

The Hebrew Letters

Judaism has always regarded Hebrew as a sacred language, the medium of divine communication. For millennia, its sages and mystics have taught that the letters are no ordinary vehicle of expression.

The Hebrew alphabet's origins are believed to have originated from a version known as North Semitic from northwest Palestine and Syria more than 3,500 years ago, establishing permanently the phonetic sound, numerical value, and order of what initially became Early Hebrew. Already used in the time of King Solomon, this was the original script of the Bible.

Then by the 5th century B.C., the Jewish people returned from Babylonian exile, using the Square script, which was used to write the Torah scrolls, and is still basic to Judaism today.

The Hebrew language is comprised of 22 letters, 5 of which are known as double letters, as they have 2 distinct forms: when beginning a word and when placed at its ending. These letters are Kaf, Mem, Nun, Pei, and Tzadi.

Vowel signs were developed during the second half of the first millennium C.E. but they appear neither in the Torah Scroll nor in most religious documents.

Dating back to Talmudic times, the Hebrew letters have not only been celebrated as holy, but also venerated as an actual tool for spiritual mastery. Abraham Ben Abulafia (c.1240-1292) was among the most important Jewish mystics, due to his development of a meditative system based on the Hebrew alphabet. The crucial aspect of his system is the utilization of the Hebrew language as the vehicle by which we ascend into the transcendent world. In the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that with the right inner focus, or "kavana" the individual could use the letters for tremendous spiritual development. The Baal Shem Tov remarked that "All things were created through combinations of the 22 Hebrew letters. In the early 19th century, Kabbalah began a long eclipse, and with the industrial age Jewish mysticism seemed outdated. But today, a new renaissance is underway. We now see science's inability to provide ultimate answers about the universe. Also, in the light of quantum physics, science and mysticism no longer seem so incompatible.

In traditional Jewish thought, each letter – its name, pictorial form, and respective position in the alphabet – is ordained by God. Therefore, every letter of a Torah scroll must be perfect, or else the entire scroll is forbidden to be used. Not a fragment of a single letter

may be omitted or distorted; nor may its individual character be compromised by contact with any other letters. Every word must be spelled correctly; one extra, transposed, or missing letter invalidates the whole scroll.

But the Aleph- Beis has much to teach even the most accomplished scholar. A Kabbalistic dictum likens the letters to human beings, as it were, saying that every letter has body, spirit and soul. As such the Aleph- Beis can serve as a manual for human conduct and guide man in his thoughts and deeds.

The 22 sacred letters are profound, primal spiritual forces. They are, in effect, the raw material of Creation. When God combined them into words, phrases, commands, they brought about Creation, translating his will into reality, as it were. The letters can be ordered in countless combinations, by changing their order within words and interchanging letters in line with the rules of various Kabbalistic letter – systems. Each rearrangement of the same letters results in a new blend of the cosmic spiritual forces represented by the letters. An analogy can be found in physical sciences. One combination of hydrogen and oxygen produces water, while another produces hydrogen peroxide. So it is with all the elements and the infinite number of possible combinations.

There are 7 heavens representing distinct spiritual levels. Each is a product of the combinations of spiritual forces represented by the letters.

Having arrived this far, we must acknowledge that the Aleph – Beis is not a commonly accepted convention like all other alphabets and that the order of its letters is not subject to change for the sake of convenience. This is why Torah sages have always resisted moves to “simplify” the teaching of the Aleph – Beis by regrouping the letters to make them easier for children to assimilate. Since it was not manufactured by man, it cannot be manipulated by man.

By articulating the prayers, we arouse spiritual forces beyond our imagination. It causes the sacred letters to arouse their spiritual roots, it brings about a totally unprecedented combination: the interacting of the Aleph – Beis is combined in the respective prayer and the particular set of circumstances prevailing on earth at the instant the prayer is uttered.

The Aleph – Beis is the brick and mortar and soul of the universe, as it is of individuals with their personal capacities. The letters that brought the world into existence remain with us every instant, for God’s utterances are eternal.

A careful examination of their teachings reveals an entire philosophy of life. The Aleph – Beis speaks directly to man, telling him the purpose of his life, directing his striving, channeling his activities, refining his urges. It makes him not only servant of God but of man. Indeed it makes him a fitting vehicle to justify the very creation of the universe.

