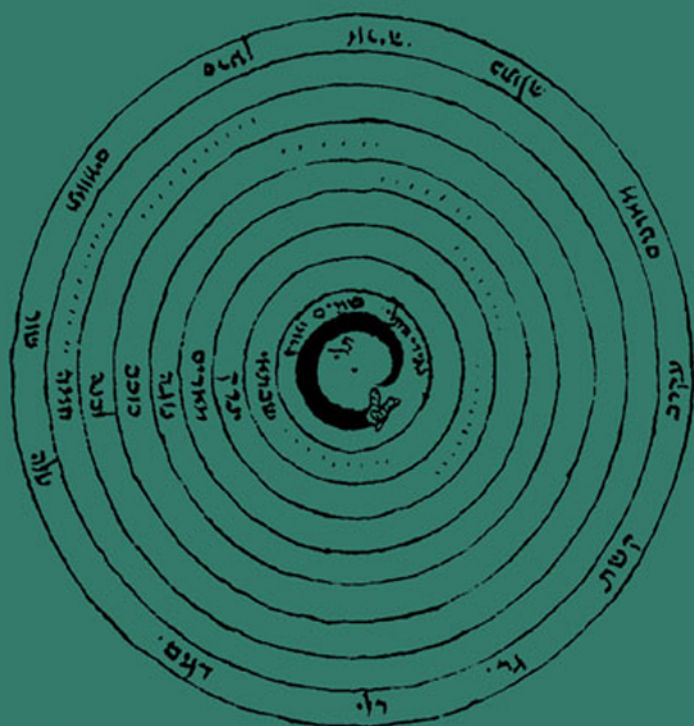


THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



WORD *and* IMAGE *in*  
MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

*The* TEXTS, COMMENTARIES, *and*  
DIAGRAMS *of the* SEFER YETSIRAH

Marla Segol



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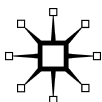


# WORD AND IMAGE IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

THE TEXTS, COMMENTARIES, AND DIAGRAMS  
OF THE *SEFER YETSIRAH*

*Marla Segol*

palgrave  
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WORD AND IMAGE IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

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*To Goldie and Orry*



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## CHAPTER 1

### WORD AND IMAGE IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH: INTERPRETING DIAGRAMS FROM THE *SEFER YETSIRAH* AND ITS COMMENTARIES

In the past 60 years, the study of Jewish mystical thought has blossomed. Once the exclusive arena of a select and traditionally educated few, it is now the most rapidly expanding field in Jewish studies. We are still compiling the canon of kabbalistic texts—many languish in archives, unedited, unpublished, and hence, mostly unknown. Even the most important collections of medieval kabbalistic manuscripts have yet to be correctly identified or fully cataloged. Little by little, scholars in the field are becoming better able to account for these works and make them available to readers. However, in the rush to produce printed texts, the graphic elements of the manuscripts have been largely ignored. The manuscripts contain a rich tradition of graphic representation that remains to be cataloged and analyzed. The study of kabbalistic manuscripts, and in this the study of its diagrams, is largely neglected. This is attributable to two prevalent trends in the study of Jewish mysticism. The first is the conventional textual orientation of Jewish studies, which is in turn based on the common misunderstanding that Jewish culture is iconoclastic, forbidding visual representations such as those found in kabbalistic diagrams. The second is a tendency among both orthodox scholars of kabbalah and its popularizers to treat it as a divinely received and therefore ahistoric tradition.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary publishing practices have also contributed to the current state of affairs. Kabbalah is a new and exciting academic discipline, so young that neither its boundaries nor its canon have been definitively established.<sup>2</sup> The standard practice of publishing edited texts without original illuminations and glosses effectively separates mystical thought from material culture. While scholars are increasing their

focus on historicizing kabbalah and more often applying interdisciplinary methodologies to its study, visual kabbalah remains largely unexplored.<sup>3</sup>

The comprehensive collection, presentation, and analysis of kabbalistic diagrams would make a significant contribution to our knowledge of kabbalah. Daniel Abrams, a leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, points out that “these many diagrams, including foremost the *sefirotic* trees have yet to be catalogued in any comprehensive way.”<sup>4</sup> The most important contributions to the study of kabbalistic diagrams come from two authors, Nicolas Sed and Giulio Busi. Sed wrote two lengthy articles in 1964 and 1965, “Une cosmologie juive du haut moyen age: la Berayta di Ma’aseh Bereshit,” and “Le texte, les manuscrits et les diagrammes.”<sup>5</sup> Sed’s work is the only scholarship that reproduces the texts with diagrams. In these two pieces he presents French translations of the *Ma’aseh Bereshit*, or the Works of Creation, alongside handmade copies of the diagrams from the texts, which are also translated into French. Also by Sed is a 1981 book treating Jewish mystical cosmology, *La mystique cosmologique juive*,<sup>6</sup> which elaborates the Jewish conception of time and space without analyzing any original diagrams. Busi has collected diagrams from manuscript collections in Rome and Milan.<sup>7</sup> He completed a book on visual kabbalah that includes about 120 diagrams. The volume was published in Italian by Einaudi, in April 2005. Busi’s work is quite valuable in that it presents and dates Italian kabbalistic diagrams, making them available to other scholars. Others, such as Gershom Scholem (*The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*)<sup>8</sup> and Elliot Wolfson (*Through a Speculum That Shines*) have analyzed textually based visualizations of the Godhead,<sup>9</sup> but only a few have studied the diagrams themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Also important to this emerging field is the work of historians of the Hebrew manuscript. Colette Sirat dedicates two pages to describing the history of kabbalistic manuscripts in her 2002 book *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*.<sup>11</sup> There are a number of works on the history of the Hebrew book, and on comparative codicology, such as Malachi Beit Arie’s *The Makings of the Hebrew Book*, and *Hebrew Manuscripts East and West*, and Joseph Gutman’s works on Hebrew manuscript production and painting.<sup>12</sup> These books are quite useful to the scholar interested in the history and the aesthetic conventions of Hebrew manuscripts, and they provide crucial tools for the material analysis of mystical diagrams, yet none of them treats mystical illustration and diagramming specifically.

These diagrams have been neglected in part because of the traditional Jewish emphasis on text, and because of their association with forbidden forms of artistic representation. This is true because Judaism has been characterized as iconoclastic, forbidding realistic visual representation generally, but especially of the human figure and of the celestial realms.

