

# *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Cube of Space, and the Emergence of the Tree of Life

*by*

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The word *Kabbalah*, which is often used to denote the corpus of Jewish mysticism and which literally means *receiving*, has a *gematria*<sup>1</sup> of 137. If we now momentarily turn our attention *Deuteronomy 8:3*, we find a very familiar passage.

*“Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8:3)*

The word that is used for *word* in this passage is not the usual Hebrew word *devar* that one might expect, but instead we encounter the word *motzah* (*mem-vav-tzaddi-aleph*) which means *utterance*. This word not only harkens back to the *ten utterances* with which God is said to have created the world<sup>2</sup>, it also has a numerical value of 137, the same as *Kabbalah*. Consequently, to me this verse epitomizes the essence of *Kabbalah*. In other words, *Kabbalah* is ultimately about trying to understand the meanings and the processes behind the creation of the universe by God as well as the sustenance that we

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<sup>1</sup> Since every letter in the Hebrew alphabet is also a number, each word has its own numerical value. This value is known as its *gematria*, from the Greek word for *measure*

<sup>2</sup> *Pirkei Avot 5:1*

receive from the One who is beyond understanding. Thus, in this one verse, we have a complete summary of that which *Kabbalah* attempts to comprehend.

Many people, when they think of *Kabbalah* and Jewish mysticism, immediately begin their study with the *Zohar*. However, long before the *Zohar*, there was the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Book of Formation*. The exact date and authorship of this book is unknown, but while the true believer will ascribe it to Abraham, the style of the Hebrew suggests a period closer to that of the *Mishnah*, circa 200 CE. The text of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is much shorter than that of the better known *Zohar*, and in many respects it is like a slim math book, i.e. short in content, but difficult for the casual reader to decipher. Additionally, the starting point of the *Sefer Yetzirah* appears to be the need to reconcile two rabbinical theories of creation. One of these being that the world was created with *ten utterances*,

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

and the other that the world was created using the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet.

“*Bezalel<sup>3</sup> knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.*” (*B. Berachot 55a*)

Consequently, the *Sefer Yetzirah* begins the process of combining and reconciling the *ten* and the *twenty-two* with these opening words in *Chapter 1, Verse 1*:

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<sup>3</sup> Bezalel was the chief craftsman for the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Covenant. See *Exodus 31*.

*“With thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom ... He created His universe.”*  
*(Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)*

In this paper we will explore select passages from the *Sefer Yetzirah* in order to see how the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet were used to define a *cube* as an early model of the universe, and we will trace the development of the *ten sefirot* from the *Sefer Yetzirah* through the later texts of the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*. Along the way we will also find clues regarding how this early model for creation, that some call the *Cube of Space*, transformed itself into the now ubiquitous model of the *Tree of Life*. And finally, we will show how the modern day *Tree of Life*, developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria in sixteenth century *Safed*, brilliantly reconciles the *Kabbalah* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* with that of the more recent *Zohar*. We begin, though, with a line-by-line analysis of various passages of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

### **Letters and Sefirot in the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah***

As with many ancient texts, the original manuscript of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is no longer in existence. Instead, we have a variety of variant texts to work from. The four main versions are: (1) the Saadia version and commentary by Saadia Gaon that was published in 931 CE, (2) the long version and commentary that was published in 946 CE by Rabbi Shabbetai Donnello, (3) the short version and commentary published circa 956 CE by Donash ibn Tamim, and (4) the redacted text known as the GRA version produced by Rabbi Eliahu, the Gaon of Vilna, in the 1700s. These four versions all agree with one

another on the main points, but variations start to enter in as one progresses to the finer details. In many respects, however, the GRA version is the best version to work because it was produced after the *Zohar* and the creation of the *Tree of Life* diagram, and, consequently, it tends to harmonize itself with these later *Kabbalistic* developments more so than the other versions do. Thus, with one exception, all our references will be to the GRA version. Also, the fact that development and evolution does exist in the texts of these different versions brings up one very important point. Namely, that *Kabbalah* is not a done and finished subject. Instead, like many other areas of inquiry, it continues to grow and evolve. In particular, I do not even consider the *Sefer Yetzirah* to be a completely finished product. In my opinion, there are still a few places where improvements could be made. But that is a topic for much later. For now, on to the text!

*“With 32 mystical paths (netivot peliyot) of wisdom engraved Yah, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God, King of the universe, El Shaddai, merciful and gracious, high and exalted, dwelling in eternity, whose name is holy. He is lofty and holy, and He created His universe with three books, with text (sefer), with number (safar), and with communication (sippur).”*  
*(Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)*

As mentioned previously, the opening of the *Sefer Yetzirah* with the number “thirty-two (10+22)” suggests in and of itself that the text will attempt to reconcile the *ten utterances* that were used to create the world with the alternative theory that the world was created

with the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet. Also, as Kaplan<sup>4</sup> points out in his commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the word *netivot* for *paths* tends to denote a more personal path as opposed to a public path. Thus, the *Sefer Yetzirah* describes the process of personal creation just as much as it does universal creation.

Next, the text says the thirty-two paths were *engraved* by *Yah* (God). The word for *engraved* (*chakak, chet-kuf-kuf*) can also be rendered as *decreed*. This should come as no surprise since in ancient times the decree of the king was often literally engraved or *set in stone*. Thus, the import is that these paths that define the universe are essentially fundamental laws that are *decreed* and *set in stone* by the Creator. Today we might say that they are analogous to the laws of physics, basic principles to which the further development of the universe must conform. Or, on a psychological level, we could liken these decrees to fundamental beliefs that a person has about themselves through which every other perception must be filtered. Additionally, in *verse 2:3*, the connection between *engraved* and *decreed* is strengthened by the words “*He engraved them with voice.*” One might also add that this engraving with voice is an example of *yesh m’ayin* or *something-from-nothing* creation. For example, this is what we see at the beginning of *Torah* where God creates his universe through the spoken word, and this even carries over into the *Gospels* of Christianity where we read at the beginning of the *Gospel of John* the phrase, “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” Finally, it should be noted that in Hebrew, the utterance *devar* means both *word* and *thing*, again illustrating the connection that exists between the spoken decree and the created object.

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<sup>4</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation* by Aryeh Kaplan

The next part of *verse 1:1* consists of several descriptive appellations of God. There is the tendency on the part of *Kabbalists* to associate these descriptive terms with the meanings of the *ten sefirot* as they are understood in later *Kabbalah*, but I've always found the lines drawn between these particular words and later developments rather tenuous, and this is one place where I think the text can be improved. If the original intent of the author was to simply describe God through attributes as is often done in the *Torah*, then in a revised reading this list could be replaced by terms that more clearly correspond to the contemporary meanings of the *ten sefirot*.

The last line of the verse above states that God created his universe with text (*sefer*), with number (*safar*), and with communication (*sippur*). In modern day terminology we might associate these processes, respectively, with right brain and left brain functions and communication between the two hemispheres. Also, note that, contrary to the base assumption of modern science, the universe is derivative. In other words, the *Sefer Yetzirah* assumes that it is life that creates the matter, and not the other way around. In particular, we might say that on a personal level it is the coordinated interaction of the two hemispheres of the brain that creates each person's unique view of the world, and it is because every person is privy to their own unique version of reality that we read the following words in the *Talmud*:

*“The Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned every man in the stamp of the first man, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow. Thus, every single person is obligated to say, ‘The world was created for my sake.’” (B. Sanhedrin 37a)*

The creation of the world with text (*sefer*), number (*safar*), and communication (*sippur*) also introduces a pattern that is repeated throughout the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Namely that the basic model for the creation of multiplicity in reality is a triad of one thing opposite another along with communication between the two opposing parts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* bases this model on *Ecclesiastes 7:14*, “And this against this made Elohim.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the communication between the opposites is generally referred to throughout the *Sefer Yetzirah* as the *covenant* between the two opposing parts. One may also think of this *covenant* as a *contract* or *protocol* for dynamic interaction.

It should also be noted that the words *sefer* (text), *safar* (number), and *sippur* (communication) all have the same three letter root in Hebrew (*samach-peh-resh*). This suggests that the division of reality into two opposites with a covenant between them is ultimately an illusion. It is like taking a glass of water and decreeing that it will be divided into water and water with water being used to communicate between. Ultimately, though, there is still only water. Ultimately, the triadic division is nothing more than a grand illusion used to create a sense of multiplicity. Furthermore, if we look at the *gematria* of the letters *samach-peh-resh*, we find that it is  $60 + 80 + 200 = 340$ , the same as *shem* (*shin+mem* =  $300 + 40 = 340$ ), the Hebrew word for *name*. Thus, we might say that the creation is the *Name of God*, and this is not the only place where we find such an association<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, when we are able to see beyond the illusion of this division, then on that day *the Name will be One*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Sefer Yetzirah* 6:4

<sup>6</sup> In particular, see *Zohar I:12a*, *Zohar I:15a*, and *Zecharia 14:9*.

<sup>7</sup> *Zecharia 14:9*

In the second verse of *Sefer Yetzirah* the term *sefirot* is introduced for the first time.

*“Ten sefirot of nothingness and 22 foundation letters: three mothers, seven doubles and twelve plain.” (Sefer Yetzirah 1:2)*

The term *sefirot* is a manufactured word that appears to be related to the word *safar* for *number*. In this regard, it could be thought of as a special term for the *ten utterances* by which the world was created. It could also represent an amalgam of the three words *sefer*, *safar*, and *sippur* that are mentioned in verse one for *text*, *number*, and *communication*.

