symbolizes a transition from death back to life. Additionally, we'll make a distinction between a verbal *Torah*, given by *Moses*, and a non-verbal *Torah* that is represented by *Miraim*. First, though, I note one interesting thing about the fact that a heifer is being used here. Recall that Israel's first great sin during the exodus from Egypt was the sin of the *Golden Calf* found in *Exodus* 22.

*“And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Arise, make us gods which shall go before us, and as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what became of him.’ And Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the golden ear rings which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me.’ And all the people took off the golden ear rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron, and he received them from their hand and fashioned with a graving tool a molten calf. And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’ And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it, and Aaron made a proclamation, and said, ‘Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.’ And they rose up early on the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play. And the Lord*

*said to Moses, 'Go down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly from the way which I commanded them. They have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt."'"*

*(Exodus 32:1-8)*

What is very interesting here is that a calf appears in one story in connection with a great sin of Israel and, ultimately, the death of those involved before they could reach the *Promised Land*, and then it appears in another story, the story of the *Red Heifer*, in the context of life. It is intriguing that a single object has these two opposing associations. However, there is a parallel in the *Talmud* where we encounter an interesting passage on how the *Torah* can bring either life or death depending upon how one uses it.

*"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 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, just as the *Torah* can be used for either life or death, so can something as mundane as a calf also be used to either enhance life or to hasten death.

We'll return to this dichotomy later, but before we do, I want to make one more introductory remark. In particular, throughout I assume the *Documentary Hypothesis*. This means that I assume that the *Torah* began as a series of independent stories that were later stitched together by an editor or editors. Among other things, this hypothesis explains why we often find similar but different stories back to back in the *Torah*. One early such example is the creation of *Adam* and *Eve*. For instance, in *Genesis 1:27* we read that the man and the woman were created together.

*“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female He created them.”*

*(Genesis 1:27)*

We can contrast this with the verses *Genesis 2:18-22* that tell us that the man was created first, and then from the man the woman was created.

*“And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a help to match him.’ ... And the Lord God made Adam fall into a deep sleep, and he slept, and He took one from his ribs, and closed up the flesh. And from the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her to the man.”*

*(Genesis 2:18-22)*

Similarly, in the *Noah* story we find one version where it rains for forty days and forty nights and another version where it is suggested that it rains for a hundred and fifty days.

*“And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights.”*

*(Genesis 7:12)*

*“And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days. And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided. The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained.”*

*(Genesis 7:24 – 8:2)*

Thus, I firmly believe that the *Torah* originated as a series of oral stories and that variant forms of these stories were eventually combined to form the written *Torah* as we know it today. Furthermore, I strongly suspect that this is the one of the reasons that we find so much word play and number play in the *Torah*. In other words, word play, number play, acrostics, and other devices may have simply been memory aids for remembering a lengthy oral tradition. For example, in a typical translation of *Genesis 2:7* we read that *“The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground.”* However, if we insert some of the original Hebrew into this sentence, then it reads *“The Lord God formed the Adam*

*from the Adamah.*” In other words, the word for earth or soil in Hebrew is *adamah*, and this is why the first man was named *Adam*. And this, in turn, becomes a memory device for recalling a crucial element of the story.

A possible numerical memory device is found embedded in the story of *Korach's* rebellion against *Moses* in *Numbers 16:2*. In this verse we read, “*And they rose up before Moses, with certain of the people of Israel, two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, regularly summoned to the congregation, men of renown.*” What’s interesting in this verse is the number 250. In Hebrew, every letter is also a number, and thus, each word has a numerical value, and, in particular, 250 is the numerical value of a word for “rebellious” (*mem-resh-yud*) and it is also the value of a word for “choice” or “elect” (*mem-bet-chet-resh*). Thus, this very number can help one remember an oral story about a rebellion that involved the princes, the elect, of Israel.