These two are theological sore points, based in changing interpretations of the second commandment that, “You shall make no graven image.”<sup>13</sup> The first is sensitive because humans might imagine themselves god-like in creating an image of the human form. The second is problematic because of the uncertain division between the cosmos and its creator in traditional Jewish thought. For example, the celestial realms, the divine throne, and even the angels in the divine palace were sometimes thought to be part of God.<sup>14</sup> And yet, representations of the celestial realms are among the most common sorts of kabbalistic diagrams. There are additionally many representations of the *sefirot*, and of the divine names, which are in some interpretations thought to be part of the divine substance. This might seem problematic. However, Jewish iconoclasm is largely an Enlightenment invention, informed by an institutionalized misinterpretation of the second commandment by Jewish and Christian scholars alike, mostly for the purposes of creating a group identity easily understood by secularized Jews and sympathetic outsiders.<sup>15</sup> Yet Jewish scholarship has in the past imposed this Enlightenment model upon earlier Jewish sources, ignoring visual representation in them.

The diagrams exist despite this denial, and they await adequate study. Kabbalistic diagrams are important because they help to historically contextualize the development of kabbalah, and they provide valuable information about the use and reception of the works they interpret. They are, as Abrams asserts, a valuable tool for understanding kabbalah, demanding serious scholarly attention. They also demand a new methodology.

At first I thought I would be the one to complete the cataloging work demanded by the new field of visual kabbalah. But in the process I learned several things that deterred me. On the one hand, one can learn a great deal about the development of the kabbalistic tradition by studying its visual representations. Yet, focusing only on the visual representations reverses but still repeats the decontextualizing mistakes of previous scholarship. This is to say that it is one thing to reproduce the texts and commentaries without the diagrams, and that it is not quite another to reproduce the diagrams without text and commentary. The meaning of both texts and diagrams comes from their relationship, and separating them deprives us of a chance to consider it. Similarly, a catalog provides an opportunity to pose questions about history and structure, but not about application. And finally, there is the question of scope. In the end it seemed better to focus on the use and reception of one key work, the *Sefer Yetsirah* (SY). This book is about the relationship between word and image in the one rather diverse textual tradition of the *Sefer Yetsirah* and its commentaries. The SY is one of the foundational texts of kabbalah, with historically significant developments in its visual representations

and its interpretive traditions. And so this project attempts to discover the ways in which diagrams accompanying one text (the SY) and its commentaries show trends in the development of the kabbalistic tradition as a whole. Having adopted more modest goals, I focus instead on methodology, looking at structure, context, use, and meaning.

There are a number of questions that need asking before it is possible to analyze the diagrams. The first set of questions concerns their origin, the second concerns their use, and the third concerns the best methodology for studying them. First, then: What are these diagrams? Where did they come from? Why do we only begin to see them in the late thirteenth century? Second: Who made them and for what purpose? How do they relate to the kabbalistic texts they accompany? Third: What distinguishes kabbalistic diagrams from other sorts of medieval visual representations? Are they images? Are they texts? And how must we consider these questions in studying them? And of what use are they to us?

### **Kabbalistic Diagrams: Their Origins; What Are These Diagrams?**

Many different sorts of diagrams appear in manuscripts of the SY and its commentaries. These include cosmological maps, models of the *sefirot* (a subset of the cosmological diagram), diagrams of the planets and stars, permutational letter charts and wheels, horoscopes, and volvelles (circular letter or permutational diagrams with moving, concentric parts). These are used for a variety of purposes, but mostly, they are practical, either for calculation or for theurgy. In addition to the above, there are charts showing genealogies of biblical figures, among other things. No matter what the form of the diagram, it is always a tool.

There are a number of different ways to think about how the diagrams work: it is possible to think of them as illustrations of their source texts, as glosses to their source texts, or as a form of visual exegesis, so that they visually represent the process bringing outside sources (both textual and graphic) to bear upon the process of interpreting their source texts. The SY is one of the most frequently copied kabbalistic works, with more complete manuscripts available than any other. Many of these have diagrams. The diagrams varied greatly as did the commentaries, and though there are distinct diagrammatic traditions, a change need not be an error. It is instead an interpretation. In some ways, these additions formed the heart of the text, as they showed its readers what it meant and how it was to be applied. Most diagrams combine these three processes; they are probably meant to illustrate key concepts in their source texts, but representing does not happen in a vacuum—instead it occurs in time, in

space, and in relation to other sources, both textual and visual. Any diagram will do what a gloss does—try to explicate concepts by using other concepts and express them authoritatively. But it does so in a different medium, and as such it not only speaks differently but it also communicates different things.

The SY is a cosmogonic, cosmological text, so its textual and visual glosses depict its subject. When the gloss is visual and represents the cosmos or aspects of it, it can be described as a cosmography. Cosmographies are synthetic, and they are aimed at authoritative representation of the cosmos or a part of it. In order to achieve this, they combine existing models to situate them in the here and now. Cosmographies are important because they illustrate a worldview.<sup>16</sup> These visual representations of the cosmos aim at articulating an authoritative worldview that can only be achieved by ordering and reconciling the many preexisting cosmologies—biblical, philosophical, magical, scientific, kabbalistic—with one another and with the drafter's experience in a particular time, place, and community of thinkers. It sometimes happens that in trying to reconcile preexisting cosmologies, people imagine new ones. Diagrams can visually represent these new cosmologies, and what is more, they are occasionally glossed with first-person narratives describing what is visually represented and why. And so they will occasionally reveal the process of symbolic innovation at work.

In the case of the SY, the practical application of the diagrams is central to their function. These diagrams are meant for use, and they often contain instructions for ritual action. The diagrams, combined with their glosses and commentaries, work to assign meaning to the rituals they illustrate by situating them in canonical Jewish narratives. As such, they explain what to do, its effects, and what the effects mean.

### Where Did They Come From?

In this light it is productive to study kabbalistic diagrams as part of a continuing tradition of Jewish cosmography. The art of Jewish cosmography is not new to the medieval period, but we have only scant evidence of it before then. The third-century Dura-Europos synagogue contains mosaics depicting the horoscope and even the divine hand. Other archaeological evidence shows that these images are not anomalous, as others have argued in the past.<sup>17</sup> The Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah*, provides an account of the use of lunar diagrams by one of its sages, R. Gamaliel.<sup>18</sup> We have few manuscripts from this period, and even fewer that are illustrated. With so little to go on, then, it is difficult to characterize late-antique Jewish cosmography.