The next word *belimah* is usually translated as *nothingness*. Additionally, this word appears only once in the entire *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible, in a verse from the *Book of Job*.

*“He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing (belimah).” (Job 26:7)*

However, the three-letter root of *belimah* (*beth-lamed-mem*) spells the verb “*to restrain*,” and this is an interpretation given in the *Talmud*.

*“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 hangs the earth upon belimah.” (B. Chullin 89a)*



To retranslate the word *belimah* in *Job* as “*restraint*” is particularly appropriate since the verses that follow all have to do with putting limits upon the elements of nature.

*“He binds up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not torn under them. He closes in the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud upon it. He has surrounded the waters with bounds, at the boundary between light and darkness.”*  
(*Job 26:8-10*)

Consequently, a better way to translate the second verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah* may be,

*“Ten sefirot of restraint and 22 foundation letters: three mothers, seven doubles and twelve plain.”* (*Sefer Yetzirah 1:2*)

If we now look at the *gematria* of *belimah*, we find some patterns that are very interesting. On the one hand, the numerical value of *bet-lamed-yud-mem-hey* is 87, and this is the numerical value of the word *ulhavdil* (*vav-lamed-hey-bet-dalet-yud-lamed*) that is found in *Genesis 1:18* and which means “*and to divide.*” Thus, just as putting restraints upon the extents of different portions of nature is an essential part of the creative process, so also is the division of oneness into various components. Furthermore, a puzzle that the ancient rabbis pondered was that at the end of the second day of creation God did not say, “It is good,” as he does at the conclusion of the other days. One of the reasons given by the rabbis in *Genesis Rabbah IV:6* was that even though these divisions were necessary for the creation of a stable and orderly world, they still represented a schism, a

destruction of the original state of undifferentiated unity. And in that respect, it was not good.

On the other hand, we may also equate *belimah* with *Elohim* plus the letter *aleph*. The God name *Elohim* has a *gematria* of 86 (*aleph-lamed-hey-yud-mem*), and the letter *aleph* has a numerical value of 1, and  $86+1=87$ . However, the glyph for *aleph* may additionally be decomposed into two *yuds* and a *vav* ( $\aleph = \text{ױ} + \text{ױ} + \text{ױ}$ ), and this results in a numerical value of 26 which is the same, in Hebrew, as the most sacred four letter name for God (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) that is today always pronounced as *Adonai* (*Lord*). Hence, we might now say that *belimah* equals *Elohim* plus *Adonai*. And what is the import of this? Namely that, according to tradition, in order for this world to endure, God had to create it with a balance between mercy and justice, and the attribute of mercy is symbolized by the name *Adonai* while justice is represented by *Elohim*. This interpretation of *Adonai* and *Elohim* evolved from the many times in the *Bible* that *Adonai* is used in conjunction with acts of grace and mercy while the name *Elohim* is connected to verses that speak of the dispensation of God's judgment.

*“The Holy One, blessed be He: ' If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then stand!' Hence the expression, ' THE LORD GOD (Adonai Elohim).”*  
*(Genesis Rabbah XII:15)*

Thus, we may conclude that the ten constraining *sefirot* also provide a balance between mercy and justice, or, to express it another way, between expansion (growth) and contraction (regulation).

The next verse of *Sefer Yetzirah* that we'll look at explicitly states that the world was created with the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet.

*“Twenty-two Foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, and with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed.” (Sefer Yetzirah 2:2)*

The statement that the world was created with the *twenty-two letters* does not have to be taken as some sort of ancient Jewish fairy tale. Instead, there is indeed a kernel of truth to it. For example, this verse says, on the one hand, that reality is formed from irreducible component parts, and this is not unlike saying that the universe is composed of protons, electrons, and neutrons, or that a counting number such as 6 may be written as the product of the irreducible primes 2 and 3. Furthermore, we may also interpret this verse on a more personal, psychological level. Mentally, we might say that our world is indeed created from words, and as we pointed out previously, the Hebrew *devar* means both *word* and *thing*. It is through words and their interactions with one another that we create our particular worldview and the unique reality that each of us sees. Furthermore, the constituent parts of these words are nothing more than the letters of the alphabet. Thus, if words create our description of reality and if letters create words, then it is no

exaggeration to say that letters create the universe. A statement like this simply needs to be understood in its proper context.

The verse above goes on to say that *He engraved them, carved them, permuted them, weighted them, and transformed them*. As mentioned previously, the word for *engraved* (*chet-kuf-kuf-nun*) can also be read as *decreed*, and this refers to *something-from-nothing* creation. Similarly, the word for *carved* (*chet-tzaddi-bet-nun*) also means *shaped*, and this refers to *yesh m'yesh* or *something-from-something* creation. For example, once we have that initial inspiration that pops into our heads out of nowhere, we can then begin to shape the idea even further. That shaping is *something-from-something* creation.

The next keyword we encounter in our verse is *permuted* (*tzaddi-resh-peh-nun*). This is yet a further example of *something-from-something* creation. By joining and combining letters in different ways, we can create different words. As the *Sefer Yetzirah* itself points out in *verse 2:4*, the same letters that spell *delight* (*ayin-nun-gimmel*) may easily be rearranged to spell *plague* (*nun-gimmel-ayin*). Or as I like to express it, the only difference between a clean room and a messy room is how things are arranged. Through mere rearrangement of what's already there, we can create a different reality.

After *permuted* we find the word *weighed* (*shin-kuf-lamed-nun*), and this refers to measurements or limitations being put upon objects. For instance, if we assess the weight of an object as 170 lbs, then that also means that its weight is not equal to some other number. The number that defines the object also limits it from being anything else.

Additionally, as mentioned before, limitation and delimitation are important parts of the creative process. This is eloquently expressed in *Job 26* and *Psalms 104*.

*“He binds up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not torn under them. He closes in the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud upon it. He has surrounded the waters with bounds, at the boundary between light and darkness.”*  
(*Job 26:8-10*)

*“Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not move forever. You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they fled; at the voice of your thunder they hurried away. They went up the mountains; they flowed down the valleys to the place which you appointed for them. You have set a bound that they may not pass over, so that they might not again cover the earth.”* (*Psalms 104:5-9*)

And finally, we come in *verse 2:2* to the word *transformed* (*hey-mem-yud-resh-nun*) which can also be translated as *substituted* or *exchanged*. When properly understood, this is something we see in nature all the time. In other words, when nature finds a successful pattern, it tends to use that pattern over and over again. For example, we see spiral shapes not only in the largest galaxies, but also in the smallest seashells, and the branching pattern of a particular tree is not only present in its largest branches, but also in the smallest twigs. On a personal level, we apply the same psychological pattern to a variety of situations we may find ourselves in. Thus, if we picture ourselves as a

successful leader, then we will generally tend to assume a leadership role regardless of the changes in the surrounding circumstances. By applying the same patterns to different situations, we create not only a more varied universe, we also do it with a minimum of effort. In summary, *verse 2:2* not only asserts that the world is created from primary components, it also gives a detailed account of the steps involved in the creative process: *decreeing, shaping, combining, measuring*, and finally, the *substitution* of a successful pattern into a variety of situations.

Now we return to *verse 1:2* where we read that the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet are divided into three groups: three mother letters, seven double letters, and twelve plain.

*“Ten sefirot of restraint and 22 foundation letters: three mothers, seven doubles and twelve plain.” (Sefer Yetzirah 1:2)*

In *verse 3:4*, the three mother letters are identified and associated, respectively, with the elements of *air, water, and fire*.

*“Three Mothers, aleph-mem-shin, in the Universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire Earth was created from water and air from Breath decides between them.” (Sefer Yetzirah 3:4)*

The associations of *air*, *water*, and *fire* with *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin* are quite natural in that the Hebrew word for *air* (*aleph-vav-yud-resh*) begins with *aleph*, the Hebrew word for *water* (*mem-yud-mem*) begins with *mem*, and the Hebrew word for *fire* (*aleph-shin*) ends in *shin*. Also, this verse reiterates the primary creative pattern found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* of a triad of two opposites connected by an intermediary principle. Additionally, we could say that all three mother letters are contained in the *Name* (*shem*, *shin-mem*) since you cannot say *shem* without the air from the silent letter *aleph* to connect the *shin* with the *mem*. Now, let us backtrack for a moment to *verse 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, and from fathers, consequences.” (Sefer Yetzirah 3:2)*

The three fathers are explicitly identified by Kaplan<sup>8</sup> as the three letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav* that are used in the most sacred masculine name for God (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), and this is quite appropriate in terms of *verse 1:13* that we’ll explore next. Also, in ancient times the ring of the king was used to impress a seal upon official documents. As we will see in the verse coming up, the letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav*, which correspond to *aleph*, *mem* and *shin*, may be arranged in six different permutations, and these permutations seal the six directions. And by so doing, a more limited world is created that separates us from the wondrous secrets of larger reality.

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<sup>8</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation* by Aryeh Kaplan

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

The ordering of the letters above for the seals in the six directions is taken, in this instance not from the GRA version of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but from the short version and the Saadia version. The lesson I want to derive can be done using the GRA version, but in many respects I find it easier to do with the version of the text I've presented above.

