

The Aleph-Bet of Creation: Jewish Mysticism for Beginners

Arthur Green

When God set out to create the universe, says an old rabbinic story, all the letters of the alphabet crowded in before the Holy Throne. Each of them cried out, "Create the world with me!" In the best-known version of this tale, the letters begin their appeal from the rear of the alphabet, working their way up to bet, which, like the Latin *b*, is the second letter from the top. Tav, the last letter, is rejected because it is associated with death, and God's creation is to be the home of life. Shin, kof, and resh are all rejected because they comprise the Hebrew word *sheker*, meaning "lie," while God's creation is to be a realm of truth. And so the tale goes, upward through the letters of the alphabet, until it comes to bet. Bet is the letter of *beracha* (fortuitously translatable with a *b* as "blessing" in English).

As the story unfolds, the letters compete for the position of first letter in the Torah. Tradition says that "God looked into Torah and created the world"; the first letter of Holy Scripture would then also be God's first tool in the creation of the universe. The bet of *bereshit* (or the *b* of "In the beginning"), victor in this contest, becomes the primal surge of divine energy through which the project of the world's existence was launched.

The midrash of the letters reveals an interesting dimension of the ancient Jewish love affair with words and language. The most popular creation-myth of ancient Israel was one in which Elohim (more later on that

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generic Hebrew term for "God" or "gods") simply spoke the world into being: "God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light." As simple as that. God calls each aspect of existence into being by stating its name.

This means that ultimate power, that by which all things come to be, resides in language. This verbal myth was so very powerful, we should recall, that it displaced the much more richly pictorial—and indeed far bloodier—Canaanite-Hebrew myth that saw creation as the culmination of a great battle among the gods, or as the triumph of YHWH over the watery forces of premundane chaos. The old tale receded to the edges of the Genesis narrative in the face of this new and all-powerful myth of the word: The true creative power of divinity (and of God's human image, of course) lies in language. How very primally Jewish this is, setting an agenda for a people who will, in both the sacred and

secular realms, achieve their place in history through the power of the word.

But the authors of our midrash of the letters are not satisfied with this assertion that speech is the ultimate root of God's power. They seek to enter into or get behind this primary speech-act. They want to break down the first divine word into its component parts; they say that letters, rather than words, brim with divine energy. Each of the letters seeks to put its own stamp on God's great project. God the primal speaker has been replaced by God the cosmic Kabbalist, arranging the creative powers by juggling the letters of the sacred Hebrew alphabet.



Why does bet win the contest? One commentary argues that since God wanted to bless the world, or since the divine wisdom foresaw creation as a source of blessing, the letter of blessing was the natural victor. Another source suggests that it is the written form of the bet that assured its preeminence. Bet is "closed" (meaning it is written with an unbroken line) above, below, and from behind. It is open only looking forward. Similarly, readers of God's Torah or inhabitants of God's universe had best not turn their eyes to what is above, below, or behind the world, but should look only forward, into history, in order to know God's ways. The gift of blessing and the lesson of humility are both given to us when bet is selected to begin the Torah.

To the question "How did the many emerge from the One?" the answer "Very gradually" ultimately will not do.

But what of aleph? Why should Creation not take place through the first of the letters? How can the contest be called off before the primary contender has a chance to show its stuff? Here interpreters have made a variety of apologies and explanations. Aleph begins the word *arur*, or cursed. God feared creating life under the sign of a curse. Others note that aleph had already been given the gift of standing for "one" and thus beginning the number sequence (for the Hebrew consonants also serve as numbers); it could not claim the mantle of beginning the Torah as well as being the first of the letters and numbers. And some point to the fact that the slighted aleph would one day be given its due: When God spoke the ten commandments at Sinai, they began with an aleph, that of *anochi* ("I am ..."). What more could the first letter want?

But our reading of the midrash needs to be pushed a step further, to a reading I have not yet found in any of the textual traditions. Aleph, as we said, stands also for the number one; bet is two, and so forth. The world was created through the bet for an obvious yet somehow hidden reason. The creation of this world is the creation of a universe of bet, or the emergence of duality. It marks the passage of the all-embracing One into the realm of self and other, or the transformation of the One as cosmic aleph into *Elohim*, a God whose very name indicates plurality, even when used with a singular verb. *Elohim*—the name used for God throughout the creation story in Genesis 1—is author of the world of bet, divinity that has to coexist in a universe shared with

others. Creation begins with bet because that is precisely what creation is: the origin of the many out of the realm of the undivided One.