There are, however, plenty of textual descriptions of the cosmos and many examples of its visualization. The creation of the world is described in several different parts of the Hebrew Bible,<sup>19</sup> and late-antique Jewish esoteric sources are intensely focused on both cosmology and cosmogony. The earliest strata of the Jewish esoteric corpus (outside the Bible and the Talmud) consist of *Hekhalot* texts, or literature of ascent to the divine palace, and the SY. These were probably written in late antiquity, though our earliest complete versions of each date to about the tenth century.<sup>20</sup> The *Hekhalot* (palaces) texts specifically describe visions of the heavenly palace and of God upon his throne.<sup>21</sup> The SY describes the creation of the universe with letters and numbers. The *yotzer*, a late-antique genre of liturgical poetry (the *piyyut*) is devoted exclusively to describing creation, and in this process its authors make use of multiple cosmological models, sometimes even within the same poem. More cosmologically descriptive works appear in the centuries that follow, including the *Shiur Qomah* (the measurement of the divine body) and the mystical midrash, *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*. *Shiur Qomah* describes a visualization of the divine body. It performs an exegesis on the biblical text, the Song of Songs, in order to elaborate the dimensions of the divine form. This performance, however, is entirely verbal, and probably entirely noetic. In these early texts, then, the visual element is present but in the form of ekphrasis; it is always described verbally rather than graphically as far as we know.<sup>22</sup>

### Why Do We Only Begin to See Them in the Late Thirteenth Century?

Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Jewish esoteric thought pays special attention to the detailed visualization of the cosmos and the process of its creation, with growing visual evidence. With the turn of the thirteenth century, there is a significant increase in the number of texts produced in the regions of southern Germany and Catalonia/Provence. The works produced in Catalonia/Provence are increasingly oriented toward the visual even in their titles.<sup>23</sup> The mystics of this region produced important works such as the *Sefer Bahir*, or Book of Brilliance, the *Sefer ha 'Iyyun*, or the Book of Insight, and Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah* (Gates of light), to name a few. This circle also wrote extensively about the SY. In the late thirteenth century, the circle of kabbalists in northern Spain<sup>24</sup> produced the *Zohar*, or Book of Splendor. Wolfson analyzes the ekphrastic aspect of kabbalah in his book *Through a Speculum That Shines*, though he does not take into account visual representations accompanying kabbalistic manuscripts. By the thirteenth century

we see, first, more surviving kabbalistic manuscripts, and second, more diagrams. We see even more in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century kabbalistic manuscripts.

This can be attributed to a number of different factors. The first is that images appear in kabbalistic manuscripts as book technology develops; early texts are often without visual markers that we now take for granted such as space between words, margins, page numbers, and punctuation. As the “visual grammar” of the book develops, books become easier to read, and scribes add diagrams and illustrations as they become increasingly skilled in using visual cues to make their material understood. This can be seen as part of the technological advances leading to the invention of printing.<sup>25</sup> The second explanation for the increased appearance of diagrams in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kabbalistic texts is simply the greater availability of manuscripts. Many of the manuscripts now in our possession come from the Cairo *Geniza*, which was used from the tenth to the nineteenth centuries. It contained more texts dated after the thirteenth century because the older ones did not survive as well, and because of changing patterns in its use due to changes in trade and population. Finally, there are more illustrated kabbalistic manuscripts later than the fourteenth century because of the popularization of kabbalah with the dissemination of the *Zohar* in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> There were, therefore, more manuscripts of this kind, many different cosmological models, and many different approaches to them, including philosophical, scientific, astrological, and kabbalistic. As cosmological models proliferated and the Middle Ages advanced, there was an increasing need to reconcile them.

### **Their Use: Who Made These Diagrams?**

Kabbalistic diagrams are almost always made by scribes. Unlike other kinds of Jewish books, such as Bibles, *Haggadot*, prayer books, or other sorts of illuminated manuscripts, kabbalistic books were not sent out to workshops for illustration. This is apparent in many different ways: we can see this when the diagrams are poorly executed and labeled in the same hand as the text, and when they are done well. In almost every case the diagram is drawn in the same ink and in the same hand as the text it accompanies. They are rarely colored, and rarely graphically elaborate or impressive.<sup>27</sup> And medieval and early modern kabbalistic manuscripts are seldom deliberately aesthetically pleasing. They are, in some ways, the ugly ducklings of medieval manuscripts. This shows that they were reproduced as a home operation, for use by those who copied them or by their colleagues and students.



### **And for What Purpose?**

The diagrams are also utilitarian in their purpose. They are tools: for learning, for thinking, for orienting, and for doing. In line with their cosmographic function, some of the diagrams serve to establish a setting for the texts they accompany and for the ritual actions they describe. Many of the diagrams analyzed in this book provide instructions for the ritual of letter combination to animate a golem. If the literature is aimed at training initiates and teaching them the necessary formulae to successfully complete rituals described in the commentaries, then these diagrams could be important pedagogical tools. Their instructional function is important because they prepare students for action based on a particular model.

#### ***For Thinking***

Similarly, because they function cosmographically, in the process of reconciling differing cosmologies, constructing them provides an opportunity for thought. The same is true of the process of interpreting them; they are not the same as the texts. They use a different medium for expression, and in addition to this, sometimes the knowledge they convey agrees literally with the text, but sometimes it does not, so that they work to graft different ideas, mystical and magical practices, and systems of symbols onto their source texts. In the dialogue between text and diagram it is possible to observe the manipulation of an older tradition by a new one, and vice versa. In this way, the intellectual effort required to match the visual to the verbal, and the diagrammatic interpretation to the literal meanings of the words of the texts provides occasion for thought.

#### ***For Orienting***

They are tools for orienting because they literally map the cosmos. Scholars of cognitive psychology argue that mystical diagrams act as cognitive maps of the cosmos. Specifically, they are meant for navigation<sup>28</sup> and for action. Kabbalistic diagrams participate in the goals of the texts they accompany. "While mysticism is characterized by the quest to *experience* a transcendent realm in whatever form the cultural canon allows, the majority of mystical writings relate to the challenge of modeling whatever passes for reality."<sup>29</sup> In part, depicting this reality consists in designating cosmological elements, showing the relationship between them, and specifically, showing the relationship between those that can be seen and those that cannot. When people construct mental models of

reality, these are called cognitive maps, and kabbalistic diagrams visually represent these models or aspects of them. This is a part of their cosmographic function. Because they are meant to be used—for knowledge or for action—they also show how to navigate the significant space of the cosmos. We act in space, in time, and within an order, and Yetsiratic diagrams, because they represent these, provide an orientation for thought and action.