The main thing to realize in this passage is that as we move from our first direction to our final one, we are moving from what I like to call *maximum revealed holiness* to *maximum concealed holiness*. The directions and their corresponding letter combinations are summarized in the table that follows.



DIRECTION	LETTERS	
Up	YHV	<i>yud-hey-vav</i>
Down	YVH	<i>yud-vav-hey</i>
East	HYV	<i>hey-yud-vav</i>
West	HVY	<i>hey-vav-yud</i>
South	VYH	<i>vav-yud-hey</i>
North	VHY	<i>vav-hey-yud</i>

The direction of *up* is associated with *maximum revealed holiness* in that the unbounded infinity of space awakens a sense of the *infinite* within us. Next, we have *down*, the earth, and its beauty is also holy though more confined by boundaries. Continuing, we might say that holiness is more revealed in the *east* than in the *west* because the rising sun represents clarity and illumination. And finally, holiness is more revealed in the *south* than in the *north* because the warmth of the tropics represents *mercy* while the cold *north* is a symbol of *severity* and constant struggle. Hence, as we move through the directions in this order, we are also moving along a continuum from *God revealed* to *God concealed*.

Now let's interpret the story told by the six permutations of the letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav*. First, note that the letter *yud* is the first letter of the most sacred Hebrew name for God (*yud-hey-vav-hey*), and it symbolizes God as *King*. Second, the letter *hey* traditionally represents the presence of God that is known as the *Shechinah* and that is sometimes metaphorically referred to as the *Daughter*. Additionally, there is the tradition that when the people sin, they go into exile and separation from God, but at the same time the *Shechinah* goes with them. And finally, the letter *vav* grammatically stands for the word *and*, and as such it represents *connection* and *union*. Consequently, if we adhere to the following rules for interpretation, then we'll see that the permutations of the letters tell their own story of the journey from *revealed holiness* to the *concealment of holiness*.

Rule 1: Holiness is more revealed when the *yud* comes before the *hey* and/or the *vav*.

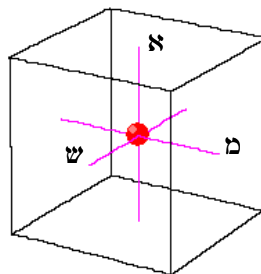
Rule 2: Holiness is more revealed when the *hey* comes before the *vav*.

Rule 3: Holiness is more revealed when the *vav* does not come between (and create a separation between) the *yud* and the *hey*.

Following these guidelines, we can now let the letters and the directions create for us the following allegory of the peregrination from the *revealed* to the *concealed*.

DIRECTION	LETTERS	TRANSLATION	INTERPRETATION
Up	<i>yud-hey-vav</i>	<i>King/Daughter United</i>	There is no separation between God and the Shechinah
Down	<i>yud-vav-hey</i>	<i>King and Daughter</i>	The King comes first, but now there is separation by <i>vav</i> . The Shechinah is in exile.
East	<i>hey-yud-vav</i>	<i>Daughter/King United</i>	Holiness is diminished because the King comes second.
West	<i>hey-vav-yud</i>	<i>Daughter and King</i>	The letter <i>vav</i> creates separation between the Shechinah and God.
South	<i>vav-yud-hey</i>	<i>United King/Daughter</i>	With the letter <i>vav</i> coming first, both God and the Shechinah are more hidden.
North	<i>vav-hey-yud</i>	<i>United Daughter/King</i>	With the King coming last, God is in a state of maximum concealment.

Thus, the six permutations not only complete and seal the six directions that define our world, they also tell the tale of a spiritual journey. Furthermore, since the father letters *yud*, *hey*, and *vav* correspond, respectively, to the mother letters *aleph* (א), *mem* (מ), and *shin* (ש), these three mother letters define a three-dimensional axis system. In other words, *aleph* represents *up/down*<sup>9</sup>, *mem* corresponds to *east/west*, and *shin* to *south/north*. This is the beginning of the construction of the *Cube of Space* from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.



<sup>9</sup> Since the *up/down* permutations both begin with *yud*.

In our next verse from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we will begin to examine the seven double letters of the alphabet. These are the letters that, traditionally, can be pronounced with either a hard or a soft sound, and as such, they represent those things in life which can manifest as polar opposites.

*Seven Doubles: bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav. Their foundation is Wisdom, Wealth, Seed, Life, Dominance, Peace and Grace. (Sefer Yetzirah 4:2)*

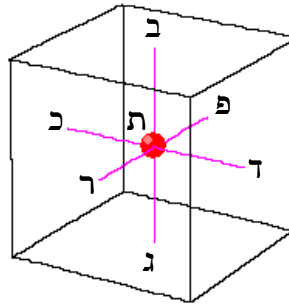
*Seven Doubles: bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav in speech and in transposition. The transpose of Wisdom is Folly, the transpose of Wealth is Poverty, the transpose of Seed is Desolation, the transpose of Life is Death, the transpose of Dominance is Subjugation, the transpose of Peace is War, the transpose of Grace is Ugliness. (Sefer Yetzirah 4:3)*

In *verse 4:2* we find seven virtues that are assigned to the seven letters of the Hebrew alphabet that have double sounds, and in the following verse we see each of these qualities matched with its opposite. The virtues of *wisdom, wealth, seed, life, dominance, peace*, and *grace*, however, do not appear in the same order in all the different versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. In other versions, these qualities are assigned to different letters. However, in our construction of the *Cube of Space* we will see just how well the letter assignments above fit the given associations, and later on when we discuss the *Tree of Life* diagram, we will also find a good fit.

In *verse 4:4*, we see exactly how these letters are going to be incorporated into the *Cube of Space*.

*Seven Doubles: bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav, Up and Down East and West North and South And the Holy Palace precisely in the center and it supports them all. (Sefer Yetzirah 4:4)*

We can now associate *bet* (ב), *gimmel* (ג), *dalet* (ד), *kaf* (כ), *peh* (פ), *resh* (ר), and *tav* (ת) with the extremities and center of the three dimensional axis system established previously by the three mother letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*.



We can also at this point create stories to help us understand and make sense of the qualities that are assigned to these seven letters.

Wisdom – *Bet* – Up: When we look at the sky, particular during the night, we are faced with an unboundedness and infinity that goes beyond our regular daily experience. Our focus on the lack of boundaries in space can cause the boundaries within our own minds

to begin to dissolve. And in so doing, we can open ourselves up to a higher *wisdom* that previously we may have been unable to hear.

Wealth – *Gimmel* – Down: Below us is the earth, the source of all true *wealth*. Whether we are talking about minerals or materials or food, all *wealth* comes from the earth. Thus, a frequent metaphor of the *Bible* is “A land flowing with milk and honey. (*Exodus 3:8*).”

Seed – *Dalet* – East: The *east* is the direction of the sunrise, and it is the beginning of the day that is the *seed* for that to come. And as the day unfolds, the *seeds* we have planted sprout and transition into *life*. As it says in *Ecclesiastes 11:6*, “In the morning, sow your *seed*.”

Life – *Kaf* – West: From one perspective, if *seed* is the beginning of what is to be, *life* is the record of what has been. Our *life*, as we know it, is the sum of our memories and experiences. At the end of the day the sun sets in the *west*, and we reflect on the *life* that we constructed in the hours previous.

Dominance – *Peh* – North: As we venture into the *north*, our world becomes harsher and full of challenges and difficulties. Survival itself becomes a struggle in the bitter cold. Consequently, the need to *dominate* and control nature comes to the forefront.

Peace – *Resh* – South: In the *south* life is easier, and we do not have to engage in the immediate struggle for *dominance* and survival that is characterized by the *north*. Think

in terms of a tropical paradise. In the south we can relax and experience *peace* and a state of wholeness.

Grace – *Tav* – Center: The center always represents a point of balance, and whenever I think of the letter *tav*, I immediately think of the word *Torah*. It is *Torah*, when used correctly, that keeps us in balance and on an even keel. Furthermore, *Torah* is associated with *grace* since in the *Talmud* we read, “*To him who is engaged in the study of the Torah by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day. (B. Avodah Zarah 3b)*”

As we see from the above discussion, the qualities attributed to the letters *bet*, *gimmel*, *dalet*, *kaf*, *peh*, *resh*, and *tav* correspond well to the compass directions of the *Cube of Space*. Also, notice at this point that we have the following associations attributed to the three mother letters and the seven double letters.

<b>Mother Letters:</b>	aleph	א	air
	mem	מ	water
	shin	ש	fire
<b>Double Letters:</b>	bet	ב	up
	gimmel	ג	down
	dalet	ד	east
	kaf	כ	west
	peh	פ	north
	resh	ר	south
	tav	ת	center

Additionally, observe what it says in *verse 1:14* of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

*“These are the ten sefirot of restraint: The Breath of the Living God, Breath from Breath, Water from Breath, Fire from Water, Up, Down, East, West, North, South.” (Sefer Yetzirah 1:14)*

The *breath of the Living God* is represented by the letter *aleph*. Similarly, *water, fire, up, down, east, west, north, and south* correspond to the letters *mem, shin, bet, gimmel, dalet, kaf, peh, and resh*. This leaves only the letter *tav* to account for, and so it must correspond to *breath from breath*. This makes sense because *aleph* is the first letter of the alphabet and *tav* is the last, and in *verse 1:7* we read *“Their end is imbedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end.”* In particular, if *tav* represents *Torah*, then this has additional meaning to us since in tradition the *Torah* is the blueprint for the universe<sup>10</sup>. Thus, as with any blueprint, the end is contained in the beginning and vice-versa, and this implies that the end is the beginning. Hence, *breath from breath*.

