

## Sacred Letters

- Dani Antman

*An ignorant villager, knowing that it was a mitzvah to feast well before Yom Kippur, drank himself into such a stupor that he missed Kol Nidre services. When he awoke late at night, he wanted to pray, but he didn't know any of the prayers by heart. So he began to recite the alphabet over and over again. "Dear God!" he cried. "I am giving You all the letters. You arrange them in the right order!"*

*The next day he went to the Kotsker Rebbe's shul for services ... The Kotsker Rabbe summoned him and asked him to explain his absence at Kol Nidre the night before.*

*"Holy master!" he cried. "So eager was I to welcome the holy day with joy that I overdid it a bit and slept through the service. When I awoke late at night, I tried to pray, but I did not know the proper words. For you see, all I know by heart is the aleph-beit. So I just recited the letters and asked God to make words out of them. Were my prayers acceptable?"*

*The Kotsker rebbe smiled. "More acceptable than mine," he said, "for you spoke them with your whole heart."*

My own work with the Hebrew letters started in an equally unschooled way. I was embarking upon the study of the mystical path of the Kabbalah. As a lapsed artist, I was drawn to the beauty of the shapes of the letters and decided to depict them in a creative way.

My previous artistic background included two years of training in fine art and twelve years as a commercial "interior renderer." Interior designers hired me to paint a picture of a room from their blueprints and design boards. The purpose of the finished piece was to show people what the proposed design would look like in the most glamorous, descriptive, detailed and realistic way possible.

My intent in depicting the Hebrew letters was exactly the opposite. I didn't want to illustrate the letters; I wanted the finished product to convey the feeling/meaning/energy of each letter.

I used collage to explore the first letter of the alphabet, *Aleph*. Images collected from magazines took the form of the letter ... swirling primal energies, divided waters, a cosmic man emerging from the void. The shape is carved out from the background, literally, raised a quarter of an inch above a sky-blue void with twinkling spheres — representing the first seed like forms of creation.

I didn't intellectually "know" that these images corresponded to the energy

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of the letter. Somehow the letter imparted its wisdom to me as I worked.

There are many stories about the mystical powers of Hebrew letters. In fact, Abraham Abulafia, a famous Kabbalist working with Hebrew letters in 1240 in Spain, believed that someone who was worthy to work with the letters could “gain knowledge of his innermost self.” It’s interesting to note that Abulafia was also known to have had contact with Sufi mystics who held a similar view of the sacredness of their Arabic letters.

The 22 consonant letters of the Hebrew language are said to be the basic creative (energy) structures that give rise to the manifest world. The written letter is considered to be a revealed and denser form that mirrors a more subtle, concealed and primordial form which exists as a configuration of light or fire. “Is not my word like fire?” says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:29)

In the Torah (The Five Books of Moses), God calls the world into being with ten utterances. (Genesis 1-31) These ten sayings, which are of course composed of letters, are held by both scholars and mystics to be the living embodiment of the divine forces that created the world. The Torah itself is considered to be the actual blueprint that God consulted to create the world. In other words, the Jewish people believe that the divine text of the Torah predates the creation of manifest reality by two thousand years.

Each letter is said to have a specific quality of creation as seen in this passage of the Zohar (a Kabbalistic text variously attributed to a second century mystic named Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and the thirteenth century Rabbi Moshe de Leon):

When the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters were hidden away. (Before creation the letters were concealed within the divine mind and arranged in reverse order.) For two thousand years before creating the world, the blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them. As He verged on creating the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him from last to first.

*The Zohar*, Pritzger Edition

Translated by Daniel Matt, 2004 Vol. 1, 1:2b page 11

It is said that if even one word of the Torah was altered, the world would not exist. Scribes copy each new Torah scroll by hand, letter by letter, the way it has been done for ages. Their work must be perfect — or the whole scroll is rendered unusable.

In ancient times, the letters were thought to have magical properties. According to Richard Seidman, author of *The Oracle of the Kabbalah*, one phrase well-known to children everywhere — “abracadabra” — may well stem from the Hebrew *abra k’adabra* which literally means, “I will create as I speak.”

Ancient mystical Jewish sages used letters, words or certain names of God for healing and protective amulets that were worn around the neck or close to the body in a pouch. One such amulet was found in Jerusalem and recently discussed in a *New*

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*York Times* article. Inscribed on the amulet was Aaron's priestly blessing from the Torah, Numbers 6:24-26. Written on a tiny piece of silver, in an old Hebrew alphabet, this blessing was thought to have been used to protect the wearer from evil forces. Scientists have verified that the amulet dates from around the year 600 B.C.

One modern-day explorer of the Hebrew alphabet, Stan Tennen, has discovered a pattern within the first sentence of Genesis that mathematically describes three-dimensional geometric forms. A spiral form described by this pattern can be held in the hand and used to project the complete 22-letter alphabet. Tennen's work reveals how the sequencing of the letters is indeed unalterable, because any change of order throws off the predictable patterning. He sees the letters of Genesis and other verses of the Torah as a literal mathematical code for the creation of form. (For more information on Stan Tennen's work, visit [www.meru.org](http://www.meru.org))

The following verse from Aryeh Kaplan's translation of the *Sefir Yetzirah* is considered an instruction manual for different meditation techniques:

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.

According to Kaplan, "First the letters are engraved out of nothing, then they are carved out and separated. Then they are permuted, so a given combination appears in different sequences. They are weighed and manipulated according to their numerical values. Finally they are transformed through the various standard ciphers." (Ciphers are codes for exchanging letters, like substituting the first letter *Aleph* for the last letter *Tav*.)