### ***For Acting***

People use kabbalistic diagrams even now. In the present they use the sefirotic tree for meditation and for healing practices. Contemporary Hasidic Jews use letter charts for meditating on creation, and on the human relation to the divine. Some individuals are able to achieve a trancelike state using these meditations.<sup>30</sup> Some use the Hebrew letter charts for kabbalistic yoga, others for good-luck charms, and for amulets for prosperity, fertility, protection from demons, or from harm on the road.<sup>31</sup> Medieval and early modern diagrams are not very different; they include instructions for meditation, for prayer, for casting horoscopes, for astral magic, and even for mystical creation. Some manuscripts contain amulets, and some contain letter charts and volvelles. All of these show how to manipulate either the letters of the Hebrew alphabet or the 12 permutations of the four-letter divine name, and their makers thought they could be used for horoscopes and for modifying the structure of the cosmos. In all of these capacities they are working models. Each operates on the assumption that there is in fact a comprehensible model for the workings of the universe whether it is a divine power, a series of divine powers channeled through the stars, or the laws of physics. They assume, too, that knowledge of that model, and the ability to adjust a course of action to conform to that model, will help to achieve a desired goal.

### **How Do They Relate to Their Source Texts?**

As discussed above, they relate to their source texts in some combination of these four ways: as illustration, as gloss, as cosmography, and as instructions for application. However, they fulfill these functions in different ways, and these differences derive from the scribe's attitudes toward the text or the commentary in question. The diagrams can illustrate, elaborate, supplement, contradict, or correct. Those that illustrate and elaborate are the ones that appear to remain faithful to the literal meaning of the text, working to situate it in relation to other parts of the text or to provide instructions for its use. Supplementing

and contradicting are forms of polemical activity, and these are not uncommon. They are also a form of exegetical activity insofar as a diagram that might not appear to agree with a text may simply interpret it in relation to other relevant sources. These apparent differences appear largely because of the many conflicts in interpreting the SY. Some of these conflicts arise from the readers' needs to reconcile its version of creation with other versions, some arise from a perceived conflict with current philosophical doctrines, and still others from the theurgic bent of the text. The commentaries express opinions on these matters and on many more, and the diagrams do too. Alternatively, some commentators saw their work as restorative; their commentaries allowed the reader to cut through scribal additions and the accumulation of commentary to recover some sense of the "original text."<sup>32</sup> Diagrams can do the same thing.

In short, they relate to the text dialogically rather than merely illustrating or reproducing it; sometimes they are friends to it, at other times they are foes, and at other times still they are interfering relatives. The commentaries on the SY could express and/or cultivate doctrinal and symbolic innovation. Its diagrams add yet another layer to the exchange and yet another way to express new ideas. This is consonant with medieval Jewish thought on interpretation; its purpose was the revelation of hidden but intended meaning, and each commentator exercised the opportunity to help bring it out.<sup>33</sup> Scribes, too, likely believed that their graphic additions brought out the truth of the texts they interpreted.

### What Good Are They to Us?

They show how people used the texts, how people imagined the world, and how those ideas about the world vary and change.<sup>34</sup> These three things, together, open a window onto one of the greater mysteries for scholars of kabbalah—symbolic innovation in kabbalah in general and the development of the doctrine of the *sefirot* in particular.

Cosmographies are important because they illustrate a worldview. These visual representations of the cosmos aim at articulating an authoritative worldview that can only be achieved by ordering and reconciling the many preexisting cosmologies—biblical, philosophical, magical, scientific, kabbalistic—with one another and with the drafter's experience in a particular time, place, and community of thinkers. Moreover, when a diagram accompanies a text, it both mediates and situates—it mediates between text and reader, between text and other texts, between different models of the cosmos, or between the viewer and the cosmos itself.

Then it situates those views in the here and now. This is the case even if the diagram is a rudimentary instructional piece. In order to instruct its viewer to complete an action, it must operate according to the viewer's idea about how the world works, and if it does not, it must present the new cosmic model clearly enough so that it can be used. In this way a worldview is always present, whether implicit or explicit. Diagrams can visually represent these new cosmologies, and what is more, they are occasionally glossed with first-person narratives describing what is visually represented and why. In their cosmographic capacity they act as witnesses to paradigmatic changes in worldview and innovations in the symbolic repertoires used to represent those worldviews. In a more general sense, however, any kabbalistic diagram, whether cosmographic, illustrative, or instructional, models a worldview.

Most scholars define kabbalah in relation to other forms of Jewish esoteric thought, and when they talk about its emergence, they mean that of a particular cosmology, with an emanative creation that begins with the ten *sefirot*.<sup>35</sup> The term "*sefirot*" first appears in the late-antique cosmogony the SY. In this work, the ten *sefirot* are central—they are the instruments of creation, but they are ill-defined at best. Later, the *sefirot* begin to acquire a new range of dynamic roles and significations, in which each is active, and each symbolizes an aspect of God's being.<sup>36</sup> This occurs around the end of the twelfth century<sup>37</sup> with the emergence of the Gerona School and the *Sefer Bahir* (Book of Brilliance). The core kabbalistic text, the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor) was written a century later, around 1280, also in northern Spain, and in this work the doctrine of the *sefirot* is more fully defined and elaborated. Yet there is no authoritative theory explaining the development of this worldview. There are a number of theories that are important. To name only a few, they include Scholem's seminal (and now largely disproven) theory that it was sparked by the emergence of a Jewish "Gnosticism."<sup>38</sup> Moshe Idel theorizes that kabbalah developed in part as a product of the Maimonidean Controversies, in dialogue with rationalist philosophy,<sup>39</sup> and Wolfson believes that it resulted from reflection on the ill-defined cosmology narrated in the SY, a Jewish cosmological work that is most likely dated to the fifth to sixth century of the common era.<sup>40</sup> The third theory is one of the starting points for this book. The SY used cosmological terms that were both poorly defined and polyvalent, and the interpretive work required to use and understand this text stimulated the imagination of the *sefirotic* cosmology that characterizes kabbalah. Further, it is clear that elements of this process are visible in the cosmographic diagrams appearing in commentaries on this work.

**What Distinguishes Kabbalistic Diagrams from Other  
Sorts of Medieval Visual Representations?  
Are They Images? Are They Text? How Must We Consider  
These Questions in Studying Them?**

Kabbalistic diagrams are visual, but they are not art. Kabbalistic diagrams are very rudimentary in most cases,<sup>41</sup> and in this way they are different from other visual materials appearing in books such as illuminations and illustrations. In dealing with kabbalistic diagrams we are faced with two concerns specific to them. First, they are constructed to convey information that is meant to be applied. Next, they are created in dialogue with their source texts and not merely as explications of it. And because kabbalistic materials are cosmogonic in nature, focusing on the creation of the world with letters, the diagrams often treat letters as graphics, so that the line between text and image is blurred at best. This is true of kabbalah generally and of the Yetsiratic material specifically. Thus any adequate methodology for analyzing kabbalistic diagrams must account for these three problems specific to them.

