

INTRODUCTION TO THE *SEFER YETZIRAH*

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As a graduate student, Aryeh Kaplan was described in a scientific Who's Who as the most promising young physicist in America. He later devoted himself to writing and teaching of the Torah. During his short lifetime (he died suddenly in 1983 at the age of forty-eight), Rabbi Kaplan wrote more than fifty books. In the text that follows, Rabbi Kaplan introduces us to the extraordinary Kabbalistic work, the Sefer Yetzirah.

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The *Sefer Yetzirah* is without question the oldest and most mysterious of all Kabbalistic texts. The first commentaries on this book were written in the tenth century, and the text itself is quoted as early as the sixth. References to the work appear in the first century, while traditions regarding its use attest to its existence even in Biblical times. So ancient is this book that its origins are no longer accessible to historians. We are totally dependent on traditions with regard to its authorship.

Equally mysterious is the meaning of this book. If the author meant to be obscure, he was eminently successful. It is only through the most careful analysis, studying every word with its parallels in Biblical and Talmudic literature, that its haze of obscurity begins to be penetrated.

There have been many interpretations of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The earliest commentators tried to interpret it as a philosophical treatise, but their efforts shed more light on their own systems than on the text. The same is true of efforts to fit it into the systems of the Zohar or later Kabbalists. Efforts to view it as a book on grammar or phonetics are even more unsuccessful.

In general, the Kabbalah is divided into three categories, the theoretical, the meditative, and the magical.¹ The theoretical Kabbalah, which in its present

form is based largely on the Zohar, is concerned mostly with the dynamics of the spiritual domain, especially the worlds of the Sefirot, souls, and angels. This branch of Kabbalah reached its zenith in the writings of the Safed school in the sixteenth century, and the vast majority of published texts belong in this category.

Meditative Kabbalah deals with the use of divine names, letter permutations, and similar methods to reach higher states of consciousness, and as such, comprises a kind of yoga. Most of the main texts have never been published, but remain scattered in manuscripts in the great libraries and museums. Some of these methods enjoyed a brief renaissance in the mid 1700s with the rise of the Hasidic movement, but within a half century they were once again largely forgotten.

The third category of Kabbalah—the magical—is closely related to the meditative. It consists of various signs, incantations, and divine names, through which one can influence or alter natural events. Many of the techniques closely resemble meditative methods, and their success may depend on their ability to induce mental states where telekinetic or spiritual power can effectively be channeled. As with the second category, the most important texts have never been printed, although some fragments have

been published. One of the best examples of these is the book *Raziel*.

Careful study indicates that *Sefer Yetzirah* is a meditative text, with strong magical overtones. This position is supported by the earliest Talmudic traditions, which indicate that it could be used to create living creatures. Especially significant are the many reports and legends in which the *Sefer Yetzirah* is used to create a Golem, a sort of mystical android. The methods of the *Sefer Yetzirah* appear to involve meditation; and it is highly possible that it was originally written as a meditative manual. A major twelfth century philosopher thus states that it does not contain philosophy, but divine mystery.² This comes across very clearly in the commentary of one of the greatest Kabbalists, Isaac the Blind (1160-1236), who stresses the meditative aspects of the text.

It is also particularly evident in a very ancient manuscript of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, dating from the tenth century or earlier. The introductory colophon states, "This is the book of the Letters of Abraham our father, which is called *Sefer Yetzirah*, and when one gazes (*tzafah*) into it, there is no limit to his wisdom."³ ...The Hebrew word *tzafah* does not denote mere physical gazing, but mystical meditative insight. This very early source would therefore support the position that *Sefer Yetzirah* was meant to be used as a meditative text.

The commentaries which treat *Sefer Yetzirah* as a theoretical text read much of it in the third person: "He combined," "He formed," and the like. According to this reading, the text is referring to God's creation. In many cases, however, the grammatical form more closely resembles the imperative.⁴ The author is telling the reader to "combine" and "form" as if he was actually giving instructions. In many other cases, the text is unambiguously instructive, as in such passages as, "if your heart runs, return to the place," and, "understand with

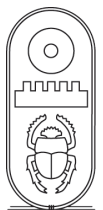
wisdom, and be wise with understanding." Rather than have the text oscillate between the third person and the imperative, it would certainly be more logical to read it all in the imperative. The *Sefer Yetzirah* thus becomes an instruction manual for a very special type of meditation...