Now let’s begin to explore the deeper symbolism of the *Red Heifer* and its connection with the feminine. One of the first things to note is that a heifer is a young, female calf that has not given birth. Hence, we have an immediate connection with the feminine. The next question to explore is why must the calf be red, and I believe the answer is found in passages like *Deuteronomy 12:23*, “*The blood is the life.*” In other words, the ritual of the *Red Heifer* is meant to counteract the impurity that results from contact with death, and what better antidote to death is there than life? Additionally, blood is also connected with the female via menstruation, and thus, in *Kabbalah* we have that the color red is associated with the female while the color white is associated with the male, and

these colors are both derived directly from female and male sexuality, i.e. the red menstrual blood of the woman and the white semen of the man. Consequently, we again have a strong connection between the *Red Heifer* and the feminine. If we now delve into the Hebrew itself, we see that the word for heifer is פֶּרֶה (*peh-resh-hey*) and the word for red is אֶדְמוּה (*aleph-dalet-mem-hey*). What is interesting about the Hebrew word for heifer is that it can also be translated as “to be fruitful.” Furthermore, if we permute the letters to obtain רִפָּה (*resh-peh-hey*), then this gives us a word in *Biblical Hebrew* that can be translated as “to heal.” Similarly, the word for “red” noted above can also be translated as “land” or “earth.” Thus, the Hebrew phrase for *Red Heifer* could also be rendered in English as “the generative, healing earth.” This translation, in turn, sheds some light upon what beliefs may underlie this ancient ritual. Furthermore, the earth is often seen by cultures as feminine since, just as new human life emerges from a female, new plant life, likewise, emerges from the soil. Additionally, this is also reflected in the fact that the Hebrew word for earth, אֶדְמוּה (*aleph-dalet-mem-hey*), is a feminine noun. To summarize, life emerges from the feminine, and the *Red Heifer* symbolizes the generative power of the female that serves as an antidote to its antithesis, death.

Continuing through the ritual, we read the following in *Numbers 19:6*.

*“And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer.”*

*(Numbers 19:6)*



It is well known that cedar has a pleasant, aromatic scent both as a leaf and in its wooden form, and its pleasant scent can have a positive impact on one's state of consciousness. Among traditional Native Americans, cedar leaves are widely used as an incense for spiritual purification, and it is not unlikely that its inclusion into the *Red Heifer* ceremony was for a similar purpose. With respect to *Biblical hyssop*, however, it is generally believed that this was a different plant from the one we call hyssop today. Some of the candidates that have been put forth as being the original *Biblical hyssop* have been marjoram, oregano, thyme, caper, and sage. While we do not know for certain which, if any, of these herbs is the genuine *Biblical hyssop*, I do have a preference for sage because varieties of this herb are commonly used along with cedar in purification ceremonies of Native Americans. Thus, there is a history of using sage, by at least one culture, in a manner that is consistent with the herbs used in the *Red Heifer* ceremony. And if the *Biblical hyssop* is sage, then the combination of cedar and sage burning would likely produce the same positive, spiritual state of mind that it does in contemporary Native American ceremonies.

The most mysterious ingredient found in *Numbers 19:6* is the one that is generally translated as "scarlet" or "crimson stuff." The actual Hebrew is שני תולעת (shin-nun-yud tav-vav-lamed-ayin-tav) which translates literally as crimson worm. This particular worm, *coccus ilicis*, has a very important tale to tell. When the mother worm is about to give birth, she attaches herself permanently to the bark of a tree, and her body forms a hard, protective crimson shell. Underneath her body and the protective shell, the mother then lays her eggs. When these eggs hatch, the mother's body provides both protection

and food for the larvae, and as the mother dies, her body releases a red dye that stains both the wood and her offspring. What marvelous symbolism! The saga of the crimson worm not only represents the transition from death back to life, but also contains the elements of “red” and “female” that align perfectly with the *Red Heifer*. One could hardly find a more appropriate symbol to include in this ritual. And my suspicion at this point is that it was this red-stained bark that was included with the aromatic cedar and hyssop/sage as one of the elements burned along with the *Red Heifer*. The remainder of the ritual is described in detail in *Numbers 19:16-19*.

*And whoever touches one who was slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. And for an unclean person they shall take of the ashes of the burnt heifer of purification for sin, and running water shall be put there in a utensil. And a clean person shall take hyssop/sage, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the utensils, and upon the persons who were there, and upon him who touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave. And the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day, and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, and wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at evening.*

*(Numbers 19:16-19)*

The phrase that is translated above as “running water” is, in Hebrew, מַיִם חַיִּים (*mem-yud-mem chet-yud-yud-mem*), and this literally means “living water.” This reference becomes

particularly important when we consider the next *Biblical* story found in *Numbers 20* that begins with the death of *Miriam*.