These visual representations of information demand a separate and differently framed treatment. There are various ways to go about this: first, it is possible to study them as artistic images anyway; second, it is possible to view them as individual illustrations of their source texts that depend on these texts for their meaning; third, one might view them as a group and independently from the texts in which they are embedded; and fourth, it is possible to view them as all of the above, as part of a multigeneric, multitextual discourse.

***As Art***

Some argue that diagrams should be studied as artistic images. James Elkins<sup>42</sup> calls upon art historians to look beyond their traditional subjects to the vast array of “nonart” images, including premodern images from science, technology, commerce, medicine, music, and archaeology. Using illustrations as examples, Elkins proposes a way of thinking about visual analysis, one that relies on an object’s own internal sense of organization. He believes that a postmodern understanding of art opens the way for this not only because postmoderns view aesthetic values and definitions of art as arbitrary, but also because they were established in the Enlightenment period, long after these premodern objects were made. Because the definition of art is in many ways inseparable from the “arbitrary values” Elkins describes, I do not see the utility in treating the diagrams as art per se, but I take Elkins’s advice to pay close

attention to the visual qualities of each diagram and specifically to its visual organization.

### **Individual Illustrations of Their Source Texts**

Every diagram is situated; it appears in a particular manuscript in a particular place, speaking to a particular element of its source text. The meaning of the diagram comes from its relationship to its source text, and its situation within it provides parameters for meaning. However, while it is a mistake to fail to consider these things, it is an equally large mistake to reduce its meaning to one that simply rephrases in another medium the one communicated by its source text. With the introduction of a new medium, the denotata is transformed. Visual representation employs not only a different language, so to speak, but with it a different set of conventions of representation. The use of these conventions specific to the visual medium could reveal a different configuration of the material, and as such a different meaning for it. In this way it is possible to say that a visual representation could mean differently than a linguistic one, thereby transforming the meaning of the work as a whole. However, in order to really get at the conventions employed in a visual representation, comparison is necessary.

### **As a Part of a Multigeneric, Multitextual Discourse**

As visual entities, kabbalistic diagrams draw on different conventions of representation that may not be articulated in the texts they accompany. The diagrams participate in conventions of meaning shared across a range of individual works, genres, and cultures. It is therefore possible to view these diagrams as operating according to a set of semiotic conventions that may signify intraculturally, crossculturally, or among different media and generic forms. More practically, they may draw upon different textual traditions, different cosmological traditions, and different conventions of representation than those articulated in their source texts. These relationships (across culture, media, form, and genre) are important to the meaning. Comparison is useful in examining the development of the symbolic tradition, and it is also an important part of considering context and of situating the diagrams in relation to larger interpretive problems.

### **All of the Above**

This book is organized to make the diagrams understandable. In order to do this, four considerations are important: the nature of the object

itself, its relation to its source text and those related to it, the actions it describes, and the worldview in which the actions are grounded. Together these considerations bring us close to a conception of the meaning of the diagram. Each chapter contextualizes the diagram in light of a larger problem in interpretation of the SY and its attendant practices. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on interpretive problems only. Thus, we begin with the “word” of *Word and Image*. Subsequent chapters begin with interpretive problems, examine the diagrams visually, and then analyze them in relation to their source texts and in relation to one another. To that end I have translated and included the portions of the commentaries in which the diagrams appear, and shown relations between these texts and others relevant to themes of the diagrams. In this process, changes in the symbolic lexicon become visible, and so does the mapping of new cosmological models onto old ones. Finally, text, diagram, and action are placed in social and theoretical context. In this way I hope to discover the meaning, the function, and the significance of the diagram.

*Word and Image* contains five chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The book’s foremost purpose is to gain insight into the meaning and the use of the diagrams. Second, its purpose is to contextualize these cosmographies in relation to their source texts and in relation to one another. Third, it is to tell the story of the development of new cosmologies and new symbols in the process of synthesizing and reconciling preexisting ones. Finally, it is to uncover the uses of the SY, with special attention to its function as a practical work. These smaller endeavors act as a lens for examining the relationship between religion and magic generally. Methodology is key here: by focusing on the structural organization of both text and diagram and on the dialogue between them, it will be possible to better understand their meaning and their function. With the texts culturally situated, it is possible to better grasp changes in worldview over time and space. With the texts theoretically situated, we can gain a better understanding of how theorists have helped us to understand these texts and to misunderstand them as well.

## Chapter 2: Situating the Text

Chapter 1 begins with a brief exposition of the SY, describing the text, its purposes, interpretive trends in its commentaries and its traditional uses, and the worldview expressed in these interpretations. To say the least, the SY is a puzzling text; it is notoriously wily and difficult to interpret. The dating is difficult to establish, as is the content of the text itself.

It first appears in the tenth century, in three different recensions of different lengths, with some differences in organization and wording. The commentaries are equally, if not more variable. So in order to understand the way its commentators reconcile different cosmological traditions, it is necessary to be familiar with them.

But there is also something at stake here. First, there is the issue of finding out which interpretative traditions are congenial to the text(s). Second, and equally important, is the issue of scholarly taxonomies of these interpretive traditions. We see the development, early on, of a wide range of interpretive traditions. Some of them disagree with each other, and even with what appears to be the literal interpretation of the text. If it is not possible to establish the meaning of the SY, it is at least possible to characterize the worldview from which and upon which it operates. From this conception all other interpretations follow.

Then there is the question of scholarly taxonomy. Most scholars identify three main interpretive traditions for the SY: philosophical, theosophical, and practical. In brief, philosophical approaches held that the SY was a speculative text seeking a scientific explanation for the creation of the universe. It did so through its ordering function. Discovering this order functioned as a form of divine praise, but it did not yield direct knowledge of the divine. Theosophical approaches were based in the notion that the created world reflected its creator. They also held that there were patterns in the relationships between the creator and creation, and between created elements themselves, and that in understanding the relationships it was possible to learn about God. They believed that the SY provided a key for understanding them, and in this for gaining knowledge of the divine. This was the end goal of reading the SY, and it excluded practical action of any sort. Practical texts in turn focused on emulating the creation described in the SY, and scholars have divested them of theological meaning.