At the very least we may conclude from the above that the three mother letters and the seven double letters are associated with the *ten sefirot*. However, I wish to carry the argument even further. My belief is that, at this point in the development of *Kabbalah*, **the three mother letters and the seven double letters are the ten sefirot**. In other words, it is my theory that these ten letters originally did double duty, counted twice as both letters and as the restraining utterances represented by the *sefirot*, and that it is only in later *Kabbalistic* works such as the *Bahir* and the *Zohar* that the *sefirot* acquired new interpretations and an existence entirely independent of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

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<sup>10</sup> *Genesis Rabbah 1:1*

And now it is time to examine the remaining twelve letters of the Hebrew alphabet. At the beginning of *chapter 5* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* we read the following.

*“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)*

In this verse, the letters appear to be associated with primary experiences and sensations that define our world. Also, as with the other letters and their associations, variations in the assignments occur as we move from one version of *Sefer Yetzirah* to another. Nonetheless, I feel that the assignments indicated above work quite well in that, in each instance, we can find one or more related Hebrew words beginning with the appropriate key letter. Results are summarized in the following table.

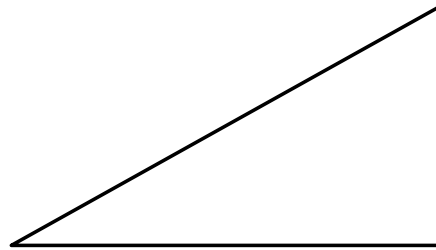


Hebrew Letter	Glyph	Assignment in <i>Sefer Yetzirah</i>	Related Hebrew Word	Translation
hey	ה	speech/conversation	הבטחה	utterance
vav	ו	thought/reflection	וכוח	debate
zayin	ז	motion/walking	זבוח	flux, flow
			זוח	to move
			זיזוי	moveable
			זיעה	oscillation
chet	ח	sight/seeing	חזיון	vision, prophecy
			חזיה	seeing
tet	ט	hearing	טרטור	noise
yud	י	action	ישמ	action
			יגיעה	exertion
lamed	ל	coition/procreation	לבן	semen
			לבב	to attract
nun	נ	smelling	נחיר	nostril
samech	ס	sleeping	סגום	thick blanket
			סהרורי	sleep walker
ayin	ע	anger	עברה	anger
			עשק	quarrel
tzaddi	צ	taste/swallowing	צרך	to consume
kuf	ק	laughter	קפריסי	humorous
			קוריוז	funny incident

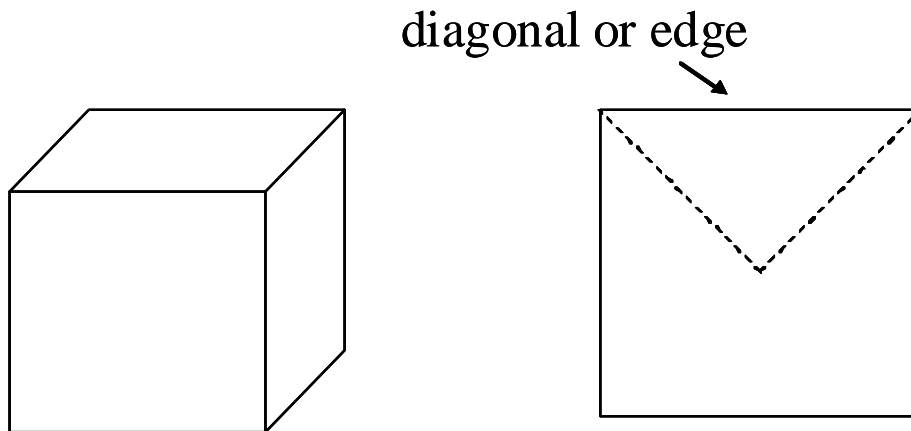
Finally, in the verse below from *Sefer Yetzirah*, the creation of the *Cube of Space* from the letters of the alphabet is made complete.

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

In this verse, the Hebrew word *alachson* that is generally translated as *diagonal* actually means the longest side of a triangle. For example, in a right triangle this would be the hypotenuse which is usually oriented so that it looks like a diagonal line from the bottom to the top of the triangle.

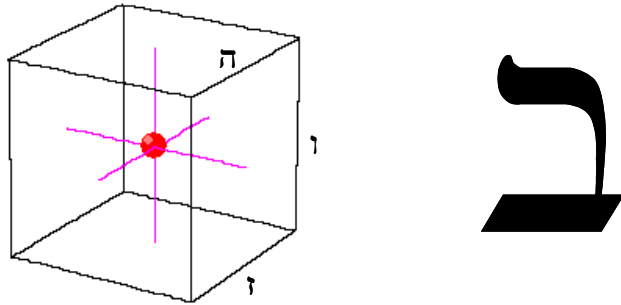


If we now imagine creating triangles by drawing lines from the center of a cube to its various corner points, then the longest side of each triangle will be an edge of the cube. Thus, the twelve diagonal boundaries are nothing more than the twelve edges found on a typical cube.



The twelve plain letters are listed in their usual order of appearance in the Hebrew alphabet, and beginning with the *east* face of the cube they are, in the GRA version of the

*Sefer Yetzirah*, attached to cube in such a way that they seem to trace out the letter *bet* on each face of the *Cube of Space*.

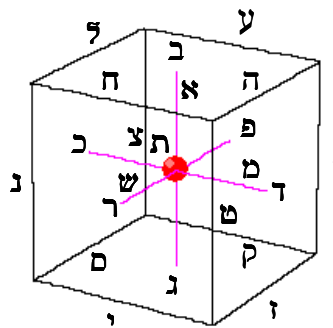


This is meaningful because of the tradition that the letter *bet* stands for a *blessing*, and that the *Torah* begins with this letter in order to indicate that the creation of the world is a *blessing* to those who reside in it.

*“R. Judah b. Pazzi lectured on the Creation story, in accordance with this interpretation of Bar Kappara. Why was it created with a bet? Because it connotes blessing (berakah).” (Genesis Rabbah I:10)*

*“The letter 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 (Berakhot) 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)*

The last part of our verse from the *Sefer Yetzirah* says that these twelve plain letters are the *boundaries of the world*, and this is quite true if we think of these letters as corresponding to sensory experience because it is the information from our senses that defines the borders of our physical reality. Additionally, if we now add the remaining twelve plain letters to our diagram, then we complete the construction of the *Cube of Space* from the letters of the alphabet.



In many respects, this is an incredibly wonderful diagram. It incorporates, via the three spatial axes, the doctrine that our perception of reality hinges upon triads of one thing being opposite another along with the third member of the triad, a mechanism for dynamic exchange. It also defines the six primary directions in terms of qualities such as *wisdom* and *folly* that exist along a continuum from one polar opposite to the other, and it recognizes the center of gravity of the cube as a seventh direction representing the point of absolute balance. And finally, it alludes to sensory experience as the defining boundary for our perception of physical reality. Quite a remarkable diagram, indeed! Furthermore, we can also interpret the *Holy of Holies* of the ancient *Temple* in Jerusalem as a microcosm for the universe represented by the *Cube of Space*. The room known as the *Holy of Holies* was constructed in the shape of a cube, and in the center of this room

was the *Ark of the Covenant* that contained the *Scroll of the Law*. This is a perfect reflection of the letter *tav* at the center of our cube representing the *Torah*.

As wonderful a model as the *Cube of Space* is, it does, however, have a few drawbacks. In particular, because it is three-dimensional, it is harder to represent on a typical two-dimensional piece of paper, and, furthermore, important parts of the diagram are embedded within the cube, thus making them inaccessible to what the eye can normally see. This, in and of itself, could serve as motivation for the construction of an alternative, two-dimensional model, and as we explore some passages from the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*, we will see the development and redefinition of the *sefirot* unfold.

The *Bahir*, *The Book of Illumination (Brilliance)*, was published in the late 1100s. It was allegedly written by the first century rabbinic sage Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, but most scholars disagree. It was a common practice in earlier times to elevate a work in stature by ascribing it to someone of authority. The book itself, however, is like a *CliffsNotes* version of many earlier writings and streams of thought in rabbinic literature. Additionally, like a student taking notes in a class, it often either adds on to earlier ideas or restates them a slightly different way. In particular, the *Bahir* discusses stories and *midrashim* on *Genesis*, the letters of the alphabet, the *ten sefirot*, and *mysteries of the soul*.

In the *Bahir*, we find further development of some of the strands that were begun in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Specifically, we see the beginnings of a redefining of the *sefirot* (away from the meanings of *air, water, fire, up, down, east, west, north, south, and center* that

we find in the *Sefer Yetzirah*) as the *sefirot* begin to acquire meanings that are independent of the letters of the alphabet.

*“What are the Ten Sayings? The first is the Highest Crown. ... The second one is Wisdom. ... The third one is the quarry of the Torah, the treasury of Wisdom, the quarry of the “spirit of God.” (Bahir 141-143)*

In this passage from the *Bahir*, the first three *sefirot* are named as *crown*, *wisdom*, and *the quarry of the Torah*. Of these three names, the first two have survived to modern times, and they are the standard appellations for the first and second *sefirot* on the *Tree of Life*. However, few today would recognize the *quarry of the Torah* as the third *sefirah*.