*“Then came the people of Israel, the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people abode in Kadesh, and Miriam died there, and was buried there.”*

*(Numbers 20:1)*

This terse report of *Miriam*'s death is immediately followed in *verse 2* by an announcement that there is no water available for the people.

*“And there was no water for the congregation, and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses, and spoke, saying, ‘Would God that we had died when our brothers died before the Lord! And why have you brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? And why have you made us come out of Egypt, to bring us in to this evil place? This is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates. Nor is there any water to drink.’”*

*(Numbers 20:2-5)*

In the *Talmud* we encounter the story of *Miriam*'s well as a source of water that travelled with the Israelites as long as *Miriam* lived.

*“R. Jose the son of R. Judah says, ‘Three good leaders had arisen for Israel. Namely, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. And for their sake three good things were conferred upon Israel. Namely, the Well, the Pillar of Cloud, and the Manna. The Well, for the merit of Miriam, the Pillar of Cloud for the merit of Aaron, and the Manna for the merit of Moses. When Miriam died the Well disappeared, as it is said, ‘And Miriam died there,’ and immediately follows the verse, ‘And there was no water for the congregation.’””*

*(B. Ta’anit 9a)*

*Miriam’s Well* was also believed to have healing powers as we read in *Numbers Rabbah*.

*“An incident is related of a certain blind man at Shihi who went down into the water to bathe. He came across Miriam’s Well and bathed in it and was healed.”*

*(Numbers Rabbah XVIII:22)*

And finally, note above that the aftermath of the disappearance of *Miriam’s Well* was that dissension spread and the people began quarreling with their leaders.

Now let’s begin to look a little bit more deeply at the symbolism involved. We should first note that water is one of the most common symbols in rabbinic literature for the *Torah*.

*“Water means nothing but Torah, as it says, ‘Ho, everyone that thirsteth come ye for water (Isaiah 55:1).’”*

*(B. Baba Kama 82a)*

Thus, we might conclude that whereas *Moses* was the giver of the verbal, written *Torah*, his sister *Miriam* was the keeper of a non-verbal *Torah* symbolized by water. We might also say that the non-verbal *Torah* is the *Torah* that we keep within our heart, the small, still voice within.

*“These words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart.”*

*(Deuteronomy 6:6)*

*“Let your heart retain my words. Keep my commandments and live.”*

*(Proverbs 4:4)*

*“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)*

*“These form the essence of the Torah, proceeding from a small, still voice.”*

*(Zohar II:230a)*

Today we identify activities such as language and mathematics with the left hemisphere of the brain, and we identify non-verbal, holistic perception and intuition with the right hemisphere. These brain hemisphere associations were not available to the authors of the *Bible*, but they certainly were able to classify things in terms of male and female attributes and gender roles that appear to have remained stable for millennia. Below is an excerpt from the *Talmud* that discusses such gender roles.

*“The verses are not contradictory. Here the first verse quoted, the reference being to the Torah, which is a feminine noun, as it is written, ‘The law [torah] of the Lord is perfect [temimah], restoring [meshibath] the soul,’ and the feminine form is employed. There, however, the reference is to war, and it is the practice of man to wage war, not of woman — therefore the masculine is employed.”*

*(B. Kiddushin 2b)*

Furthermore, we can deduce that the ancient Hebrews saw verbal activities as masculine simply from the fact that it is *Adam* who names the animals.

*“And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them, and*

*whatever Adam called every living creature, that was its name. And Adam gave names to all cattle and to the bird of the air and to every beast of the field.<sup>1</sup>*

*(Genesis 2:19-20)*

Likewise, it is *Miriam* who leads the women in the right-brain activity of music and singing by the *Red Sea*.

*“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing. And Miriam answered them, ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.’”*

*(Exodus 15:20-21)*

Thus, I believe that there is both a verbal, written *Torah* given by *Moses* and a non-verbal, unwritten *Torah* that is felt within our hearts that is represented by *Miriam*.