What we therefore have in *Sefer Yetzirah* appears to be an instructional manual, describing certain meditative exercises. There is some evidence that these exercises were meant to strengthen the initiate's concentration, and were particularly helpful in the development of telekinetic and telepathic powers. It was with these powers that one would then be able to perform feats that outwardly appeared to be magical. This is supported by the Talmudical references, which appear to compare the use of *Sefer Yetzirah* to a kind of white magic.⁵ An important thirteenth century commentator writes that students of *Sefer Yetzirah* were given a manuscript of the book *Raziel*, a magical text containing seals, magical figures, divine names, and incantations.⁶

The Text

The *Sefer Yetzirah* is a very small and concise book. In its Short Version, it is only some 1,300 words long, while the Long Version contains approximately 2,500 words. The Gra Version contains around 1,800 words. So short is the text, that one of the earliest fragments appears to have the entire book written on a single page.⁷ There is speculation that the original source may have contained as few as 240 words.⁸

The present text contains six chapters, and in some editions, these are said to parallel the six orders of the Mishnah.⁹ Some ancient sources, however, state that the book contains five chapters, and it seems likely that the present fifth and sixth chapters were combined as one in these texts.¹⁰ The earliest commentator, Saadia Gaon, in a somewhat different version,



divides the book into eight chapters.¹¹

The text is presented dogmatically, without substantiation or explanation. In the first chapter in particular, it is solemn and sonorous, reading like blank verse poetry. Very few Biblical passages are quoted, and with the exception of Abraham, no name or authority is mentioned.

The book seems to be divided into four basic parts. The first chapter introduces the Sefirot, speaking of them at length. After this, however, there is no mention whatsoever regarding the Sefirot in subsequent chapters. This had led to some speculation that the *Sefer Yetzirah* might actually be a combination of two (or more) earlier texts.

The second chapter consists of a general discussion about the letters of the alphabet. It clearly appears to be introducing their use in a meditative context. Also introduced in this chapter are the five phonetic families and the 231 Gates. Again, neither the phonetic families nor the Gates are ever again mentioned in the text.

Chapters three to five discuss the three divisions of the letters, “mothers, doubles, and elementals.” These are related to the “universe, soul, and year,” presenting a fairly detailed astrological system. In these chapters, the entire thrust of the book is changed, and they contain virtually no hint whatsoever of its meditative aspects. This, however, can be explained by a principle found in many later Kabbalistic texts. In order to focus spiritual and mental powers, one must take into account the time and astrological environment.¹²

The sixth chapter again does not appear to have a clear connection to the earlier parts of the book, although in the Long Version, it is presented almost as a commentary. Here, for the first time, are introduced the concepts of the “axis, cycle, and heart,” ideas which are not discussed any place else in Hebraic or

Kabbalistic literature, with the exception of the *Bahir*.¹³ Of all the chapters, this one seems the most obscure, and it is difficult to decide if its emphasis is theoretical or meditative.

This chapter concludes with a stanza linking the *Sefer Yetzirah* to Abraham. It is this quote that serves as a source to the tradition that the book was authored by the Patriarch.

ENDNOTES

1. This is discussed at length in my *Meditation and Kabbalah*, and *Meditation and the Bible* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser).
2. *Kuzari* 4:27.
3. Barceloni, p. 100. This is in the British Museum, Ms. 600. See M. Marguliot, *Catalogue of Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum*, Vol. 2, p. 197. Also in the Vatican, Ms. 299, and the British Museum, Ms. 752. Another account also states that Rava and Ray Zeira gazed (*tzafah*) in the *Sefer Yetzirah* for three years (Barceloni, p. 268).
4. Thus, in a number of places in the text, the word *Tzar* is used instead of *Yatzar*. This is more easily read in the imperative than in the third person past.
5. *Sanhedrin* 67b, Barceloni, *loc. cit.* Also see *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 179:15, *Sifsey Cohen* 179:18; *Tshuvot Radbaz* 3:405.
6. Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malka, *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah* (Oxford, Ms. 1536), quoted in George Vajda, *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, philosophe juif marocain*, (Paris, 1954), p. 171; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, (New York, 1969), p. 177. There is some question as to whether this Raziel is the same as the published edition. Abraham Abulafia also mentions having studied this book, see *Sheva Netivot HaChakhmah*, in A. Jellinek, *Philosophie und Kabbalah*, (Leipzig, 1854), p. 21.
7. A.M. Habermann, *Sinai* 10:3b (1974) with regard to Geniza fragment Taylor-Schechter 32:5. This is the Saadia Version, which is the longest.
8. Yisrael Weinstock, “LeBirur HaNusach shel Sefer Yetzirah,” *Temirin* 1:20, note 41, 1:16, note 31.
9. See *Ne'edar BaKodesh, Shaarey Tzion*.
10. Barceloni, p. 105. In the Pistoris translation, chapters five and six are combined, as well as in many manuscripts. See Weinstock, *loc. cit.*, note 33. The divisions in *Donash* and *Chakamoni* were put in by the printer, and do not exist in the original manuscripts.
11. Saadia Gaon, *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*, translated into Hebrew by Yosef Kapach (Jerusalem, 1972), p. 34.
12. See Introduction to *Raziel; Shimushey Tehillim* in *Tshuvot Rashba* 413; R. Moshe Cordevero, *Commentary on Zohar Shir HaShirim* (Jerusalem, Ms. 4 74), in G. Scholem, *Kitvey Yad BaKabbalah*, p. 233-4.
13. See *Bahir*, Ed. Reuven Margolios (Jerusalem 1951), Nos. 95, 101, 106.