It’s also in the *Bahir* that we encounter tree imagery that is functionally equivalent to the *Cube of Space*<sup>11</sup>.

*“I am the One who planted this tree in order that all the world should delight in it. And in it, I spread All. I called it All because all depend upon it, all emanate from it, and all need it. To it they look, for it they wait, and from it, souls fly in joy.”*  
(*Bahir 22*)

*“What is this tree that you mentioned? He said: It represents the Powers of the Blessed Holy One, one above the other.” (Bahir 122)*

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<sup>11</sup> All emanates from the *Tree*, and it represents the *Powers*. Similarly, the letters of the *Cube* create everything, and it contains the *sefirot*.

The passage from the *Bahir* that will be most important to us, however, is the one below.

*“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)*

This passage is clearly a reference to the *Cube of Space* that is described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but the additional element of the *Tree* is added. In particular, we read that the *Tree* is contained inside the *Cube*. This is momentous because there is no explicit reference to a *Tree* in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and yet tree imagery is an important motif and mythic element both within Judaism and in the myths of cultures around the world. For example, in Norse mythology there is the *world tree* called *Yggdrasil*, and its branches extend far into the heavens. In Siberian folklore, it is a similar *world tree* that connects the upper and lower worlds with this one, and it is through this tree the shaman is able to travel from one realm to the next. In pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures, there was also a *world tree* that performed functions similar to that of the Siberian's. And in Judaism, we not only have the appearance of the *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of Knowledge* early on in the *Torah*, we also have later mythologies surrounding a life-giving *Tree of Souls*<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>See the *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* by Howard Schwartz

*“The sixth precept is to be fruitful and multiply. For he who performs this precept causes the stream of existence to be perennially flowing so that its waters never fail, and the sea is full on every side, and new souls are created and emerge from the “tree” (of life) and the celestial hosts are increased in company with those souls. This is implied in the words: Let the waters swarm with the movement of living souls.” (Zohar I:12b)*

*“On the Sabbath day, when the day is being sanctified, myriads of new souls emerge from the Tree of Life, and these are breathed into the denizens of earth and enter into them and remain in them during the whole of the Sabbath, and at the close of the Sabbath all these souls ascend once more to the regions of light, there to crown themselves with holy crowns of supernal brightness and splendor. And as at man's birth the Holy One provides him with a soul, so also does He provide him with this “other” soul specially for the Sabbath: at the same time not “diminishing” the food, raiment, etc., from his week-day soul.” (Zohar II:98a)*

*“All souls (neshamah) emanate from a high and mighty Tree, from that “River which goes out of Eden” (Gen. 2:10)” (Zohar II:99b)*

As Jung would likely say, the tree motif is a fundamental, universal archetype. Consequently, it is important for this motif to eventually be incorporated into any mystical theory of the universe.



The *Zohar*, *The Book of Splendor (Radiance)*, from which we have just quoted above was published in Spain the late 1200s (after the appearance of the *Bahir*) by Rabbi Moses de Leon. It was allegedly written by Shimon bar Yochai, a rabbi of the second century CE, but again scholars disagree based upon evidence such as a careful linguistic analysis of the text. Like the *Midrash Rabbah* collection, it is arranged as a collection of stories and *midrashim* around the standard *Torah portions*, but whereas the *midrashim* of *Midrash Rabbah* possess the same flavor of fine logical discourse as the arguments found in the *Talmud*, entering the *Zohar* can be like entering a dream. It is often hard to follow and hard to separate what is real from what is not real. Nonetheless, amidst the uncertainties, one can still walk away with much wisdom and understanding.

Within the covers of the *Zohar*, we find even further development of the *sefirot* in spite of the fact that this particular term is not used in the original text. Nonetheless, that does not mean that the text doesn't talk at length about topics such as the *ten utterances* that the *sefirot* represent. In particular, let's look at the following passages from the *Zohar*.

*“R. Jose propounded the question: ‘What are the “six days of Bereshit” of which the Rabbis speak so often?’ R. Simeon answered: ‘These are, in truth, “the cedars of Lebanon which he has planted”. As the cedars spring from Lebanon, so these six days spring from Bereshith. These are the six supernal days which are specified in the verse: “Thine, O Lord, are the Greatness (**Gedulah**), the Might (**Gevurah**), the Beauty (**Tiferet**), the Victory (**Netzach**), and the Majesty (**Hod**)” (I Chronicles 29:11). The words “For all” refer to the Zaddik (righteous one), who*

is **Yesod** (foundation of the world). The word *Bereshit* we interpret to mean “the second, i.e. **Chokmah** (Wisdom) is the starting-point”, because the supernal **Keter** (Crown), which is really first, is too recondite and therefore is not counted; hence the second is the starting-point.” (Zohar I:31a-31b)

“When Thought illumines, though from what source is not known, it is clothed and enveloped in **Binah** (understanding), and then further lights appear and one is embraced with the other until all are intertwined.” (Zohar I:65a)

“And thus, as it is *hasidah*, there springs from it **Chesed** (mercy), which is the primordial light referred to in the statement: “And God said, Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). (Zohar I:163a)

“These are the thirteen aspects of praise, enumerated during the course of that hymn: song, praise; hymn and psalm; strength and dominion; victory, power and greatness; adoration and glory; holiness-these together make twelve, and unto these is added **Malchut**- sovereignty-which is the thirteenth, and whose office is to unite all the rest in one bond, for it (Sovereignty) receives blessings from the others.” (Zohar II:132a)

From these passages we see that we can find within the *Zohar* the modern names of all of the *ten sefirot*. The only await further development and redaction by the *Kabbalists* of sixteenth century Safed in Israel.

We will now examine one more concept from earlier *Biblical* and *rabbinic* literature that the *Zohar* elaborates on and that appears to be related to the *Cube of Space*, namely, the *Stone of Foundation*. The original reference to this *stone* appears to occur in *Isaiah 28:16*.

*“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)*

In the *Midrash Rabbah* collection, we find a handful of references that elaborate on the meaning of the *Stone of Foundation* such as the one below from *Numbers Rabbah*.

*“The building of the world commenced from the spot on which the Temple was to stand. R. Jose b. Ilalafta said: Why was it called Foundation Stone? Because thereon began the foundation of the world. Hence it is written, Out of Zion the perfection of beauty, God hath shines forth (Psalm 50:2).”*

*(Numbers Rabbah XII:4)*

However, it is when we enter the *Zohar* that we experience the full mythic force of this metaphor.

*“This foundation stone<sup>13</sup> was created before the world, to be the point from which the world evolved.” (Zohar I:72a)*

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Matt, in the Pritzker edition of the *Zohar*, also refers to this *stone* as the *Rock of Weaving* that weaves the world into existence.

*“When the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to create the world, He detached one precious stone from underneath His Throne of Glory and plunged it into the Abyss, one end of it remaining fastened therein whilst the other end stood out above; and this other and superior head constituted the nucleus of the world, the point out of which the world started, spreading itself to right and left and into all directions, and by which it is sustained. That nucleus, that stone, is called sh'thyiah (foundation), as it was the starting-point of the world. The name sh'thyiah, furthermore, is a compound of shath (founded) and Yah (God), signifying that the Holy One, blessed be He, made it the foundation and starting-point of the world and all that is therein.” (Zohar II:222a)*

Already, we can see some similarities between the *Cube of Space* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Stone of Foundation* of the *Zohar*. The *Cube of Space* is created by the letters that are used to create the world, and the *Stone of Foundation* likewise is used to create the world.

*““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” (eben shethiah), which is the central point of the universe and on which stands the Holy of Holies.” (Zohar I:71b)*

Because the Hebrew word for *sapphire* has the same three-letter root as the word *sefirot*, we may make a substitution and say that the *Stone of Foundation* is also the *Stone of Sefirot*, suggesting that the *sefirot* are contained in the *Stone of Foundation*.

This next passage from the *Zohar* not only connects additional verses in the *Tanach* to the *Stone of Foundation*, it also presents what could be construed as connections between the *stone* and the elements of the three mother letters (*air, water, and fire*) and the seven double letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, thus strengthening the connection between the *Stone of Foundation* and the *sefirot*.

*“R. Jose discoursed on the verse: Whereupon were the foundations thereof fastened ? (Job 38:6). He said: ‘When God created the world, He established it on seven pillars, but upon what those pillars rest no one may know, since it is a recondite and inscrutable mystery. The world did not come into being until God took a certain stone, which is called the “foundation stone”, and cast it into the abyss so that it held fast there, and from it the world was planted. This is the central point of the universe, and on this point stands the holy of holies. This is the stone referred to in the verses, “Who laid the corner-stone thereof” (Job 38:6), “the stone of testing, the precious corner-stone” (Isaiah 28:16), and “the stone that the builders despise became the head of the corner” (Psalm 128:22). This stone is compounded of fire, water, and air, and rests on the abyss. Sometimes water flows from it and fills the deep. This stone is set as a sign in the centre of the world. It is referred to in the words, “And Jacob took a stone and set it as a*

*pillar” (Genesis 31:45). Not that he took this stone, which was created from the beginning, but he established it above and below, by making there a “house of God”. This stone has on it seven eyes, as it is written, “On one stone seven eyes” (Zecharia 3:9), and it is called “foundation stone”, for one thing because the world was planted from it, and for another because God set it as a source of blessing to the world.” (Zohar I:231a)*

Recall how the twelve plain letters of the alphabet were associated with the edges of the *Cube of Space* in such a way that they traced the letter *bet*, for a *blessing*, in each of the cardinal directions. Similarly, as written above, the *Stone of Foundation* is set as “a source of blessing to the world.”