Returning to our ceremony of the *Red Heifer*, we can now understand that just as important as the ashes of the heifer is the *living water* into which the ashes are placed. This water represents the essence of *Torah* and the path back to life. Furthermore, the letters of the word אפר (*aleph-peh-resh*) for “ashes” can be permuted to spell רפא (*resh-peh-aleph*), another word in Hebrew for the verb “to heal.” Hence, the ceremony involves the generative, female energy, as represented by the ashes of the *Red Heifer*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the rest of the *Torah* it is sometimes the man who names a child, sometimes the woman, sometimes both, sometimes *God*, and in the case of the offspring of *Jacob* it is almost always the woman. Nonetheless, it is still the male *Adam* who engages in the first use of language to name things, i.e. the animals.

being combined with the *living waters* of the non-verbal *Torah* in order to heal one from contact with the dead and to transform one's state from death back to life.

Now let's look at the rest of the story that follows *Miriam's* death.

*“And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the rod, and gather the assembly together, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it shall give forth his water, and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock, so you shall give the congregation and their beasts drink.’ And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as he commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Hear now, you rebels. Must we fetch you water out of this rock?’ And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he struck the rock twice, and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.’ This is the water of Meribah, because the people of Israel strove with the Lord, and he was sanctified in them.”*

*(Numbers 20:6-13)*

There are several things we should be aware of here. First, notice that the root of the name *Miriam*, as well as the place *Meribah*, is *mem-resh-yud* in Hebrew, and previously



we noted that this root means *rebellious*. Thus, when the feminine principle, as represented by *Miriam's Well*, is absent, the male principle becomes quarrelsome and rebellious.

Now let's revisit the story of the *Golden Calf* in *Exodus 32* that we alluded to earlier. The thing we learn from looking at the Hebrew in this chapter is that the word for *calf* that appears in *Exodus 32* is spelled *ayin-gimmel-lamed*, and this is a masculine word that denotes a male calf. Hence, we might say that in the incident of the *Golden Calf*, the female principle was absent, and thus, strife ensued. On the other hand, in the story of the *Red Heifer*, the female principle is present, and it is used to restore balance. Notice, too, that the story of the *Red Heifer* is sandwiched between two stories of rebellion, the rebellion of *Korach* and the rebellion at the *water of Meribah*, and in each instance of rebellion it can be argued that the female principle is missing. This strongly highlights once again the importance of maintaining a balance between our male and female natures.

Next, notice that *Moses* is punished for not following *God's* directions exactly. He was supposed to just speak to the rock and then water would appear. Instead, he physically manipulated the rock with his staff as if he were digging a well in a manner that did not require any divine intervention. What can we make of this? Well, we can begin by noticing that a rock is a common symbol in Judaism for *God*.

*“He is the Rock. His work is perfect for all his ways are justice. A God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.”*

*(Deuteronomy 32:4)*

Thus, there are three elements here – the masculine represented by *Moses*, the rock represented by *God*, and the feminine represented by the *water*. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the oldest extant book of Jewish mysticism<sup>2</sup>, the basic pattern that is given for all creation is one element opposite another with a third element that acts as a link between the other two. In this case, we have the masculine opposite the feminine with *God* acting as the intermediary. Furthermore, we have arrived at a teachable moment. While the association of the left hemisphere of the brain with language and analytical skills and the association of the right hemisphere of the brain with intuition and holistic, non-verbal thought is a relatively recent construct, the association of language and analysis with the male and intuition and non-verbal experience with the female goes back much further. For example, we previously saw this male/female typology evidenced in *Genesis 2:19* where it is *Adam* who provides the names for all the animals. There is even a related passage in the *Zohar*<sup>3</sup> that clarifies the precise relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal with the non-verbal coming first.

*“The audible voice issues from the inaudible.”*

*Zohar I:50b)*

However, there is something deeper that the story in *Exodus 20* teaches us that would have been well illustrated if *Moses* had correctly followed *God’s* instructions. Namely,

---

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars believe the *Sefer Yetzirah* was originally composed around 200 C.E.

