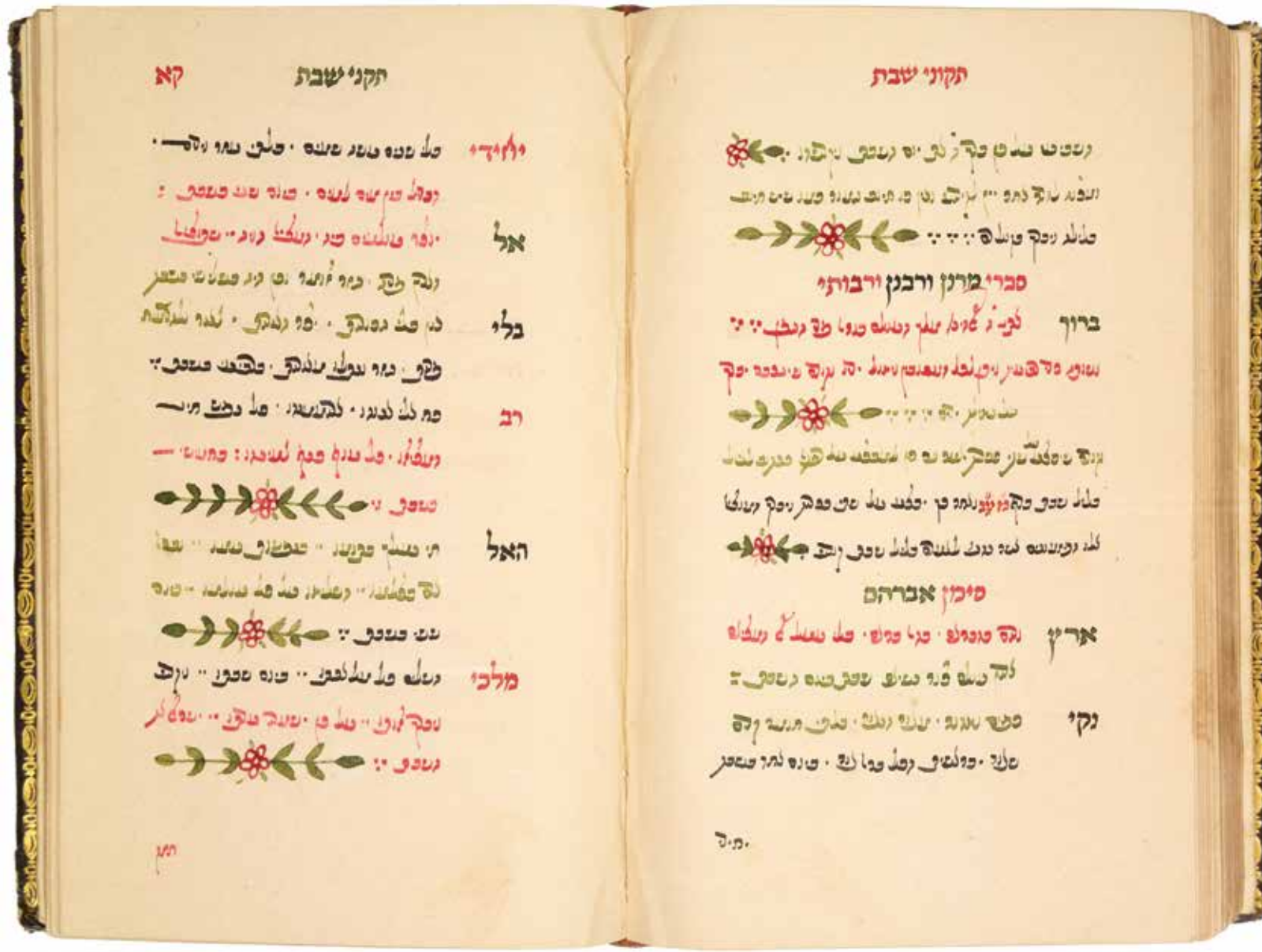


A Language with a Vision: Secrets of the Hebrew Letters

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A page from *Book of the Sabbaths of the Lord*. Nissim Ya'akov Ozalb, 1840.
Handwritten on paper; colored ink and gold powder. Israel Museum, Jerusalem



THE INTEGRITY OF HEBREW, its essential purpose and vision, and its contribution to the development of human consciousness have been remarkable yet are often misunderstood or ignored. Even by those who speak it. How often do we encounter a language that had a vision before it even began to say something?