As though to dramatize the key role of duality in creation, the Genesis story is told as a tale of pairs: light and darkness, earth and heaven, upper and lower waters, sea and land, sun and moon, male and female, week-day work and Sabbath rest. These are the primal pairs through which creation is made known. The most basic of dualities, to which all these others point, is that of God and world, testament to the crucial change that the One would seem to have undergone by becoming Creator. Creation, so we would imagine, means that the limitless One is forced to become the One-in-relation. Its endless and ever-renewing energy is now to be manifest in the cacophony of infinite growth and diversity, rather than in the austere silence of changeless eternity.

But no. The midrash of the letters insists that the aleph is still there, waiting patiently behind the bet. The unity that precedes and underlies all of being has not been changed by creation. What has been added is only another perspective, that of the creatures. From our point of view, God is indeed *Elohim*, a Self who shares the stage of existence with countless other selves, including our own. But from the divine point of view, all is as it was before. One remains one. This unitive truth will be shared with humanity at Sinai, when the aleph will manifest itself as the starting-point of God's "I am." Sinai's revelation will be one that contains all of Being as a single whole. It will show us the path that leads toward repair of the primal breach that is the inevitable concomitant of creation, the breaking of the one into the many. The revelation at Sinai will begin to bring us back from the realm of two to that of one. It will do so once again through words and language, confirming forever the centrality of these to the Jewish mind.

It is no accident that this healing speech begins in silence. Aleph on its own is an entirely silent letter; only an accompanying vowel sound can make it speak. The whole Torah, as a Chasidic master once noted, is contained in that silent aleph, waiting to be spoken. But how long does it take to move from aleph's silence to the sound of that "Ah," the sound of the vowel that follows aleph, and the place where all words begin? What is the process that moves the cosmos from silence to speech? On this point even the Torah itself remains silent.

Here our contemplation of the mystery of aleph-bet leads us to the question of all questions, the essential conundrum that has teased mystics and would-be mystics since the beginning. If all is one, how do we get to the many? If all there is is aleph, where does bet come

from in the first place? In the tale of the creation, the question forms around the origins of the world's existence, seemingly separate from its source. If divinity is a perfect One, all of reality contained within a single aleph, how does our world, called the "world of separation" or multiplicity, come to be? When we speak of revelation, the question is reformulated in terms of word and silence, but it is not essentially altered. If all is one in divine silence, how could we ever imagine that silence being broken by the fragmented—and therefore potentially profane—character of speech? Only when we turn to redemption, the third eternal moment of the cosmic schema, is the question reversed: How do we go from speech to silence, from the many to the One, from our world that began with bet back to the realm of the silent aleph?

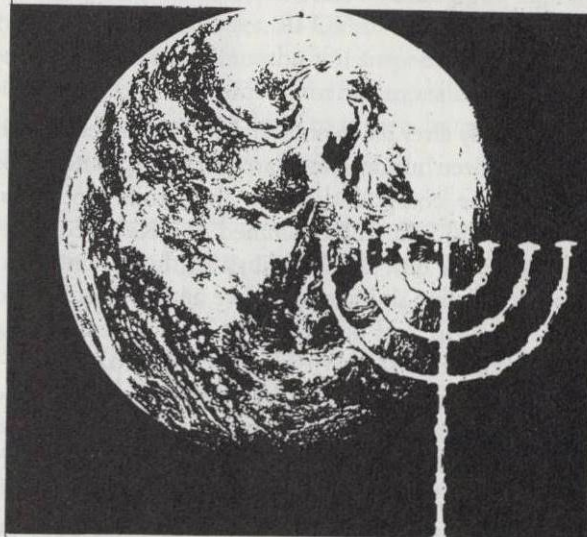
The Kabbalists, as Jewish mystics have been called since the Middle Ages, tried to deal with this problem by gradualizing nearly to infinity the transition from One to many. They described the primal stages of emergence from the One as occurring with the utmost subtlety, and refined them still further, over and over again. First, the One was surrounded by an ether, an air so fine that it could not be grasped. Then there appeared a line so thin it could not be drawn, then a "lamp of darkness" and a primal point. Step by step, stage by stage, with a step backward for each glance forward, the changeless infinite began to approach definition.

The Kabbalists described the fully manifest divine realm as a network of ten potencies, or *sefirot*, which together comprise the divine self. This means that the unity of God is dynamic, ten-within-one, rather than static. These *sefirot*, called by a great variety of symbolic names, serve both as stages in the unfolding self-manifestation of God and as rungs the mystic has to traverse in order to restore divine wholeness. But the Kabbalists' discussions of these ten powers are also replete with hints that this ten does not represent a multiplicity at all. Ten is, after all, merely one carried out to the next power; one need add nothing but a zero in order to create it. So too one hundred and all the rest, the Kabbalists like to remind us, hinting that even the greatest multiplicity can come to be without betraying the One.