<sup>3</sup> The *Zohar* is a voluminous work of Jewish mysticism that was first published in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain.

that while, in evolutionary terms, non-verbal perception predates verbal construction and analysis, it is, nonetheless, the verbal brain that can direct the attention of the non-verbal brain. Think about this. Just about everything you have done has probably begun with a verbal statement either out loud or to yourself about what you wanted to do and what you wanted to accomplish. And then once you made that declaration, the non-verbal brain got to work on how to help make that happen. This, too, is referenced in the *Zohar*.

*“In due course speech is attached to it (the inaudible), and through the force of that speech it emerges into the open.”*

*(Zohar I:50b)*

Thus, what we should have seen in *Numbers 20:11* was an example of how the male principle or left brain (*Moses*) can declare an intention that is then followed by a positive response from the female principle or right brain (*Miriam’s Well, water*). Instead, however, we saw the left brain’s analytical side trying to do it all by mechanically poking at the rock with a stick until water emerged, and, thus, the opportunity for a valuable lesson in the mechanics of personal creation was lost. Fortunately, there were rabbis that came later such as the *Talmudic* sage *Rav Huna* who understood the importance of balancing the male and the female.

*“Rav Huna said, ‘AFAR (DUST) is masculine, while adamah (ground) is feminine. A potter takes male dust (coarse earth) and female earth (soft clay) in order that his vessels may be sound.’”*

*(Genesis Rabbah XIV:7)*

In the *Talmud*, we find frequent references to the *Shechinah*, the feminine presence of *God*, but throughout much of the *Torah* we hear primarily the male voice. Nonetheless, there are threads here and there of the importance of the feminine in the process of creation. For example, in *Proverbs* we find that *wisdom* is identified both with the feminine and with the beginning of creation. Notice, too, in *Proverbs* 8:22 below the primacy of this female wisdom. It precedes the rest of creation.

*“The Lord by wisdom has founded the earth. By understanding has he established the heavens.”*

*(Proverbs 3:19)*

*“Wisdom cries aloud in the street. She utters her voice in the squares.”*

*(Proverbs 1:20)*

*“Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn out her seven pillars.”*

*(Proverbs 9:1)*

*“Does not wisdom call and understanding put forth her voice? She stands at the top of high places by the way where the paths meet. She cries at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors. ... The Lord created me (wisdom) at the beginning of his way, the first of his acts of old.”*

*(Proverbs 8:1-22)*

Additionally, at the very beginning of *Genesis Rabbah* we find the *Torah* associated with wisdom, and hence, this also links the *Torah* with the feminine. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the word *Torah* in Hebrew is a feminine noun.

*“Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, ‘IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED,’ 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)*

Furthermore, we also find an identification in the *Zohar* of the *Torah* with the feminine.

*“The voice of Jacob, which is the Torah, is thus attached to two females, to this inner voice which is inaudible, and to this outer voice which is heard.”*

*(Zohar I:50b)*

As we have seen before in a quote above from *Rav Huna*, the earth is representative of the female. Again, this should come as no surprise since it is easily observed that plants germinate in the belly of the earth and then spring forth into this world just as a fetus grows in the belly of its mother. Below is a verse that expresses even more clearly *Rav Huna*'s view that the created world springs forth from the feminine.

“R. Huna said in R. Joseph's name, ‘Whatever is in heaven and on earth was created from the earth alone, as it is written, “For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven (Isaiah 55:10).” Just as the rain's creation is from the earth, though it falls from heaven, so all that is in heaven and on earth was created from the earth alone.’ R. Judan proved it from the following, ‘All go unto one place. All are of the dust,’ i.e. earth (Ecclesiastes 3:20).”

Hence, from a philosophical perspective, while the word *God* may refer to something completely unknowable and unobservable, once we get into the realm of the creation, it is the feminine that precedes the masculine. This doctrine is spelled out even more clearly in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

According to tradition, the *Sefer Yetzirah* was authored by *Abraham*. However, that is hardly possible. The text dwells extensively on the mysticism of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and that alphabet was not even in existence during the time of *Abraham*. Others believe that it was the famous *Talmudic* rabbi, *Rabbi Akiba*, who authored the work. Possible, but I have another theory as to its authorship. Based upon the grammatical style of the book, it was probably written, more or less, around the year 200 CE. This was about the time that the great *Talmudic* scholar, *Rav Huna*, was born, and he is, nonetheless, my best guess as to the true author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Here is my argument. If we look in the *Talmud*, we see that a theory that the universe was created with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet is cited in the name of *Rav*. This in itself suggests that *Rav* was knowledgeable of mystical traditions.