Kabbalah teaches that everything in the world above has its analogue in the world below. That is why, say the kabbalists, the bible begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beth*, which is the equivalent of the number two – to teach us that God created everything on two levels, “what happens above depends upon what happens below”, “the perfection of the upper worlds waits upon the perfection of the lower worlds...Adam and Eve must be turned face to face before the upper union is perfected.”

The clue to the basic structure of creation, says the Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Creation, one of the oldest of mystical texts, believed written between the 3rd and 6th centuries; where the term *sefira* is first found in Sefer Yetzirah Here it is used to describe the ten elementary and primordial numbers, *sefirot*, as the book calls them, and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These together represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole of creation. They are the “32 secret paths of wisdom: through which God has created all that exists”. These letters are not only symbols of the structure; they are the essential expression of God’s will and wisdom. All that exists, man, nature, the cosmos- is also God’s speech. The Hebrew letters are related to God as ordinary language is related to man. The words of the Torah, God’s speech, are the closest we can get to Him. But just as written words reveal only a part of God’s thought, so the words of the Torah reveal only a part of God’s thought. The spoken word can reveal even more, the idea that precedes its articulation, even more, and the mental impulse which is the seed of the thought, even more. The more ineffable the communication, the more it has to say. This is the reason for the Kabbalah’s preoccupation not only with the written and spoken word, but with the voice that is not yet differentiated into letters, and with the silent breath before it becomes a voice. In short, the more articulate, the more differentiated the instrument of communication, the less is revealed.

This idea appears again and again in Jewish mysticism, which is a mysticism utterly engrossed with the word. Since Hebrew letters are direct expressions of God’s thought, the Jewish mystic was interested in the form as well as the meaning of these letters, a thought which led a latter- day mystic to suggest that the white space surrounding the letters was also replete with mystical meaning. This interest in the sound and form of Hebrew letters as a key to ultimate mysteries of creation achieves its apogee in the kabbalist’s concern with the letters of God’s name.

Aleph #1, signifies all that each one of us accomplishes, however important in daily life, first emanating from stillness and silence. It is the primal force of Creation that exists before any form can be visualized. Each person possesses some of this divine power, for the Aleph’s shape resembles an individual ready to act in the world.

It represents #1, and begins the word for Divine Unity, *Echad*. It also begins the first of God's holy names in the Bible- *Elohim*-as well as the traditional, esoteric name for God: *Ein Sof* (infinite).

To bring energy into your everyday activities, meditate upon the *Aleph*.

Beit #2, has always been mystically associated with a house (bayit).

Beit represents the primal, receptive energy: the universal home, the infinite womb of fertility, from which everything is born and nourished.

Beit begins the Hebrew word *beracha*, blessing, signifying that our everyday life is filled with divine nurturance – if we are receptive to it.

Two represents duality. The Zohar says: " The difference by means of which light is distinguishable from darkness is by degree only; both are one in kind, and there is no light without darkness and no darkness without light."

All the other letters might fall over, but not the *Beit*, see how its base is so close to the Earth, the ground.

The Holy One wants us to be at home in His world. So the Torah begins with a *Beit*, it is the place of beginning.

To feel a greater sense of blessedness, divine nurturance, and being at "home" in the world, meditate upon the letter *Beit*.

Gimel #3 , reflects the key qualities of kindness and growth. It begins the Hebrew phrase for loving-kindness (*gamelet Hasidim*).

Gimel begins the Hebrew words for both exile (*galut*) and paradise (*gan eden*), intimating that our daily actions unite these two seemingly different realms. In this regard, the Talmudic word *gamla* describes a bridge that connects two areas. Gimel teaches us that two apparently opposing forces must be blended to form a third, more complete and perfect entity. Emanating from the Oneness of *Aleph* and the duality of *Beit*, there comes the synthesis of *Gimel*.

Gimel also represents growth, the process by which any initial spark of creativity must be properly guided until flowering into physical reality. Thus, it begins the Hebrew words for both great (*gadol*) and mighty (*gibor*). To accomplish this task when facing indifference or opposition from others often requires the key spiritual trait of courage (*gevurah*). *Gilgul* – associated with a cycle or wheel, *Gimel* represents the soul's repeating cycle of physical death and then rebirth on earth. It is the act of beginning.