But graduation does not adequately solve the problem. I look around at the world of multiplicity, knowing (from both tradition and experience) of the One that lies behind it. When I ask, "Whence the many?" I find the Kabbalist prepared to induct me into his realm of complex and subtle myth. I sense the delicacy of his mind and find something more than delicious in its elevation and refinement. In his tale of the origins of the many, I cannot but sense that he *knows* something. He

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*On the brink
of an historical
turning point*



Hans Küng JUDAISM

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peace activists or hard-liners. Extraparliamentary bodies like Peace Now and Yesh Gvul were also struck dumb, apparently out of fear that their voices would scare voters away from Meretz candidates, who are now seen as the authentic representatives of the peace camp in the Knesset. Peace activists have not learned from the Movement for Electoral Reform or the Movement for a Constitution in Israel, both of which have developed effective strategies to keep pressure on the politicians and to focus public attention on their issues.

This year's campaign has shown that the political system in Israel is not yet mature enough to meet the challenges of personality-based elections. The Labor party, which did not manage to force the Likud, formally, into direct election of the Prime Minister, tried to do so informally by emphasizing the leadership of Rabin and by downplaying the importance of the party. At the same time, Labor strategists focused narrowly on the weaknesses of the uncharismatic Shamir. A country with "normal" problems like recession, unemployment, and the maldistribution of wealth perhaps can afford the luxury of wasting its collective attention on the personal conduct or "character" of the candidates. But a country with survival issues that demand incisive decisions on matters that have not produced anything approaching consensus cannot focus the debate on how much Rabin drinks or how long Shamir sleeps.

It is, of course, legitimate, even in Israel, to consider the way the candidates for head of state behaved forty-five years ago (Rabin during the War for Independence and Shamir in the underground). But there is room for this kind of focus only on condition that these subjects don't dominate the debate and relegate the main issue of war and peace to the sidelines. Neither party has abided by this condition.

The slogan of the elections, "Israel is waiting for Rabin," could turn out to be dangerous not only to its bearers, but, in the long run, for democracy in Israel. A jingle with a semifascist ring to it always latches onto an especially heroic or charismatic figure, such as Rabin or Begin. But Rabin is over seventy years old, and it's entirely possible that this is the last election campaign for both him and Shimon Peres. Rabin is basking in the glory of his tenure of Chief of Staff of the Six Day War and the Defense Minister who rescued the hostages in Entebbe. But what will the Labor party do in another four years when the next generation of politicians takes command? Does "Israel is waiting for Ramon" resonate, for example? In the personality cult surrounding Rabin, the party has set a standard that it's doubtful another figure can meet in the foreseeable future. The greater danger is that the public has learned that it must wait for a savior, and that the party and its platform are

secondary. Today the savior is Rabin. Tomorrow, any number of other ex-generals could easily fill that role: Ariel Sharon, Rafel Etan, or Rahavam Ze'evi, the head of the far right "transfer" party, Moledet. □

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JEWISH MYSTICISM

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hints to me (without ever needing to say it directly) that he too has been joined to the One, that he knows what it is to emerge from a state of utter absorption and to have to create again, on the far shores of mystical union, the mind of the many.

But I want more. To the question "How did the many emerge from the One?" the answer "Very gradually" ultimately will not do. So I turn to the next stage of Kabbalah, one that seems to have a different answer to the great question. Here the mystics of the Lurianic School add the notion of *tzimtzum* or divine self-contraction to their theory, opting for a quasi-spatial metaphor in order to explain reality. The One is all that exists, they say, and it fills all of primal space. The One indeed leaves no room for the many; any multiplicity emerging within it would instantly be reabsorbed into endless oneness. In order for the many to exist, the One first has to create the naught. It does this by an act of self-contraction, by removing itself from a certain realm, from which it is then quite totally absent. The first creation is that of the naught. It is within this vacuum that the domain of the many comes to exist, created by new and specifically directed rays of divine energy beamed in from beyond. The many represents a strange combination of the absence and presence of the One. It can exist only because of the One's absence, because the divine all-in-all has chosen to become transcendent (read: "absent," "distant") in order to allow for the existence of an "other." But the life-source of that other is nothing but the One, for no being could be imagined that does not have its root in Being.