Hebrew is one of the three oldest languages, along with Chinese and Sanskrit, and is the core source of monotheistic traditions and religious practices. Sages called Hebrew “a holy language” and “a language of truth” because they recognized its divine influences and hidden structures of wisdom. This wisdom, based on sound vibrations, was designed to be spread in the world and to withstand forces that would deny it or try to destroy it—two of these forces being time and forgetfulness. The very act of giving Hebrew such titles helps protect and preserve a language that was designed to assure the survival of life on earth. And the survival of the earth itself.

The original Bible was written in Hebrew, and from right to left. It was canonized over a thousand years. Until the eighth century, the first five books of the Bible, also known as Torah or the Five Books of Moses, were one long sentence with no vowels or punctuation. This suggests that we stand in front of a vast and evolving body of work, a text offering many ways to understand it. These many possibilities are traditionally referred to as the “seventy faces of Torah”—each to be revealed at a different time. Torah is a cosmology where one can be led to see life with all its contradictions

and opposing forces, each finding its rightful place. The blessing and the curse, the good and the bad, life and death. The Bible is not a theory that can be denied or replaced later by another theory. All have a place and a reason. It is eternal because it speaks about the laws of life. It is always true because it integrates its opposite. Through the ages, people have argued with its wisdom, distorted it, misused it, or dragged it down to their own level. We continue to return to the biblical text because most of humanity base their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—consciously or unconsciously—on its content.¹

Unique to Hebrew, each Letter has a numerical value, and thus additional meaning; this was the basis of Hebraic numerology. Yet another dimension of meaning can be found in the vowels, which look exactly like plus, minus, and division signs. The Bible's signs of cantillations, or tropes—which show us how we are to chant Torah during services—also reveal concealed wisdom. For example, when Abraham is about to offer to God that which he loves most—his child—an angel appears and calls his name twice: Abraham! Abraham. The first *Abraham*—as the sound of the cantillations expresses—is a call to stop, and the second, a heartbreaking one: “How could you possibly think this is what I ask of you?” This insight appeared to me while chanting this portion on the High Holidays. Abraham, the great spiritual leader, abandons his planned sacrifice and descends the mountain with his son beside him. Hundreds of people are waiting at the foot of the mountain, called Mount Moriah (in Hebrew, *Mori-yah*—meaning “God is my Teacher”). They are astonished to learn

that from now on the gods will have to be appeased in new ways. The God who guides them now does not need, or want, human sacrifices. In times when human sacrifice was commonly practiced all over the Middle East and the Mediterranean, if not the world, as a way to appease the gods, this story represents a radical reform in the relationship between Man and God—a stop to this ritual. I would not have received such depth of insight without forming the sounds of Abraham's name, without feeling the vibrations in my own throat and heart, without following the signs of cantillation—all of which delivered profound emotion and understanding. This is how the Hebrew Letters and their vibrations transmit their power.

The followers of the Hebraic traditions are encouraged and commanded to constantly engage themselves in the highest of all—the study of biblical text and its sages' commentaries. It is described as a supreme act. The Torah goes so far as to say that the “disciples of sages increase peace in the world.” Meaning that the study and contemplation of truth and the meaning of life raise global consciousness. This passage refers to disciples, not to the sages themselves; we can understand this to mean that one does not have to achieve understanding to create peace; one must simply seek it. It is the *process* of seeking truth and the meaning of life that is important here. Imagine if simply engaging with this holy text could bring peace to a world rocked as it is by unrest. Mindfully reading and uttering these words of wisdom, thinking and feeling them. Questioning is fundamental as well. Developing passion for truth and meaning. And doing it whenever possible—whether you're

“contemplating day and night” or on your way to the farmers' market. It is our job only to engage in the quest, to set in motion an intention, which raises our own consciousness, our own vibration. We can only imagine that this affects the consciousness—the vibration—of the collective. Incrementally, Light, Peace and Love increase in the world.