Most scholars believe that the SY was at first a philosophical text, and that its practical, effective (read: magical) interpretations were added to it as times changed and as the needs of its audience changed. Similarly, they tend to privilege cognitive applications over practical ones and to assimilate theosophical approaches to philosophical ones. This chapter reexamines this taxonomy in light of freshly considered evidence from the SY itself, from its reception history, and from the commentarial tradition to find that while all the interpretive trends are related to one another, the practical and theosophical modes are more closely related than the philosophical is to either one of these. As such, the separation of the cognitive function from practical application needs reexamination. The rest of the book aims to do so.



### Chapter 3: Genre as Argument: A New Look at the Literary Structure of the *Sefer Yetsirah*

Chapter 1 shows a variety of interpretative traditions applied to the SY. This is due in large part to its semantic inscrutability. It focuses on the commentarial tradition. This chapter examines the process of making meaning in the SY itself. As discussed above, the text is semantically difficult, its reception varied, and its structure poorly understood. Because of these difficulties, there are competing claims about the nature of the SY. These difficulties cannot be resolved by semantic analysis of the SY. To that end, it is necessary to find some other way of seeking meaning in it, or in other words, some other mode of semiotics.

The field of semiotics can help identify another mode of making meaning of the SY. The contemporary study of semiotics is typically<sup>43</sup> divided into three branches: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. These three branches name three different modes by which signs generate meaning. Thus far we have discussed two of these three in relation to the SY. Semantic meaning generally refers to the meaning of signs, especially the relation between signs and the objects to which they refer.<sup>44</sup> Applied here, this is the attempt to establish the referents of particular words and sentences appearing in the SY. As discussed above, the text frustrates this effort. On the other hand, syntactics studies relations among signs in a formal structure, such as genre. The third branch of semiotics is pragmatics, which concerns the relations between signs and their effects on those who use them. The commentary tradition reflects the pragmatics branch of semiotics. The commentaries are divergent because of the polysemous semantics of the SY, and because of the diversity of its readers across time and space. Because both the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the text are unstable, and the structure of the work is well articulated, its syntactics (the formal, literary structure of the work) play a greater role in generating meaning in the SY than they might if the semantic meanings were more easily established.

In order to better understand its meaning and function, this chapter examines the syntactics, or the literary structure of the SY. I propose that there is a discernible pattern in its organization that is key to understanding its meaning and function. The generic form is a tool for conveying meaning just as its words are. This pattern is a ring composition, a form commonly used in the Hebrew Bible and in late-antique and early medieval works. The ring-composition form highlights passages that emphasize the practical application of the SY. With the aid of formal analysis, it is possible to better understand the meaning and function of the text, as well as the history of its reception.

### Chapter 4: Thinking in Lines and Circles

The previous chapter discusses the ring structure of the SY. It shows how the literary structure, or the syntactics, asserts the primacy of the practical interpretation of the work. It focuses, then, on the relation between syntactics and worldview. Chapter 3 continues this discussion in an examination of two early diagrams of the kabbalistic *ilan*, or tree. They both immediately succeed a copy of the SY, and they both appear in kabbalistic varia. They are found in two closely related Italian manuscripts, MS Parma 1390, dated 1286, and BN 763/Hebrew 255, dated 1284. MS Parma 1390 was probably composed by the thirteenth-century Italian kabbalist Menachem Recanati.<sup>45</sup> These manuscripts include several types of texts and diagrams such as *sifrei sefirot* (books of the *sefirot*) and magical alphabets.

These texts and images are considered together in theorizing the worldview articulated in the diagrams and the manuscripts containing them. On another level, chapter 3 also works to show the relationship of the sefirotic model to the cosmological model articulated in the SY and its commentaries. The relationship between syntax and worldview exists because the diagrams function cosmographically, as cognitive maps modeling the cosmos and providing instructions for navigating it. The structure of the diagrams replicates the structure of the cosmos, so that the construction of meaning is a journey. When viewers work to make sense of the diagrams, they mentally travel the cosmos depicted in them. In this way the diagrams are, in Clifford Geertz's terminology, both "models of" and "models for."<sup>46</sup> They visually represent a significant aspect of the structure of the cosmos, and at the same time, in representing it, they orient the viewer so that the act of interpretation is also an act of navigation. In the end, this chapter shows how the *sefirotic* model is related to the Yetsiratic one, and in this, how a theosophical interpretation is grounded in a practical conception of the SY.

### Chapter 5: The Letterforms: How Did He Combine Them?

In the SY, the universe is created with the ten *sefirot*, and by combination of the 22 letters of the alphabet. Similarly, texts and diagrams convey instructions for human operators to replicate the process, to create by combining letters. This chapter uses the SY, its diagrams, and its medieval commentaries to theorize the nature of the letters, the source of their power, and the meaning and function of their combination. The texts of the SY situate the powers of the letters both in the divine and in astrological forces, so that letter combination acts upon God and the cosmos at large.

Most importantly, though, the authors attribute theological meaning to the letters at the same time that they assert their effectiveness. The medieval commentaries add yet another layer of meaning to the act of letter combination. Their authors believed that the effective use of letters was a mode of messianic action. As such, letter combination is not merely a “magical” activity void of mystical meaning. Instead, it is a ritual embedded in Jewish narratives about time and cosmos, and specifically in its narratives about messianism.

The medieval sources on letter combination trouble some longstanding scholarly conceptions about the relation between magic, mysticism, and meaning. Some of the most important scholars of kabbalah have separated magic from meaning. However, in the SY, the very power of the letters comes from their relation to God, and because of this, their practical use is conceived as theologically meaningful action. The meaning attributed to the letter-combination ritual is instructive. It enables us to better situate the practice of letter combination in terms of medieval religious discourses, and in terms of scholarly conceptions about the relationship between mysticism and magic, and religion and magic more generally.

### **Chapter 6: Golem Diagrams: Golem-Making, Astrology, and Messianism**

This chapter examines the “raising” of the golem. The golem is an artificial anthropoid, a pile of mud or dust sculpted into the shape of a human being and brought to life by the performance of rituals consisting of letter combination and circumambulation. From the late Middle Ages onward, the golem has lived a varied and interesting life in the popular imagination. Both rabbinic and modern sources show its social function, but medieval sources give the ritual a theological telos.

**Chapter 5** examines golem-making diagrams and recipes to situate the text in its contemporary attitudes about the meaning of theurgy. The diagrams show that the purpose of medieval golem creation differs from both rabbinic and contemporary popular-culture conceptions of it. There are several important sources for the golem-making diagrams. These include the Pseudo-Saadya Commentary (12th c.),<sup>47</sup> Abraham Abulafia’s *Hayyei Olam Ha’Ba* and *Tehilat Yetsirah* (13th c.), and the Commentary of the Pseudo-Rabad (Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, 13th–14th c.). The diagrams appearing in these commentaries are among the most common among diagrams of the SY tradition as a whole. **Chapter 5** frames the diagrams in the context of the meaning of the golem ritual.