The next passage speaks of the association of the *stone* with the *Temple* or *God’s house*.

*“R. Judah began to expound the verse, “And this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God’s house” (Genesis 28:22). ‘That stone’, he said, ‘was the foundation stone out of which the world evolved, and on which the Temple was built.’” (Zohar I:72a)*

The primary meaning of *God’s house* is, of course, the *Temple* in Jerusalem, but the passage below suggests that we might also think of the entire universe as *God’s house*, or as the passage itself says, “*This palace is called Elohim.*”

*“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, 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, 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.” The Zohar is that from which were created all the creative utterances through the extension of the point of this mysterious brightness.” (Zohar I:15a)*

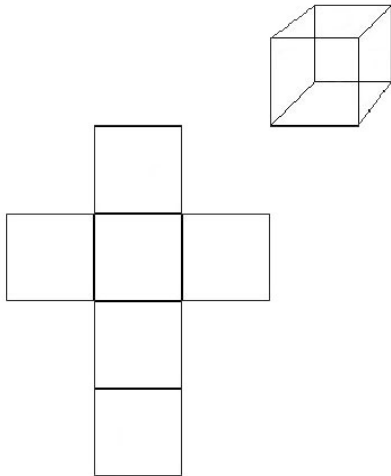
As we see from the above, the *Cube of Space* and the *Stone of Foundation* contain many common mythic elements. Thus, they appear to be isomorphic images of the same mythic concept. I believe they are basically the same notion simply expressed in two slightly different ways at different points in time. To summarize, below is a table illustrating the similarities between the two myths.

<b><i>Cube of Space</i></b>	<b><i>Stone of Foundation</i></b>
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 <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>

If we turn our attention back to *Genesis 28:22*, “*And this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house,*” we can now appreciate the prescience of this statement as the transformation of the *stone* into the *pillar* is a mirror image of the transition from the earlier *Cube of Space* into the later *Kabbalistic Tree of Life*. The only thing we don’t know for certain is all the details of how this transformation originally came about, but nonetheless, we can make some good, educated guesses.

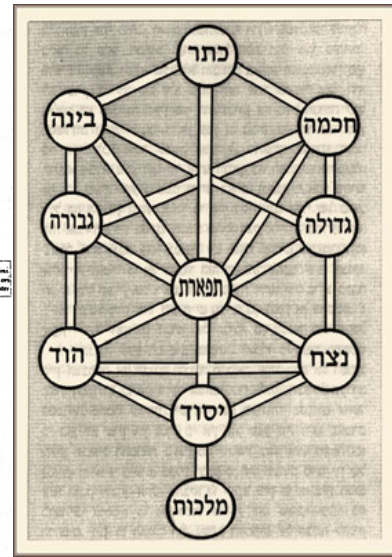
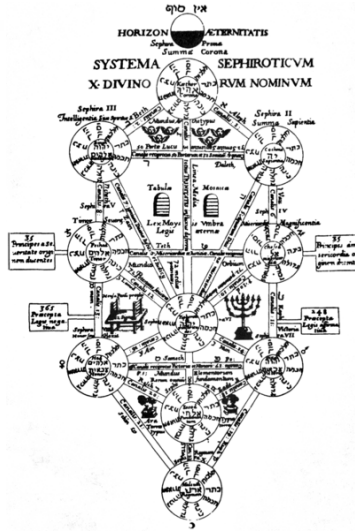
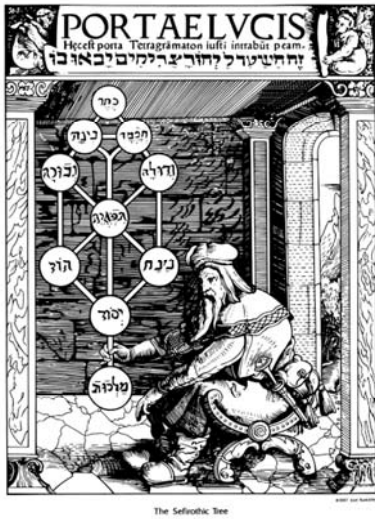


If we want to convert a three-dimensional *cube* into a two-dimensional object, the obvious thing to do is to unfold it the way we would unfold a cardboard box. Below is an illustration of the most typical unfolding.

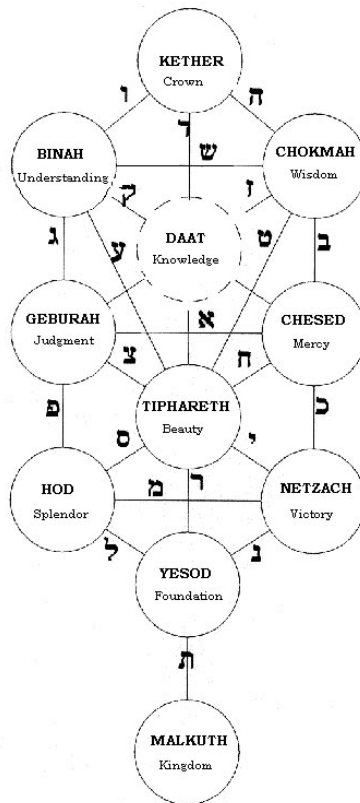


Admittedly, when the box is unfolded, the resulting image will be suggestive to some of a Christian cross. However, the medieval rabbis would certainly see it through their own eyes and understanding, and hence, would be more likely to find the image suggestive of a tree. Furthermore, in the *Sefer Yetzirah* 6:5 we read “*three opposite three,*” and the above diagram certainly suggests putting three *sefirot* on each side with the remaining four in the extended central column, and this is exactly how it is done today in the modern image of the *Tree of Life*.

One thing we do know is that the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* that was developed after the publication of the *Zohar* did not achieve its present form all at once. Like most other things, it, too, underwent evolution, and below are some of the earlier images of the *tree*.

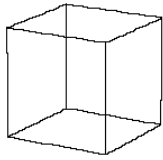


However, it is the version of the *tree* developed in the late sixteenth century by Rabbi Isaac Luria that is the most enduring and the most remarkable in terms of how it reconciles the early *Kabbalah* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* with much later *Kabbalah*.

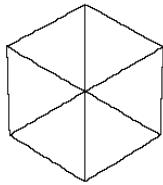


Again, we don't know precisely how Rabbi Isaac Luria derived his final version of the *tree*, but if we go back to the *Cube of Space* as our starting point, we can outline the following remarkable derivation.

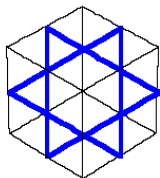
1. *Take a cube.*



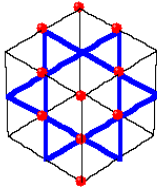
2. *Rotate it until it looks like a hexagon.*



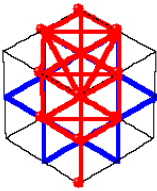
3. *Draw a star.*



4. Add some points.



5. Create a tree!

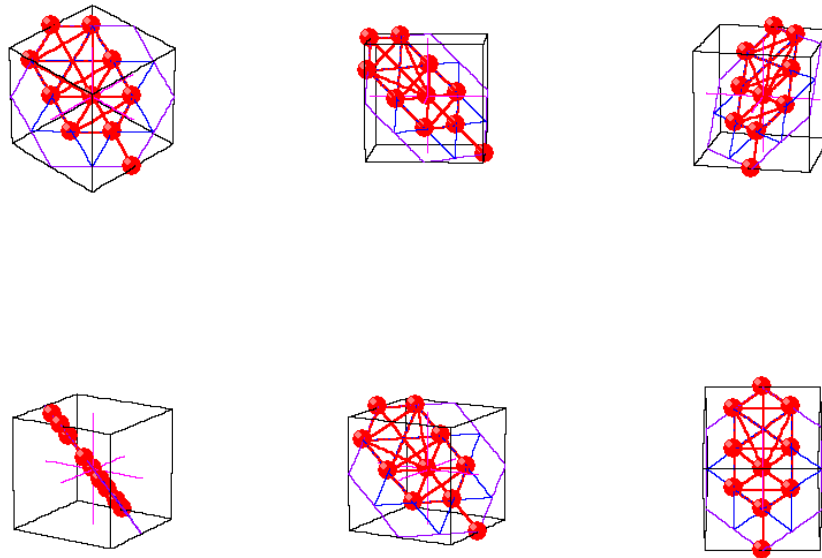


As we said, we don't know if this was the exact process undertaken, but since the final result is a perfect replication of the *Lurianic Tree*, it's hard to imagine arriving at this result without using a *hexagon* and an inscribed *Star of David* in some fashion similar to what we've done above. Additionally, there is a way to cut a *cube* in half so that the cross-section is a *hexagon* instead of a *square*, and this construction allows us to fully embed the *tree* within the *cube*, as is suggested by one of our above passages from the *Bahir*. The result is a truly beautiful diagram that combines the imagery of the *Tree of Life* with its predecessor model the *Cube of Space*. What follows are some images of this construction as seen from a variety of vantage points. Also, notice how appropriate it is that the center of the *tree* corresponds precisely with the center of the *cube*. Furthermore, this construction requires 49 lines (12 edges of the cube, 3 spatial axes, 6 sides of a

hexagon, 6 for the *Star of David*, and 32 for the paths of the *Tree of Life*), and coincidentally this number is exactly the number of Hebrew letters in that declaration of faith known as the *Shema*.