Hebraic biblical text was designed to address any period of time in the life of the individual or the community, and any spiritual or physical need. It is adaptable in its own unique, often misunderstood way. The language is there to challenge the mind and focus the attention. It does this by keeping us in a constant state of questioning, leading us to search for truth and meaning, keeping our passion and yearning alive. This training is instrumental to the expansion of consciousness, flexing the mind and preparing it to face life changes and challenges. Freeing the creative imagination.

Each story or event in Torah is given on four levels of understanding. The first two are the written tradition, known as “black fire,” which is the text itself and what we understand it to mean. The other two levels are the oral tradition, known as “white fire,” the negative space around the Letters, which is the hidden and mystical level of the text. The vision of this wisdom as a whole, written and unwritten, hidden or not, is passed from generation to generation, appears and disappears, depending in part on external conditions, but also perhaps according to its own internal, independent will. It is a cosmology serving a Will if you wish, something mystical, organic, that lives and moves in the world on its own, whether its followers obey it or run away from it. We may simplify and call it also

a promise, a dream, a covenant, or a divine plan.

The Letters are the bare bones of Hebrew. Kabbalists understood them to be vibrations of sound that set in motion far more than ordinary communication between people. Gazing at the text in meditation, the Kabbalists saw how the Letters fly, changing their physical location—geometrical shapes mysteriously dancing, descending and ascending, a means by which levels and dimensions of reality blended and intermingled—all of which led to new insights. For these sages, this confirmed that the Letters carried the power to create reality. They understood the vibrations of these Letters to be the tools with which the world was created and continues to be created, the spiritual DNA of an ongoing creation.

The Song of Songs, the holiest of all biblical books, invites us to enter this mysterious, passion-invoking reality. The narrator in the Song of Songs describes this experience as lovers “entering a Garden,” where they lose each other and find each other. Just like atoms that were separated and yet maintain a mysterious, almost spooky connection. Just like God and us.

In the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, we see a map of how consciousness descends from Above, from *Keter*, all the way down to our world, *Malchut* (“Kingdom”). The ten points or circles on the Tree are known as *sefirot* (“emanations”). The Letters descend, in the channels connecting the sefirot, bringing the Light from Above to Below.

While the sefirot are located in a fixed place on the Tree, the Letters flow in between them, taking various paths to descend, connecting the sefirot,

vibrating and setting Light in motion—vivifying and vibrating worlds and levels of life. All is designed to influence the world of Malchut, where we live.

The Tree is like a celestial computer, keeping all the worlds and the various levels of reality in existence by shining Light both inwardly and outwardly—

within each atom and throughout the entire universe. There are many kinds of light. The Light described in Kabbalah as the hidden light is the one that stands on its own, a primordial light set in motion from the Creator down through the Letters to us here in the level of Malchut. It can be experienced only by those who seek it.

In the same way that the Tree of Life is activated by the Letters, assuring the flow from Above to Below, the power of sound, the voicing of the Letters, assures the flow from Below back to Above. Uttering sound vibrations here on earth—speech—brings spirit into matter, sanctifies life, connects worlds and dimensions, and thus returns the flow up the Tree back to Source or Creator. This takes place through prayer, blessings, *unifications* (prayers that include visualization and intention), meditation, and other rituals of offering, but most of all it is through the power of speech that

we witness the Divine here on earth.

This reciprocal flow of energies is conveyed in the first word of Genesis, B’resheet, which – like all Hebrew words – has multiple possible meanings: “at first,” “in a beginning,” “with wisdom,” or “He created an offering” (*Tayish*).

(The order of the Letters in words appearing in Torah is not fixed; the Letters can be moved around within a word, thus creating a new word, as in the example of Tayish.) This is part of the flow of the vast wisdom of creation, found in the very first word of the Bible. God set in motion a movement that creates and maintains our world. We reciprocate; we send something back to assure the connection and express our gratitude. Both movements are simultaneously set in motion by the Creator. The word Tayish is saying that our ability to respond to Source is also set by the Divine. We, however, have the choice to respond. Or not.

You don’t have to go much further to continue to find profound wisdom. Genesis tells us, right in the beginning of the first verse, that the world was created through the Letters, meaning they were created first to help the Creator with creating. The first few words of Genesis read, “At



first, God Created Et...”/ “בראשית ברא” אלהים...