The Kabbalists would use the letters as described above to bring themselves into deeper and deeper states of consciousness. They would look at words with equal numerical values and comment on the mystical relationships between them.

Another practice was to take the various names of God and permute them with all the vowels. These expanded divine names were then associated with the elements, the days of the week, the planets, the twelve signs of the zodiac, colors and even angels. The result is an amazingly complex view of our universe that shows how everything is inherently connected to and emanates from the divine source.

In his book *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Aryeh Kaplan writes, "It was said that if an individual knew how to correctly manipulate the letters of the alphabet he could make use of the same spiritual forces that originally brought the universe into being." There is a story of one Rabbi who created a golem, a human-like form, through reciting very precise letter combinations without one mistake.

All of this is historically interesting, but my motivation for exploring the

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Hebrew letters was to see if the claims were true. *Was there an alive creative energy that could be felt or perceived if one meditated on the letters, permuted them or drew them? Could this type of meditation bring me into a direct connection with God?*

Again in *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Kaplan writes that Abulafia taught that “one should permute the letters by writing them down to make use of the body as well as of the intellect ... from the permutations, your heart will become extremely warm. From the permutations, you will gain new knowledge that you never learned from human traditions nor derived from intellectual analysis. When you experience this, you are prepared to receive the influx (*shefa*).”

As I mentioned, Abulafia had contact with Sufi mystics who considered Arabic letters sacred as well. The deceased modern-day Sufi teacher Bawa Muhaiyadeen described “how the 28 letters formed the body of the children of Adam and dwelt in the earth-world as stars.” He even drew an illustration showing the human form created from the 28 Arabic letters, with each letter relating to a part of the body. The tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable name of God composed of four Hebrew letters, has also been visually rendered as a human form.

Nine years after making the initial collage you see on this issue’s cover, I returned to a personal practice with Hebrew letters. I meditated for hours on the tetragrammaton. I would draw it, play with the position of the letters, say the letters out loud and visualize them. My whole being filled with light and energy, and my everyday consciousness disappeared as the egoic “I” was absorbed into the light. This, then, was the experience of influx, of *shefa*, that Abulafia described.

So I invented another artistic project for myself: I would take each of the 22 letters and paint them in a way that the viewer could receive an actual transmission of the energy of the letter.

I envisioned myself having a show within a few months, and I actually reserved gallery space for it! Little did I know what I was getting into. One year later, I had just one painting of the first and mighty letter *Aleph* that met my criteria. The process I went through was an initiation into the letter’s energy — but that took awhile to figure out. I didn’t want the painting to look like a letter on a background — I wanted the letter to seem as if it were breathed onto the flat surface by the spirit of God. Numerous attempts failed. I was also fighting the medium of oil paint with its slow-drying time and my lack of ability to create translucent glazes.

I enlisted the help of a local artist, Michael Madigan, who took one look at my failures and suggested acrylics. With his help, I managed to better translate the feeling of the letter into paint. Through some mysterious process, a soft, dark *Aleph* appeared, wavering between the manifest and unmanifest worlds. “Aha!” I thought, “now I’ve got it down — I’ll just continue with the other 21 letters!” But much to my

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dismay, I continued to start and destroy painting after painting. They started out clear and ended up disappearing into muddiness. I would get more and more agitated as each piece seemed to disappear into nothingness. In despair, I finally consulted Aryeh Kaplan's *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*. By chance, I opened to page 91:

At first, the initiate depicts the letter in transparent air, visualizing it clearly ... He then begins to see the letter as if he were looking at it through water ... the letter begins to blur and fade as if it were being viewed through increasingly deep water ... the initiate must then engrave and carve chaos and void, mire and clay ... at this stage, the form breaks up and dissolves completely ... finally all that is left is inky blackness, as if one were buried in totally opaque mud and clay. Later on a fourth step returns the initiate to a state associated with fire and blinding light.

It was an utter revelation for me to read this passage and understand my visual journey to the state of nothingness. The stages of chaos, void, mire and clay were expressed progressively as my paintings disappeared. I had to accept and be present with the descent into nothingness that the paintings were reflecting. It didn't quite fit with my desire for a finished product! As I did this, I experienced the fundamental primordial state from which all form emerges and to which all form returns. It is called *ayin* in Hebrew, and it is the Divine Will to create, before any "thing" actually exists. The *Sefer Yetzirah* says that it is through the Hebrew letters that God "formed substance out of chaos and made nonexistence into existence."

After embodying this state of consciousness, I understood the prohibition against graven images in the Judaic tradition. Any fixing of the image prevents one from seeing all the way through form to the ultimate nothingness, and from ultimate nothingness back to the creation of form. It is a constant, ongoing cycle that we all participate in every second that we are alive. Our bodies are dying and being created anew every day: so are our planet and our solar system.

Once the initiate understands that all form stems from ultimate nothingness, the world of form takes its rightful place as an emanation of divine intent. "Reality" is not fixed; it is a constantly-changing creative process. The final stage described as fire and blinding light symbolizes enlightenment and the light that we can bring back to the world as we expand our creative capacities.

So my initial forays into working with the Hebrew letters did not produce a complete body of artwork as expected. Instead, as the letters meditated *me*, my consciousness was transformed to be able to perceive their divine origin. This is the true meaning of the practice of Kabbalah — that we may be transformed to receive more and more of God's light. This light is then no longer hidden but revealed through our human form, through the sacred word and letter, and through every aspect of life itself.