*“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)*

*Rav* was born in the year 175 CE and lived in Babylonia where he started an academy at Sura, and this is the academy where much of the *Babylonian Talmud* was ultimately constructed. Also, *Rav*’s student and successor at the academy was *Rav Huna*, and teachings recorded in rabbinic literature indicate that *Rav Huna* also had a deep, mystical understanding of the universe. For example, the first quotation below shows that he understood that everything we see is a part of *God*, but we can never see the totality of *God*, and the second quotation indicates that he understood that much of what we see is fleeting and utterly lacking in substance. Mystical, indeed!

*“‘Lo, these are but parts of His ways, and what blemish of aught is heard of Him! But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand (Job 26:14)?’ Rav Huna said, ‘Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, “Lo, these are but parts of His way, and what blemish of aught is heard of Him? What defect is heard of Him? But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand?”’ Rav Huna said, ‘When thunder goes forth in its full force, no creature can understand it. It is not written, none understands, but “who can understand?” The intelligent know His hints and His thoughts.’ Said Rav Huna, ‘If you cannot comprehend the essential nature of thunder, can you comprehend the essence of the world?’”*

*(Genesis Rabbah XII:1)*

*“Solomon said, “For who knows what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spends as a shadow (Ecclesiastes 6:12)?” As a shadow of what? If life is like the shadow cast by a wall, there is substance in it. If like the shadow cast by a date-palm, there is substance in it!’ David came and explained, ‘His days are as a shadow that passes away (Psalm 144:4).’ Rav Huna said in the name of R. Aha, ‘Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it.’”*

*(Ecclesiastes Rabbah I:3)*

There is but a single mention in the *Talmud* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and its use for magical creation. The particular people involved are *Hanina*, *Oshaia*, *Rabbah*, and *Zera*, and all of these are people that were involved one way or another with *Rav Huna*. *Oshaia*, *Zera*, and *Rabbah* (*Rabbah bar Nachmani*) were students of *Rav Huna*, and *Hanina* was *Oshaia*’s brother<sup>4</sup>. Thus, all the principal players are one way or another linked to *Rav Huna*.

*“Rabbah said, ‘If the righteous desired it, they could by living a life of absolute purity be creators, for it is written, “But your iniquities have distinguished between etc.”’ Rabbah created a man, and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him, ‘Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust.’ R. Hanina and R. Oshaia spent every Sabbath*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Who’s Who in the Talmud* by Shulamis Frieman



*eve in studying the Sefer Yetzirah, by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it.”*

*(B. Sanhedrin 65b)*

In summary:

- The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes at length how the universe was created from the letters of the alphabet, and *Rav Huna*'s teacher, *Rav*, was a teacher of this doctrine according to the *Talmud*.
- Quotations from the *Midrash Rabbah* collection show that *Rav Huna* had a deep mystical understanding of the universe.
- The people mentioned in the *Talmud* as actually having used the *Sefer Yetzirah* for purposes of creation were all connected to *Rav Huna*.

Another connection between this text and *Rav Huna* is the use of the appellation “*Life of the Worlds*” for *God*. This expression occurs in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and fourteen times in the *Midrash Rabbah*, including once by *Rav Huna* (*Genesis Rabbah* I:5). Additionally, in the *Babylonian Talmud* we find a story where a student and a son of *Rav Huna* are performing just the kind of creative magic that is discussed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

*“What is the reference to witchcraft? — R. Hisda and Rabbah son of R. Huna were travelling in a boat, when a certain non-Jewish matron said to them, ‘Seat me near you,’ but they did not seat her. Thereupon she uttered something, a charm, and bound the boat, and they uttered something and freed it.”*