“B’resheet Barah Elohim Et...” The first Letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Alef (א; sounds here like e), together with the last Letter, Tav (ת), creates the word et (את). Just as “from A to Z” in English means the whole alphabet, the word et signifies the entire Hebrew alphabet. All twenty-two sound vibrations from Alef to Tav are implied by this mysterious word et, which has no other meaning than the conjuring of the alphabet. Although we can see this word in almost every sentence in sacred text and in the spoken language, it has no meaning in the sentence and therefore has never been translated. For example, let us look at the literal translation of the first line of Genesis: “In the beginning God created et the heaven and et the earth.” Clearly there is no need for this word. The translation into English ignores it. The sentence works without it. The only answer that makes sense is the Kabbalistic one; et stands for the entire twenty-two Letters as tools of creation and is there to assure the process of creation, to affirm and bless it. The Creator is creating our world by uttering sound vibrations: *Let there be light ... land ... trees ... man ...* Imagine God humming us into being.

Although the Bible has been translated again and again through the centuries, biblical Hebrew is actually untranslatable. Hebrew is a root-letter language where words have various meanings—often complete opposites of each other. Any translation is thus an interpretation and is subjective, limited, and often severely limiting. When the Bible was first translated into Greek in the second

century near Alexandria, Egypt—becoming part of what is known as the *Septuagint*—a day of mourning was declared in Israel. The Septuagint marked a new era, where Torah would be read and spread as a fraction of what it actually meant—and teach a fraction of its truth. From then on, its power was compromised, depleted, and at times almost lost. Whether it was intentional or not, a channel of Light to the world was diminished and weakened.

Another aspect that complicates translation and a more complete understanding of the biblical texts is the unusual, and most likely purposeful and intentional, structure of verbs in Torah; they are not exactly in the past, not exactly in the future. They unite past and future into a timeless, ongoing present moment—the Now. Therefore, Creation was not intended to take place “in the beginning” but “in a beginning,” continuously, year after year, moment by moment. The world is in a constant state of creation. Now is the deepest place, the most real time. Now is where life happens; it’s also the hardest place to stay.

It is no coincidence that this Now is the Hebrew meaning of the unutterable biblical name of God: YHWA (יהוה). “Now.” This ongoing Now is related to another name of God: *Ein-Sof*/, Endlessness (אין סוף), which has no beginning and no end. The infinite. The Timeless. The Now.

A more honest translation of Torah would gather all the possible meanings of each word so that the individual reader or community could select what is helpful for their own self-development. All verbs would be in the present tense, the Now. Moses is still talking to us, and we are still listening. Or not.

In *Sefer Yetzirah* (*The Book of Creation*), attributed to our biblical astronomer Abraham, God created with the “twenty-two elemental letters.” He “engraved them, carved them, weighed them, and transposed them, forming with them everything formed and everything destined to be formed.” All twenty-two Letters are described as circling the world, as in a wheel, forming a grid that creates the world and keeps it alive and breathing. A cosmology made from the Hebrew Letters. *The Zohar* says, “Twenty-two foundation letters: they are set in a circle as 231 Gates. The circle rotates life back and forth.”

When God sees Abraham playing with the Letters, engraving, carving, probing, and forming, “until he succeeded in deeds of creation,” God embraces him and kisses him on the head, calling him “Abraham, my beloved.” What exactly did Abraham

do with the Letters? It’s a mystery; the language of this book is ancient and poetic. But it suggests Abraham created something out of nothing, that he started from scratch, from vibrations of thought, feeling, intention, and attention and created something new.

The concept of circling (as with the grid that circled the world) is conveyed in various traditions. Circles are used as holy objects, such as the Tibetan prayer wheel or the Jewish dreidel. They turn and turn until they stop at a particular spot on the wheel, seemingly at random but actually just at the right place, the

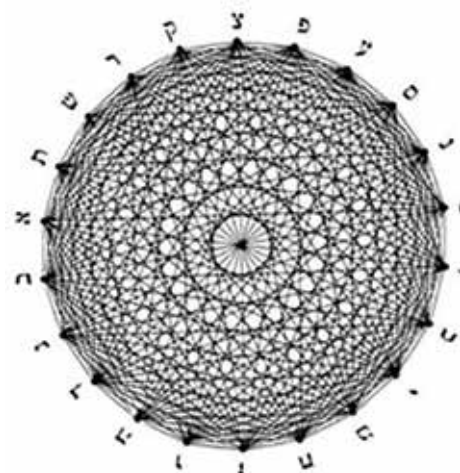
place they were meant to stop. The wheel, which carries wisdom, perhaps sets something deeper in motion.