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one,  
Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.*

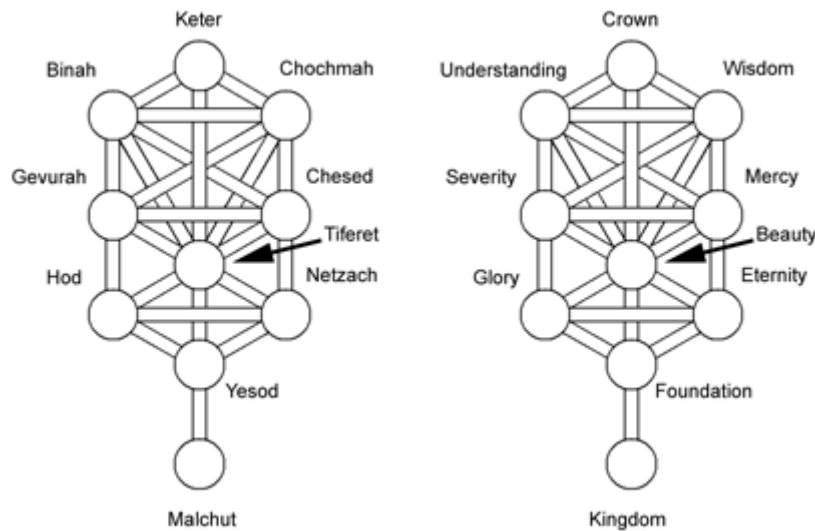
שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד  
ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד



The *Tree of Life* embedded in the *Cube of Space*

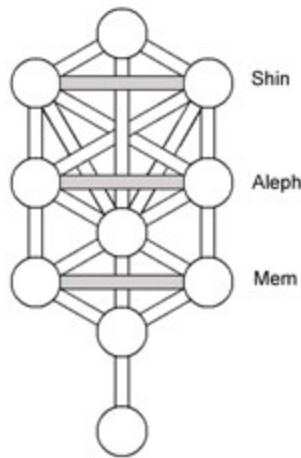
Now that we have completed the derivation of the *Tree of Life* from the *Cube of Space*, let's examine the relation of the final image to the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Below, for

reference, is the *tree* with both Hebrew and English names given for the *sefirot*. Also, we see that in this final diagram the *sefirot* have achieved an existence independent of the letters while at the same time, we have the *sefirot* and the letters melded together into a single schematic for representing the “*thirty-two mystical paths of wisdom*” that are mentioned at the start of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Furthermore, modern interpretations of the *Tree of Life* suggest that the right side of the *tree* be interpreted in terms of intuitive, holistic right brain functions, the left side in terms of the more analytical, structure oriented left hemisphere of the brain, the bottom of the *tree* in terms of concrete physical reality, and the top of the *tree* in terms of that which is more abstract and non-physical.

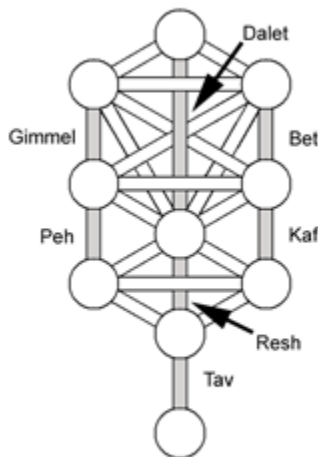


One of the things we can notice immediately about this *tree* diagram is that there are three paths connecting the left and right sides of the *tree*. These paths correspond to the three mother letters, *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and these letters represent, respectively, *air*, *water*, and *fire*. Thus, one good way to use this

diagram is to think of all the ways we can use these particular elements to bring ourselves into balance. For example, just consider the health benefits that may be reaped from activities such as swimming, aerobics, yogic breathing exercises, therapeutic whirlpools, fresh air, clean water, saunas, gentle sun baths, and meditation to calm the fires of the mind, just to name a few. Notice, too, that the vertical order on the *Tree of Life* corresponds to the anatomy of the human body: fire in the brain, air in the lungs, and fluids (water) in the belly.

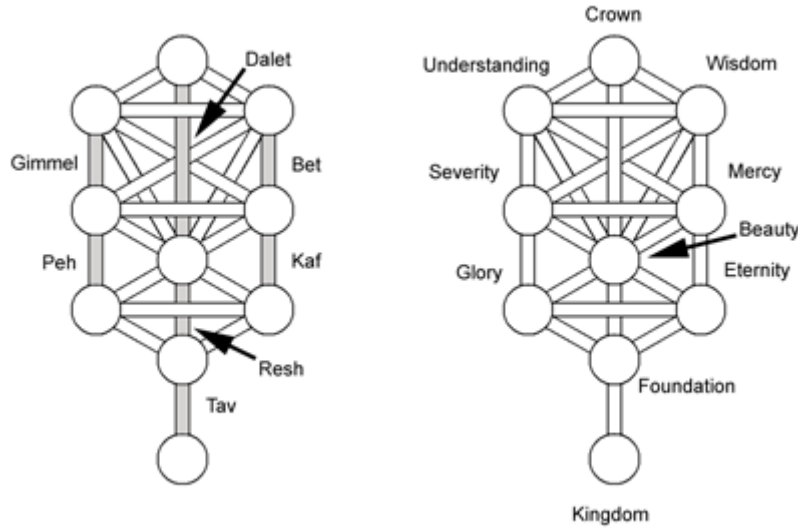


The next obvious thing about the structure of the *Tree of Life* is that there are seven vertical paths, and as might be expected, these paths correspond to the seven double letters, *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav*, discussed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Notice, however, how they are placed on the *tree*. We have *bet* on the upper right side, *gimmel* on the upper left, and *dalet* in between. This *right-left-center* pattern replicates the pattern found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* of one thing opposite another with a mediating principle in between. And as we go down the *tree* we see this same *right-left-center* pattern repeated again with *kaf-peh-resh*, and then we end with *tav* at the bottom.





Recall also how in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the letters *bet-gimmel-dalet-kaf-peh-resh-tav* correspond to *wisdom, wealth, seed, life, domination, peace, and grace*. Earlier we discussed these associations in conjunction with the *Cube of Space*, but now we want to look at them again in context with the *sefirot* on the *Tree of Life*.



The letter *bet* stands for a *berakah*, a *blessing*, and by blessing others we raise ourselves to a higher state of *wisdom*. Again, notice that *wisdom* is on the right side of the *tree* which refers to right brain functions. Thus, *wisdom* in this context refers not to analytical analysis, but to a primordial knowing of what is true and what is false. *Wisdom* is knowing at the highest level before any left brain analysis takes place, and by blessing others we can elevate ourselves to this level of good.

The letter *gimmel* stands for *gamal*, a *camel*, and among the animals of the desert we might say that the camel is the animal with the most *wealth* since it can live off its own stored water and fat. Also, in terms of left brain functions, there is a point at which we

have to live off of and digest the knowledge we've already acquired in order to move to a higher level. This reflects what is said in the following passage from *Proverbs*.

*“Drink the water from your own storage well, and fresh water from your own spring.” (Proverbs 5:15)*

The letter *dalet*, among other things, stands for *daat, knowledge*. In *Kabbalah*, knowledge is seen as the synthesis of right and left brain activities, the child of intuitive *wisdom* combined with analytical *understanding*. Furthermore, when we have knowledge, then that knowledge becomes the *seed* for what we will bring into manifestation. For example, the intent to create something coupled with the understanding of what is required results in a detailed blueprint of how to bring the project into manifestation. That blueprint is both the *knowledge* and the *seed* of what is to come.

The letter *kaf* is associated in the *Sefer Yetzirah* with the word *life*. In Hebrew, though, the letter *kaf* stands for both *kivane, to attune*, and *kavannah, intention or devotion*. Through intention we can direct and attune the focus of our right brain, and by attuning ourselves to *mercy* and *love*, we enhance the *life* within us.

The letter *peh* means *mouth* in Hebrew, and in the *Sefer Yetzirah* it is associated with *dominance*. The message here is clear. To progress from ordinary left brain activities to a higher level of intellectual functioning you have to learn to control your mouth. In

other words, learn to discipline your brain and to control and dominate both your tongue and your appetites! In particular, avoid using your mouth to slander others.

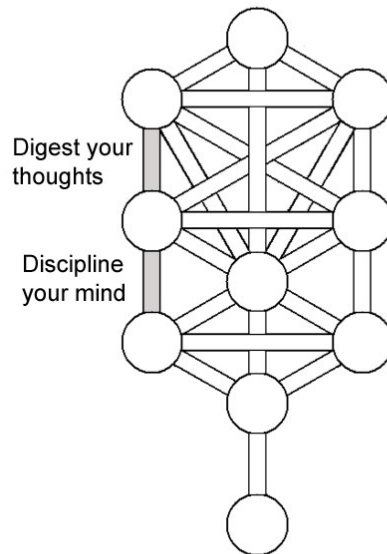
*“Rabbi Johanan said in the name of Rabbi Joseph ben Zimra, “What is the meaning of, ‘What shall be given to you, and what shall be done more to you, you deceitful tongue! (Psalm 120:3)’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the tongue, “All members of the human body are standing, you are lying; all members of the human body are outside, you are guarded inside; not only that, but I surrounded you with two walls, one of bone and one of flesh; ‘What shall be given to you, what shall be done more to you, you deceitful tongue!’”” (B. Arachin 15b)*

The letter *resh* stands for the Hebrew word *rachamim*, *compassion*, and in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *resh* represents *peace*. Furthermore, in Hebrew the word *peace* means more than simply an absence of conflict. It also implies a state of wholeness and completeness. By being compassionate to others, we also achieve balance and *peace* for ourselves.