To foster growth in any aspect of your life at present, focus on the letter *Gimel*.

Daled #4, signifies the four realms of the universe in all of its totality.

Aziluth (Emanation)- the endless, undifferentiated energy of the divine.

Beriah (Creation)- encompassing ideas but lacking specific forms or structures

Yetzirah (Formation)- containing the patterns or blueprints but not physicality itself

Assiyah (Action)- where tangible reality – that is, matter – exists.

Daled begins the Hebrew words for doorway (*deled*) and knowledge (*death*). In the Hassidic view, there are countless gateways hidden around us in everyday life. Related to this notion, *Daled* conveys the frame of mind known as *devekut* (cleaving of God), a major form of Jewish meditation. To open spiritual doorways that are now hidden or closed in your life, meditate upon the letter *Dalet*.

Hei #5, is found twice in the sacred name of God known as Tetragrammaton – *Yud- Hei- Vov- Hei* and connotes divine revelation. Its sound, resembling a mere exhalation, teaches that attentive focusing upon the breath is a means for spiritual development.

Hey is the closest you can come to the Holy One.

Hey begins the Hebrew word *heenayni*, "Here am I". While everyone can say "I am present", very few can say "Here I am", for to answer so means that you no longer belong only to yourself. It also means that you give the *Hay* of your being to the One who calls. That is why *Hay* is the letter most linked with God's name.

Hei begins the Hebrew word for intensive soul baring- *hitbodedut*.

Hei alludes to the five dimensions of the human soul:

Nefesh (physical instincts)

Ruach (emotions)

Neshamah (the mind)

Chayah (bridge to transcendent awareness)

Yechidah (cosmic unity)

Kabbalists recommend that we daily strive to strengthen our highest qualities through will and devotion.

To experience greater divine light – revelation – in your current life, meditate upon the letter *Hei*.

Vav #6, connotes space, mass, and physical wholeness: that every complete, self-contained object contains six dimensions. "Six days did God make the heavens and the earth": that is, each day corresponds to a special divine force in the creative process.

Vav is the sound of being joined. One and another. But it does not, precisely to remind us that "one" and "another" cannot be joined because they are independent. Otherwise the "one" would be dissolved into the "other". And then there would be only one. But such is not the way of real unity. Since only one who is unique can be joined. And this is the work of *Vav*: to join us all into a myriad of constellations each remaining different, each bound to the other. For this reason there can only be one word which begins with *Vav*. That is confession: (*viduy*). Telling the sad truth where before there had only been a lie.

And once you confess the sad truth, then, no matter what, you are joined to the one you told.

The straight, upright form of the *Vav* additionally suggests that only when a person expresses uniqueness can a meaningful joining with others occur.

Hei – Vav is the Name of the Holy One.

To strengthen your sense of interconnection, and your actual social network in daily life, meditate upon the letter *Vav*.

Zayin #7, It begins the word for time (*zman*), which Jewish mystics regard as a key feature of human reality, an element which only exists in our universe; time and space don't exist in other universes.

Representing the seven days of the week including the Sabbath.

Zayin begins the Hebrew words *zachaer* (to remember) and *zikaron*, remembrance. The Baal Shem Tov emphasized: "Forgetfulness is exile.

Remembrance is redemption.

Because there is memory, there is also Light which shines from one end of the universe to the other.

If lately you have been feeling rushed, harried, or impatient, meditate upon the letter *Zayin*.

Chet #8, is the letter of vibrant health and vitality, for it begins the crucial Hebrew word *chai*, referring to Life. According to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the letter *Chet* is formed by combining the two previous letters – *Vov* and *Zayin* – with a thin bridge shaped line between them. Thus, Jewish mysticism intriguingly teaches that our physical well being- represented by *Chet*- is linked to the quality of our relations with other people (*Vov*) and our inner relationship with time (*Zayin*).

It also begins the Hebrew word for dream (*chalom*). " When prophets were no more, their place was taken by sages, who in a sense, even excelled the prophets, and in absence of sages, things to come are revealed in dreams."

Rabbi Elijah advised his disciples that "God created sleep to this end only, that we should attain the insights that we cannot attain when our soul is joined to the body; for during sleep...the soul is out of the body and clothed in a supernal garment."