Here, too, the Kabbalist's rendering both attracts me and leaves me disquieted. I feel close to the Kabbalist in his struggle to be other, to distance the ever-present One from his own inner space so that his separate identity as a created self might emerge and find itself real. But the tension wrought by this void is more than I can bear. To say that I exist thanks only to God's absence is to make me a being who thrives on alienation, who needs to be far from the One at least as much as he needs to be near. Will I then seek darkness as much as light? Evil as much as good? How dare I then speak of union? If I need divine absence in order to thrive, how do I keep religious passion—the desire for intimacy—from being a lie?

So I turn to the early Chasidic masters, my favorite guides and teachers in these inner realms. Mostly they are my guides despite what Chasidism later became, not because of it. I have read and been inspired by these masters and their original writings for many years now, not in the denatured and sanitized way they have often been presented to moderns, but also not in the flattened and overly pious reading of their latter-day Chasidic followers.

The first Chasidic masters were heirs to Kabbalistic cosmology in its most baroque form. Kabbalists since the sixteenth century had elaborated an almost infinitely complex map of worlds, potencies, and restored "countenances" of the divine, interwoven with the mysteries of divine names, letters, and numbers, all in every imaginable combination. One needed vast knowledge of these symbols and their carefully ruled inner dynamics in order to play on the chessboard of Kabbalah, where each move was seen as effecting potential salvific bounty for the universe and each misstep was sure to bring about defilement and wrath. The cosmic harmony originally intended in creation had been shattered by a cataclysm that preceded creation, and the purpose of human existence was nothing less than that of restoring wholeness to God. This could be effected only by means of Kabbalistic gnosis, a recondite religious intellectuality that supported acts of extraordinary ascetic devotion.

In a move that may be considered one of the great acts of cosmic housecleaning in the history of religion, the first Chasidic masters set aside all of these domains. The "heavens" of the mystic's mind were emptied of all their way stations, potencies, and symbolic configurations. These were henceforth to be considered only of psychological importance, and were to be drawn on mostly for metaphoric use. Were we dealing with a polytheistic system, we would say that all the deities and demigods were set aside. Here their rubrics are perforce those of realms and symbols rather than "gods," but the psychological force of their elimination is not much different. The upper realms are redeemed of their clutter and the mystic mind is redeemed of the burden of gnosis, of the need to identify and unite with each of these arcane principalities in the course of its journey.

The cosmos is now empty. No more ten rungs, four worlds, two hundred thirty-one gates, three hundred ten universes, or any of the rest. Now all has been reduced to two. These are the primal pair: nothingness and being, emptiness and fullness, transcendence and presence. The first and the last of the Kabbalist's rungs, or *sefirot*, have been retrieved from the ruins of his system. At one end of the empty cosmos stands *chochmah* (divine wisdom), the first point on the map of the One's journey into being. Here all of existence is present in

the state of not-yet; *chochmah* is the One out of which all being is to be. At the other end of the cosmos is *malchut* (divine kingship), the world in all its fullness, the One dressed in the garb of the many.

Now the task of the mystic is simple. The two have to be revealed as one. Emptiness and fullness, the one and the many, God and world are two modes of the same reality, two perceptions of the same truth. The unchanging One that underlies reality, that existed "before" it and out of which the many emerged, stands over against the One that exists within the many, partaking fully of all the variety of life, evolving, growing, changing in each moment, borne within each being. The quest for truth is the attempt to unmask their oneness.

The ultimate symbol for this discovery is to be found in the aleph itself. An ancient reading of the forms of letters shows that aleph as classically written (think here also of Chinese masters contemplating their brush strokes) is composed of three letters: two letters yod joined by a vav. The two yods represent these two faces of reality, the changeless and the ever-new. The vav (this letter is used for "and" in Hebrew) is the *principium conjunctionis*, the force that joins the two together. All is contained within the single aleph, a One to which there indeed is no other. The many exist, on the plane of our ordinary reality. We live, we love, we bring forth new generations. We bring this world to the edge of destruction; we stop and seek to heal it. In the midst of all this drama it is good to remember, once in a while, that all of it takes place only within a single stroke of the endless and unchanging cosmic aleph. □

BEDOUINS

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proposal, an alternative path for the Bedouin that calls for modernizing the pastoral means of production. Land in the Negev would be leased to individual Bedouin families for a period of forty-nine years. If in the past the Bedouin never had cause to regard the enrichment of desert flora as one of their primary concerns, Kressel conjectures that leasing the land would provide them with incentive to care for a particular parcel of land: to fence it, to seed it, and to use it for fodder.

With infrastructure—roads, water, utilities—provided by the government, Kressel envisions a northern Negev that sustains villages of between sixty and eighty Bedouin families, each of them maintaining up to one hundred sheep (or forty sheep in addition to two or three camels), and traveling north with their flocks for the

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