The Letters were used in the Temple in Jerusalem by the High Priest to bless, guide, and protect the physical and spiritual well-being of the community. Rituals with the Letters charged the people with the power to survive and fulfill the mission they were being groomed for—to become vessels that attract Light and bring blessings to the world. The people received guidance from the Letters in times of distress. The Letters helped them stand strong in

the face of opposing forces that denied their belief—that this world exists for a reason and needs guidance to be the blessing it was intended to be.

Hebrew disappeared as a spoken language in the fourth century, when the Romans expelled the Israelites, or the Hebrews,

from their own homeland and changed the name of their country to Palestina Syria, and the name of the people from the Hebrews to the Jews (those who reside in Judea). The Romans forbade them to study Torah, in an effort to erase the power of their language and their faith. Despite the fact that Hebrew had been driven underground, its influence—its laws, morality, ethics, and many aspects of its culture—continued to be integrated into the world’s consciousness, especially in places where the Bible was the spiritual foundation. We see Hebrew’s influence today in



The Hebrew alphabet. “Twenty-two foundation letters: they are set in a circle as 231 Gates. The circle rotates life back and forth.” —*The Zohar*

words like *amen*, *hallelujah*, *YHWA*, *cherubim*, and *seraphim* or in names like Adam, Noah, David, Daniel, Sarah, Rebecca, Miriam, Ruth, and Esther. Hebrew Letters even appear on tarot cards, serving the function of hidden spiritual powers, despite the fact that those cards originated in Europe.

Hebrew did not reappear as a spoken language until the late nineteenth century, when the peoples who had once spoken it returned to their homeland. The first generation of Jewish children born in Israel spoke far better Hebrew than their parents did. This is an unprecedented revival of a dormant language, which, for two thousand years, was being used solely in prayer. Clearly, the language belongs to the land.

Clearly, this language cannot be a product of human reasoning or ordinary needs. There is nothing logical or rational about its history or character. It does not evolve in a linear way. It is unpredictable and mysterious in that it relates to a God that cannot be concretized, a God that is unknowable. How can this Divinity be conveyed? It is through the language of the heart, through the power of imagination, through stories that are filled with paradoxes and contradictions and scandals that we go beyond logic, into the realms of the subconscious. The vivid biblical stories, their symbols, dreams, perplexing signs, and images, are the very tools that made it possible to bring the subconscious into the conscious. Analyzing these ancient biblical stories for thousands of years, seeing them as reflections of our own stories, is the root of modern psychoanalysis; this process of engaging and analyzing prepared us to approach and use this level of the subconscious more easily.

All of this is part of a grander Vision, the Divine plan, if you will. This process of bringing the unconscious to light is here to help us make sense of our reality and ensure growth and development. We are touched. We go deeper. We see more and try harder to see more. We become more conscious human beings. We start to connect experientially to the bigger picture. When we become more aware of the hidden wisdom of the larger reality, we also see the false beliefs we hold about ourselves. We discover the motivating stories in our subconscious that drive us to do things we didn’t really want to do. We see what no longer serves us and are able to allow a Higher Truth to take its rightful place. A new order appears. The Higher Self becomes the leader. The divine spark in us ignites. Many of us are approaching these changes on all levels of life, preparing ourselves for a new time, a time where new dimensions of life appear. The twenty-two tools of creation are here to keep us aware and alert, with a flexible, expanding mind. Open to change and growth. The lower self is willing to surrender to the new order and serve the wisdom of the Higher Self. It’s happening in the soul of the individual, the soul of communities, and the soul of humanity as a whole. This is the vision for growth and development that the Letters, as tools of creation, offer us today. ♦

¹ I say “most of humanity” because both Islam and Christianity are growing religions in the world and are based on and heavily influenced by the Hebrew Bible.

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