Chet also begins the word *chochmah*, wisdom, and *chasidut*, piety affirming the link existing between these aspects of spirituality.

To experience greater vitality and physical health, ,meditate upon the letter *Chet*.

Tet, #9, begins wthe Hebrew word *Tov*, good, It suggests that goodness is often hidden in our universe. It opens the Hebrew word for purity and brilliance (*tihar*),

intimating that our soul becomes more resplendent as we experience inner clarity. Each one of us emits a supernal glow that illuminates the path of others.

Tet begins the Hebrew word for travel (*tiyul*), an activity valued by the Hasidic founders for its spiritual potential. Philosopher Martin Buber reflected on the power of travel: "Every journey has a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware".

To strengthen your awareness of the true goodness(although perhaps concealed) in your life, focus on the letter *Tet*.

Yud, #10, the smallest letter of the alphabet, and the only one suspended in mid air.

It represents a cosmic messenger bringing movement and change into our lives. It begins the Hebrew word for Exodus (*yetziyah*), marching forth, leading out. Likewise, it opens the word *Yom*, day, signifying that the seemingly small events of a single day can exert incalculable effects on the world. In this regard, the names of many prophets and biblical leaders start with the letter *Yud*- . These include, *Yisroel, Yehezkiel, Yirmiyahu and Yeshaya* .

It also begins the word *Yetzer*, impulse, our inborn tendencies for both selflessness (*yetser hatov*) and egoism (*yester hara*).

Representing #10, it is linked to the ten forces comprising the tree of life.

To overcome stagnation and bring change into your life, meditate upon the letter *Yud*.

Kaf#11, first of the double letters, begins the word *kavana*, describing intentionality, willpower and one pointedness of mind. To aim, this has been the pillar of Jewish spirituality for millennia, the base for transcendental awareness. It also begins the word *Keter*, crown, the highest of the ten divine energies comprising the Tree of Life.

To improve your willpower and intentionality, focus on the letter *Kaf*.

Lamed # 12, the tallest of the Hebrew letters, literally meaning "learning" and "teaching", with true knowledge which comes from the heart.

Lamed also stands for #30. There are 36- *Lamed Vov* – hidden righteous saints on earth in every generation who quietly perform uplifting deeds that sustain the world.

To achieve greater learning from the heart, meditate upon *Lamed*.

Mem, # 40, begins and closes the Hebrew word for water (*mayim*), symbolizing the vast sea of human consciousness containing depths concealed from view. It also begins the word *maggid*, a wise teacher and spirit guide.

It also begins the word messenger-*moloch*, whereby God sends often angels into our lives to perform a specific mission, but we remain unaware of their true identity. The Hasidic masters taught that sometimes, unbeknownst to ourselves, we become divine messengers, imparting for others a crucial word or act to change their entire life.

Representing # 40, it signifies the length of time necessary for a cycle to reach fruition, like the Great Flood that brought rain for 40 days and nights, and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

To allow yourself more fully to experience spirit guides and angels, focus upon the letter *Mem*.

Nun #50, symbolizes Faith and its vibrancy in spiritual life. It begins the word for prophecy –*navooah*– and prophet – *navi* –signifying a spokesperson. It opens and closes the word *niggun*, meaning melody or tune. Music has always been a spiritual force, and a doorway to transcendent experience. With song, we can open the gates to heaven.

To strengthen your faith, meditate upon the letter *Nun*.

Samech, a closed, round letter symbolizing divine support and protection: a higher power aids our mission on earth. It begins the kabbalistic term *Sefirah* and its plural form *Sefirot*

The forms of divine energy permeating the entire universe.

Opening the word for secret – *sod* – connotes the hidden realms around us.

It also begins the word ladder- *soolam*- symbol for inner journeying for Jewish mystics.

To strengthen your sense of divine support, meditate upon the letter *Samech*.

Ayin symbolizes the qualities of perception and insight. It begins the word for eyes (*aynayim*), traditionally associated with true discernment. The sages have long taught that as we grow spiritually, we gain greater awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and the hidden pattern of meaning underlying events in the everyday world.

Ayin starts the word for tree (*aytz*). In the Kabbalah, every form in the universe, including ourselves and one another, is regarded as a Tree of Life (*aytz chaim*) filled with the ineffable radiance of God.