*(B. Shabbat 81b)*

Is this conclusive proof? No, this is just circumstantial evidence. Nonetheless, I would not at all be surprised if *Rav Huna* was the true author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* begins with the statement, “*With thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom decreed Yah, ..., HIS/ITS universe with three books (seferim), with story (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur),*” and the obvious question to ask is, “Why thirty-two?” The most likely answer, in my opinion, is that this was a way of reconciling two different theories of creation – one that the world was created using the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the other that the world was created with ten utterances from *God*. Since  $22 + 10 = 32$ , a little simple math reconciles these two versions. Plus, since the first letter of the *Torah* is *bet* and the last letter is *lamed* and since together these letters spell *lev*, the Hebrew word for *heart* which has a numerical value of thirty-two, this also brings in the imagery of the *Torah* and the still voice of the *heart* which are both connected in Judaism to the feminine.

*“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)*

*“With ten utterances was the world created.”*

*(Pirkei Avot 5:1)*

*“R. Johanan said, ‘The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? These are the expressions “And God said” in the first chapter of Genesis. But aren’t there 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 (Psalm 33:6).”’”*

*(B. Megilah 21b)*

The other thing we see in this opening verse from the *Sefer Yetzirah* is that the universe was created “*with three books (seferim), with story (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur).*” This is the first mention of what is a fundamental pattern in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Namely, that all creation can be reduced to one thing opposite another with a third element that provides a means of interaction and communication between the opposites. This doctrine, in turn, has its origin in a passage found in *Ecclesiastes*.

*““Also, this against this made Elohim.”*

*(Ecclesiastes 7:14)*

However, since the three Hebrew words, *sefer*, *safar*, and *sippur*, that appear in this verse all have the same three-letter root, this suggests that all the division of reality into one thing opposite another with interaction between the opposites is ultimately just an illusion created by the mind. Such an opinion is also expressed by the *Zohar*.

*“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)*

Soon after this opening verse, the *Sefer Yetzirah* introduces the three *mother letters* which represent the opposites of water and fire with air as the intermediary between the two.

*“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)*

The letter *aleph* is the first letter of the Hebrew word *avir* which means *air*, the letter *mem* is the first letter of the Hebrew word *mayim* which means *water*, and the letter *shin* is the last letter of the Hebrew *aish* which means *fire*. Thus, we have the association of *aleph* with *air*, *mem* with *water*, and *shin* with *fire*. Additionally, we have in this verse an association between the *mother letters* and the *father letters* - *aleph* with *yud*, *mem* with *hey*, and *shin* with *vav*. Furthermore, we can now see the order in which things evolve according to the *Sefer Yetzirah*. At the very top we have the unknowable *God* that is beyond conception. However, once we get into the finite world, the world of differentiation, then everything is characterized by the pattern of three, two opposites and

an intermediary, that is represented by the *mother letters*. Following the *mother letters* are the *father letters*, and from the *father letters* come consequences, i.e. everything else.

Now this chronology raises two questions, the first of which is why do the *mother letters* come before the *father letters*? The answer is simply that the *Sefer Yetzirah* reflects the way of nature where we observe that it is the female that gives birth and that it is from the feminine earth that plant life springs forth. As seen previously, this is the point of view that *Rav Huna* apparently subscribed to, and recall that a proof-text for this viewpoint was *Ecclesiastes 3:20*, “*All are from the dust, and all return to the dust.*” One might likewise also derive it from a passage from *Isaiah*.

“*Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who has created these things.*”

(*Isaiah 40:26*)

The Hebrew word for *who* is spelled *mem-yud*, and this word has a numerical value of 50. Similarly, the Hebrew word for *earth* that is spelled *aleph-dalet-mem-hey* also has a numerical value of 50. Thus, if we substitute *earth* for *who* in the passage from *Isaiah*, then the verse reads, “*Lift up your eyes on high, and behold earth has created these things.*” The bottom line, though, is that in the finite world that we live in, the female principle precedes the male. This can also be derived from a verse within the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

*“Ten sefirot/declarations of constraint in number. Ten fingers, five against five, and a unifying alliance oriented in the middle in the cut of the tongue and in the cut of the flesh.”*