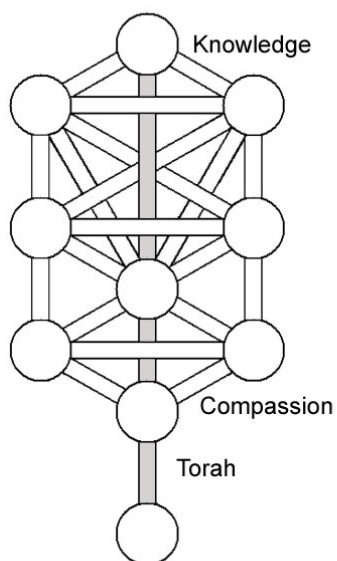
And finally, the letter *tav* stands for *Torah* in Hebrew and for the principle of *grace* in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. As we have mentioned previously, these two concepts are eloquently connected by the following passage from the *Talmud*.

*“To him who is engaged in the study of the Torah by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day.” (B. Avodah Zarah 3b)*

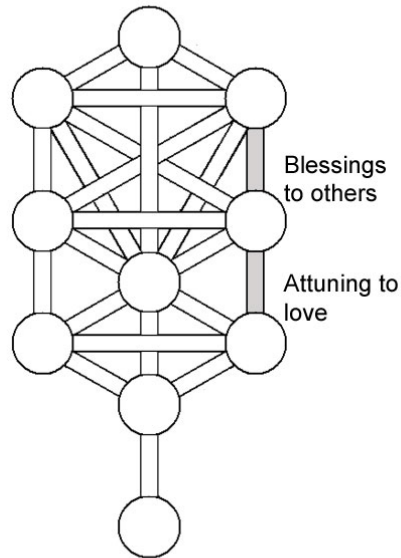
From the above, we see that the meanings of the double letters given in the GRA version of the *Sefer Yetzirah* also fit in well with the structure of the *Tree of Life*. Additionally, the meanings of these letters direct us with regards to how to make a vertical ascent of the *tree*. For example to ascend on the left side from the *sefirah* of *Hod* to *Gevurah* to *Binah*, we have to discipline and dominate our mind (*peh*), and then, like a camel (*gimmel*), digest the knowledge we've acquired in order to move to an even higher level.



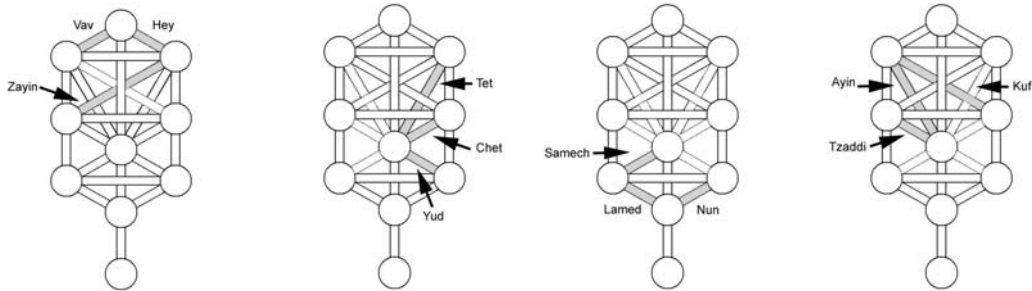
To move up the central column of the *tree*, we have to begin with *Torah*. We have to adhere to proper behavior and a high ethical standard in order to establish a good foundation. This in turn will cause *compassion* to unfold automatically within us and take us to a place of balance and beauty. And the end result will be an ability to apprehend true *knowledge* that will enable us to pierce the illusions of the world and comprehend the true nature of our connectedness with all things.



And finally, on the right side of the *tree*, the letter *kaf* represents our *kavannahs*, our *devotions* and *intentions*, and by intending *love* and *mercy*, we bring the force of *life* into our own lives. And as we fill ourselves with love, we reach a point where we must give away that love to others, and in so doing we become a *blessing* in their lives. And that *blessing* to others is what is represented by the letter *bet*, and by giving blessings to others, a higher spiritual *wisdom* begins to unfold deep within us.



It is now time to examine the twelve diagonal paths on the *Tree of Life* that correspond to the twelve plain letters mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and as before, the placement of the letters will form a meaningful pattern.



Imagine yourself situated at the center of the *tree* (at the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*) looking outward, and recall that the natural order of these twelve letters in the Hebrew alphabet is *hey-vav-zayin-chet-tet-yud-lamed-nun-samech-ayin-tzaddi-kuf*. If we begin with the first three, *hey-vav-zayin*, we'll find these letters near the top of the *tree*, and the letter *hey* is in between the letters *vav* and *zayin*. More specifically, this triad appears in a pattern that we might characterize as *center-left-right*. This order of this pattern is simply the reverse of the *right-left-center* pattern that characterized the placement of the seven double letters! Again, the *tree* appears to be trying to convey the theme of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that all creation stems from the interaction of two opposites with a mediating principle between them. Continuing through the alphabet to the next triad of plain letters, *chet-tet-yud*, we once again see them placed on the *Tree of Life* according to this *center-left-right* pattern. And this same pattern, when viewed from the center of the *tree*, is continued by the third triad, *lamed-nun-samech*, as well as the fourth and last triad, *ayin-tzaddi-kuf*. Thus, it seems clear that the placements of both the double letters and the plain letters on the *Tree of Life* were meant to send us a message about the core meaning of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

In conclusion, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, *Kabbalah* should be considered a subject that is continually evolving and progressing. If instead, we consider it as a fixed body of knowledge that was completed long ago, then that body will begin to decay just like every other body that is no longer animated by life. Along these lines, the meanings of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have undergone continual modification throughout the millennia. Thus, for reference, I've placed on the next page a table that shows not only the meanings found long ago in different versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* but other interpretations that have appeared in both other works and other time periods. The very last column titled *Modern*, however, represents the meanings that I most often draw upon. These meanings come from either Hebrew words that begin with the indicated letter or from an interpretation of the glyph of the letter itself. Additionally, by then using these interpretations along with the meanings of the *sefirot* one can not only determine one's current place on the *Tree of Life* (i.e whether one is more left brained, more right brained, concrete, or abstract in orientation), but also use the associations as guides for travelling around the *tree*. However, the exact mechanics of such journeys would require yet another lengthy paper beyond this one, and as we often say, that is task that is best left for another time, another place, and another grand adventure.



Letters	Glyph	GRA	Short Version	Long Version	Saadia	Zohar	Other	Modern
aleph	א	air	air	air	air	unity	ox	air
mem	מ	water	water	water	water	king	water	water
shin	ש	fire	fire	fire	fire	Almighty, falsehood	tooth	fire
bet	ב	wisdom	life	wisdom	life	blessings	house	blessing others
gimmel	ג	wealth	peace	wealth	peace	beneficence	camel	camel, benefactor, digesting knowledge, teaching others
dalet	ד	seed	wisdom	seed	wisdom	poverty	door	knowledge, humility, changing "I" ( <i>ani</i> ) into "nothingness" ( <i>ain</i> )
kaf	כ	life	wealth	life	wealth	glory, extermination	palm of the hand	intent, devotions
peh	פ	dominance	grace	dominance	seed	redemption, deliverance, transgression, serpent	mouth	mouth, mental discipline
resh	ר	peace	seed	peace	grace	falsehood	head	compassion
tav	ת	grace	dominance	grace	dominance	truth, death	cross	Torah
hey	ה	speech	sight	speech	sight	Name of God	window	effortless creative utterance, <i>Shechinah</i> , five, 2 to the 5th power is 32
vav	ו	thought	hearing	thought	hearing	Name of God	hook	connection, union, six directions
zayin	ז	motion	smell	motion	smell	remember, sword	weapon	sword, seven, Sabbath
chet	ח	sight	speech	sight	speech	sin	fence	mercy, life
tet	ט	hearing	taste	hearing	taste	good, sunk, sin	snake	the creative womb, good
yud	י	action	coition	action	coition	God's will	hand	oneness, union, <i>yordeh merkavah</i> , descent into the subconscious followed by ascents to higher states
lamed	ל	coition	action	cotion	action	king	ox-goad	learning, <i>limmud</i>
nun	נ	smell	motion	smell	motion	awesome, comely, fallen	fish	faithful, <i>ne'ehmahn</i>
samech	ס	sleep	anger	sleep	anger	support	prop	support
ayin	ע	anger	laughter	anger	laughter	iniquity, humility	eye	eye, fountain, seventy, creation of multiplicity
tzaddi	צ	taste	thought	taste	thought	righteousness	fish-hook	righteousness
kuf	ק	laughter	sleep	laughter	sleep	falsehood	back of the head	holiness