Opening the Hebrew word for advice (*aytzah*), *Ayin* also teaches that spiritual development always involves the help of others. For Kabbalists, we are hardly

expected to grow by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Rather, peers and mentors, are placed in our lives for practical guidance. To increase your sense of discernment and insight in daily life, focus upon the letter *Ayin*.

Pei represents the power of human speech, for it begins the Hebrew word for mouth (*peh*). It visually resembles a mouth with a tooth emerging from its upper jaw and inverting into its cavity. In the Jewish mystical viewpoint, whenever people speak they release a spiritual energy into the universe- an energy setting both visible and invisible events into motion.

As a double letter, *Pei* conveys twin messages. In its positive aspect, it signifies that we ought strive to offer cheerful, supportive words to one another. At the same time, it connotes the importance of silence: of knowing when *not* to speak. *Pei* begins the Hebrew words for hole (*poht*) and doorway (*ptach*), symbolizing that our speech has the power to open doorways and allow us entry into new realms of experience.

To enhance your ability to speak effectively – even inspirationally – to others in your daily life, meditate upon *Pei*.

Tzadi begins the Hebrew word for righteous (*Tzadik*), one who brings down the Light of heaven into this rocky, mundane world. According to the great Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, God created the cosmos through a process known as *tzimtzum*. Beginning with the letter *tzadi*, this Hebrew term refers to withdrawal or contraction of the divine, so that a void separate from God could exist. Out of that incomprehensible vacuum, matter and everything else in the universe were able to come into being and develop. For our own life, this process has a parallel relevance, as sometimes we must reduce our inner forcefulness in order to allow others- such as loved ones- their unique growth and learning.

Linked as it is to righteousness, it begins the word for charity (*tzadakah*).

To amplify righteousness in your life, focus upon the letter *tzadi*.

Kuf composed intriguingly of Zayin and Resh, it begins the word *kedushah*, referring to holiness and sanctification.

It also opens the word *korban*, which means sacrifice. To reach a higher spiritual state we must necessarily sacrifice aspects of our lower self, letting go of egoistic thoughts and desires, so that the holy can flow into us.

Kuf begins the word *kabayil* (to receive), *kabalat Shabbat*, welcoming the Sabbath. Many techniques of Jewish spiritual practice, such as meditation, are designed precisely to help us attain a more welcoming, receptive consciousness toward the sacred.

To increase your spiritual receptivity, focus upon *Kaf*.

Reich is associated with higher consciousness, it begins the Hebrew word for holy spirit (*ruach ha-kadosh*). *Ruach* means wind or breath. Traditionally, Kabbalists have viewed breathing as a gateway to exalted states of awareness.

The Hebrew words for healing (*rafoah*) and healer (*rofeh*) start with *Reish*, intimating that our physical well being is interwoven with the vitality of our breathing as well as our intuitive ability.

If you wish to strengthen your intuitive sense – to better “see around corners” in daily life – meditate upon the letter *Reish*.

Shin next to last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, starts the word *shalom*, peace. It opens the word *Shabbat*, rest and sacred time.

Associated with *shin*, are the rhythms of change in everyday life, ultimately leading to peaceful existence.

According to the Zohar, *Shin*, which begins the Hebrew word two *shanim* – signifies too that for completion to truly occur, we must overcome dualities in our thinking. The difference by means of which light is distinguished from darkness is by degree only, both are one in kind, as there is no light without darkness and no darkness without light.

The Hebrew word for joy (*simcha*) begins with *Shin*. It is the essence of spirituality.

To better experience a sense of peacefulness and harmony in your life meditate upon *Shin*.

Tav the final Hebrew letter, symbolizing that our universe is marked by cycles in all things – and that the ultimate end of this human cycle is joyful, complete redemption.

It begins the word *tikun*, meaning to rectify, redeem, or make whole.

Tav begins the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefila*, traditionally regarded as a natural outpouring of religious feeling and passion.

The final letter *Tav* also opens the Hebrew word *teshuvah*, meaning repentance, or returning to the Source.

For the Kabbalists, each of us is estranged from our divine essence to a certain degree; therefore, we must constantly seek to nurture and then express our highest qualities in the everyday world. It is precisely in this manner that redemption – and universal *tikun* – will occur.

To better actualize your unique mission in life, meditate upon *Tav*.

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