Five diagrams are analyzed in this chapter. First is a cosmological model of the heavens with the seven planets, the twelve constellations,

and the *T'li* in the middle. This diagram typically accompanies the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary on SY59. The one analyzed here comes from JTS 1895, folio 17b. It is a fourteenth-century Spanish manuscript containing the *Pseudo-Saadyan Commentary of the Sefer Yetsirah*, a twelfth-century text. Second is a set of letter wheels representing combinations of the 72-letter divine name. These conventionally accompany Abraham Abulafia's *Hayyei Olam Ha Ba*. Here, I examine the letter wheels appearing in the MS Parma 1390, and in BN 763, the same manuscripts examined in [chapter 3](#). Third and fourth are a pair of diagrams accompanying the Commentary of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi (known as the Pseudo-Rabad). They come from JTS 1884, a fourteenth-century copy of a later thirteenth-century commentary. The first accompanies commentary on SY54, and it is a wheel-shaped diagram of 12 simple letters and the objects created with them. The second is a volvelle with permutations of the tetragrammaton and the rotations of the constellations of *Kimah* and *Kesil*, the Pleiades and Orion/Ursa Major. This is a drawing of a letter-combination volvelle. Finally, these last two are compared to the working volvelle of the SY Mantua, the 1562 editio princeps of the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*.

This chapter presents the diagrams, describes them visually, translates them and the commentary accompanying them, and theorizes their function. In order to explore the meaning of the ritual, [chapter 5](#) theorizes golem making in terms of the process of totemization, that of turning an object into a subject. It does so in light of scholarly conceptions of the ritual. These assert that the golem performs one of three social functions. First, golem creation is thought to act as an index of power relations between practitioners. Second, it is thought to perform a totemic function as a representative of the group. And third, in later sources it is created to protect the communities or particular individuals. However the medieval sources show that this is not the only function of the golem. Instead, it is used to effect metaphysical changes, including the resurrection of the dead and the reconstruction of the cosmos. These are associated with the coming of the messiah, and practitioners conceived of the golem-making ritual in these terms. In the Middle Ages, this is the true function of the golem. As such the golem gains its power through the process of totemization, but once created, it does not act as totem. And the ritual is theologically meaningful in terms of core Jewish discourses.

### In the End

In the end, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah* follows manuscripts, diagrams, and commentaries of one work, the SY, in order to accomplish five

things. First, I aim to better grasp the meaning of the text itself. Second, I use the diagrams to better understand the development of kabbalistic cosmology. Third, I use the images to gain insight into the worldview of its audiences. Fourth, I show the applications of the text. In focusing on the applications of the text, I use a small lens to look at a larger problem: the overarching frame is that of the relation between religion and magic, and of scholarly treatment of these categories. The key to this lock, as it were, is a methodology focused on dialogue. On a smaller scale it attends to the structural organization of both text and diagram and to the dialogue between them. On the larger scale it situates the dialogue between text and diagram in relation to the cultures that generated them, and to contemporary scholarly taxonomies of mysticism and efficacy and in this, religion and magic.

## CHAPTER 2

### SITUATING THE TEXT

The *Sefer Yetsirah* (SY), Book of Creation, is a mystical cosmogony that describes the creation of the universe with the letters of the alphabet and the *sefirot*, a term that the book never does define. The book was written as a narrative response to Genesis 1 and to other late-antique accounts of letter magic.<sup>1</sup> Genesis begins with a spoken decree, and the SY narrates the construction of the letters necessary for speech and describes their function in the creative process. It is, therefore, an account of the mechanics of creation. The SY is an unadorned book, with few words (from 1,300–2,500, depending on the version), written in very simple Hebrew. Yet Moshe Cordovero, a famous sixteenth-century kabbalist,<sup>2</sup> wrote of this work: “The words of this book are deep, high, and hidden from the stare of those who study it, notwithstanding that many have tried to explain it.”<sup>3</sup>

While esoteric works are often considered mysterious, there are identifiable textual and historical reasons for the inscrutability of this one. The SY is famous for its instability. There is no consensus on the date and the origin of the work. Moreover, there are significant variations among manuscripts, deriving from three problems. The first is the semantic difficulty of the work; while the vocabulary is simple it is also laconic and polyvalent. This led to scribal emendation or error in some cases. The second problem is the early appearance of different recensions in the manuscript tradition, so that from the start there never was a singular authoritative text. The third is its varied reception, produced by a sustained interaction with many different Jewish communities and cultures spread out over time and space. In the end we see a work that is unstable because of the difficulty of its semantics, combined with the cumulative effects of changes in transmission and in its symbolic lexicon over time and space, reinterpreted through different cultural lenses. These different

receptions have been preserved in its commentary tradition and in the diagrams accompanying them.

The very instability of the work, built in from the start, has generated a rich tradition of commentaries and illustrations. These commentaries represent a wide range of opinions about the meaning of the SY and its proper use. They include philosophical, magical, and theosophical interpretations. The commentaries respond differently to the primary propositions of the SY, and it is therefore necessary to know both the plot of the work and the general outlines of the commentarial tradition in order to situate the diagrams.

The SY narrates a process of creation by which God carved Hebrew letters either out of himself or out of some other preexisting substance, and these letters were combined to create the cosmos and everything in it. The text claims it is indeed possible and desirable for human operators to replicate the process in praise of the divine. Commentaries differ in their approach to the nature of the letters and their relationship to divine power. Depending on these factors, they differ as well in their estimation of the relation of the created world to the divine. Finally, some believe that the SY had a performative aspect that was crucial to the meaning of the work, conveying instructions for action. Others minimized this aspect or asserted that it was not present. Depending on time, place, and speaker, these performances were either thought integral to Jewish tradition, and therefore valued, or alien to it and dismissed. These different interpretations show various elements of religious worldviews applied in interpreting the text.

This chapter summarizes the SY and then describes, first, what is known about the date and context of the work; second, its problematic status as a unified text, the reasons for it and their consequences for hermeneutical practices and transmission; and third, its commentarial traditions and the worldviews associated with each. The diagrams examined in the rest of the book engage the interpretations and viewpoints expressed in the commentaries.