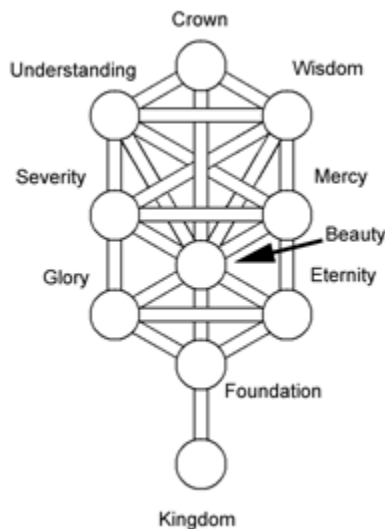
*(Sefer Yetzira 1:3)*

In the cosmology of the *Sefer Yetzira*, the tongue, representing speech, serves as the connecting link between us and the rest of the world, and similarly, the male sex organ serves as the physical link that connects the male and female bodies. And now we might be able to see the argument that is coming. The female can be present without the male, but once you have the male, you also have the presence of the connecting link, the circumcised *cut of the flesh*, and the existence of that link immediately implies the existence of something to be linked to, i.e. the female. Thus, you can't have the male preceding the female, based upon this biological line of reasoning.

A second question to ask is why are the letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav* called *father letters*? Fortunately, the answer to this one is simple. These are the letters that comprise the most sacred name of *God* that we never pronounce, the *tetragrammaton* that is spelled *yud-hey-vav-hey* and which we think of as a *father name* for *God* since this name is usually given a masculine connotation. However, observe this. If we were to take the letters in this name, *yud-hey-vav-hey*, and substitute for them the *mother letters*, *aleph* for *yud*, *mem* for *hey*, and *shin* for *vav*, then it would certainly be nice if the result, *aleph-mem-shin-mem*, could in some way be interpreted as a *mother name* for *God*. Well, guess what?

The first part of this name, *aleph-mem*, is an ancient Hebrew word for *mother*<sup>5</sup>, and the second part, *shin-mem*, spells *name* in Hebrew. In other words, *aleph-mem-shin-mem* literally says *mother name*! Additionally, notice that the *father name* ends in the letter *hey* which usually denotes a feminine noun in Hebrew. Thus, even the *father name*, *yud-hey-vav-hey*, suggests to us that the feminine principle is already present.

Whereas the point of view of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is that the female principle precedes the male principle, this doctrine was reversed in *Kaballah* almost a thousand years later as the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* diagram emerged.



In this diagram, the top most part of the tree traditionally represents *God's will*, the right side of the tree represents the male, and the left side represents the female, and we travel down the tree on a path that begins top-right-left. In other words, the modern *tree of life*

---

<sup>5</sup> Strong's Hebrew Dictionary of the Bible

diagram has the male coming before the female, and in my opinion, this is a mistake that does not reflect the intent of the earlier Jewish mystics. Nonetheless, it's easy to see how this mistake might have been made. In one of the creation stories in *Genesis*, *Adam* is created first and then *Eve* is created from his rib. It is quite likely that later *kabbalists* used this story as their proof-text for now having the male precede the female. However, this is not an argument that I accept, particularly since as we see above, the *sefirah* representing *wisdom* is on the right side of the tree, and we've already established the connection between *wisdom* and the feminine. Thus, I reject this revision<sup>6</sup> which I see as an error. I much prefer the earlier Jewish mysticism of the *Sefer Yetzirah* which elevates the feminine.

In closing, we can conclude that within the *Torah* and later rabbinic and mystical Jewish literature, there is a strand that recognizes both the importance and primacy of the female voice, and this strand is strongly seen in the story of the *Red Heifer* once we understand the story's references to the *generative earth*. Furthermore, while the male principle (our analytical side) can direct the focus of the female principle (our spiritually connected, generative, intuitive side), without the female principle the male principle has no life, no inner voice to guide its ship by, and ultimately it comes to ruin. As *Rav Huna* suggested centuries ago, in order to be sound, we must all find the balance between our inner male and female natures. Not only our personal survival, but also the survival of humanity ultimately depends upon finding this balance within.

---

<sup>6</sup> There are other revisions in later *Kabbalah* that work quite well, and to me this illustrates the fact that *Kabbalah* should be considered a living topic that is continually evolving in its explanations of the nature of the universe and reality.