### Summary

The SY describes the process of divine creation with instruments designated in the text as the 32 paths of wisdom, which in turn consist of the 10 *sefirot*<sup>4</sup> and the 22 Hebrew letters. In the narrative, God uses each of these letters to create, within three different categories of existence: time, space, and the human being, named in the text as “the year, the universe, and the soul.” Each letter shares in the essence of the object made with it in all three realms. The last parts of the book contain what appear to be

instructions for human replication of the divine creative process. Most versions end with the lines: “And when Abraham our father, may he rest in peace, looked, saw, understood, probed, engraved and carved, He was successful in creation.”<sup>5</sup> Some of its diagrams join in this project by adding instructions for applying the principles of creation. Others map the cosmology of the SY, visually representing the setting in which the action of its narrative occurs. The work consists of six short chapters. The first two chapters introduce and develop categories and principles important to creation. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 narrate their application, and chapter six theorizes the whole process, concluding with an example of their use by the patriarch Abraham, a human if mythological operator. The SY is summarized as follows:

Chapter 1 narrates the divine creation with 32 paths of wisdom used to “carve out” the 10 *sefirot* and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The text does not define the *sefirot*. In fact it does the opposite by assigning multiple possible meanings to the term and then asserting that the *sefirot* are “without substance.”<sup>6</sup> The 22 letters are then divided into three groups: the first is the three mothers (Aleph, Mem, and Shin); the second is the seven “doubles” (Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh, Taf), or letters whose sound can be hardened with the addition of a *dagesh* (Bet-Vet, for example); and the third is the twelve simple letters, whose sounds do not change. The ten *sefirot* are next used to create ten dimensions—beginning, end, good, evil, above, below, east, west, north, and south. Next comes the emanative creation of the three elements (not four): air, water, and fire. There is no earth element. This first chapter presents both the geography and the vocabulary of the text, and with it the first of the main interpretive challenges, because it describes the *sefirot* in purposefully paradoxical terms to assert both their existence and their immaterial nature.

Chapter 2 describes the letters as “carved out by the voice, hewn out of the air, and fixed in the mouth.”<sup>7</sup> Paralleling this tripartite model, each of the letters is used to create three realms: the universe, the year, and the soul (space, time, and the human being.) The chapter also describes the methods by which the letters were combined. Many medieval manuscripts include within the texts themselves combinatory charts of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, depicted according to the creative principles outlined in this chapter.<sup>8</sup> The plot is summarized as follows: “He looks and exchanges; he makes all creation and all speech one name. And a sign for the matter: twenty-two objects in one body.”<sup>9</sup>

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show the application of the principles described in chapters 1 and 2. Beginning the applied portion of the work, chapter 3 narrates the role of the three “mother letters,” *Aleph*, *Mem*, and *Shin*.



Each “rules over” one of the three elements, *Aleph* over air, *Mem* over water, and *Shin* over fire. These are the “mother” letters from which “everything was created.”<sup>10</sup> The Saadya version and some commentaries add “fathers” to this, meaning all the letters appearing after the mothers.<sup>11</sup> Again, the text describes the methods for combining the letters, and it lists the items created in this way in three different realms—the universe, the year, and the soul, or space, time, and the human being.

Chapter 4 describes the nature and the function of the seven double letters, those that make two sounds, one soft and the other hard with the addition of a *dagesh*. Each of these possesses a pair of opposing human qualities (life: death; peace: evil; seed: desolation, etc.)<sup>12</sup> They are additionally associated with the six directions discussed in chapter 1.<sup>13</sup> The second to last verse of chapter 4 includes instructions for using the letters, some direct and some cryptic. More directly, it explains how God combined the letters to create, and it addresses the reader in the imperative, with the command to “know, ponder, and form.” More puzzlingly, it asks rhetorically: “The Seven Doubles, how does one permute them? Two stones build two houses, three build six houses, four build 24 houses, five build 120 houses, six build 720 houses, and seven build 5040 houses. From there on go out and calculate that which the mouth cannot speak and the ear cannot hear.”<sup>14</sup> Again, the reader is addressed in the imperative, but asked to complete an impossible task.

Chapter 5 describes the remaining 12 simple letters. Each of these is used to form one entity in “the universe, in the year, and in the soul,” consistent with the tripartite model in the work. An example follows: “He made Bet rule, and bound it to a crown, and combined one with another and formed with it Saturn in the universe, the Sabbath in the year, and mouth in mankind.”<sup>15</sup> Each of these is also associated with human actions such as “sight, hearing, smell, speech, taste, coition, action, motion, anger, laughter, thought, and sleep”<sup>16</sup> These are called the “Arms of the Universe,” and they provide its geographic boundaries. Each one of the 12 simple letters is also associated with one of the 12 constellations, and one of the months of the year.

Chapter 6 sums up and theorizes the cosmology elaborated in the previous chapters, and in the end it shows Abraham applying the creative principles of the SY. The cosmology is changed, adding a new element, that of the *T’li*, or the dragon. The text positions the *T’li* as a constellation that moves all the others and rules over them. This chapter discusses the power of the *T’li* over the constellations, and it unifies under one governing force, the various numeric groups of 10, 3, 7, and 12 elaborated in earlier chapters. This last chapter theorizes the creative power of the letters and numbers by grounding them in forces widely considered to drive the

course of events. This is theorized as follows: “The *T’li* in the Universe is like a king on his throne...”<sup>17</sup> Chapter 6 concludes with an exemplar for applying the SY: “And when Abraham our father gazed, he looked, saw, delved, understood, engraved, carved, permuted and depicted, and he was successful in creation.”<sup>18</sup> In a very few others this line does not appear exactly this way, but a variety of other variations do instead, some promising unlimited wisdom, others life in the world to come, and others still complete knowledge of the upper and lower worlds. Thus we have a speculative, cosmological, cosmogonic work, with its practical application modeled by the biblical patriarch, Abraham.

### Dating

The SY is one of the older works in the Jewish esoteric tradition, and there is no consensus on the date of its composition.<sup>19</sup> For our purposes there are two sets of data relevant to the dating of the work. The first are objective criteria: when was the work actually composed? The second has to do with the medieval perceptions of the work: when did its medieval users believe the text was written, and what did this mean to them? By most accounts the earliest possible date for the work is the fifth century, which sees the first reference to a work on *yetsirah*, or formation. The latest is the ninth, the century preceding the appearance of three different manuscripts of the work in three different recensions. Relying only upon material evidence, it might make sense to assign a ninth-century composition date. But the three tenth-century versions show significant differences between them, and assuming the existence of an originary text, this would not account for the time needed for such variations to develop.

Shlomo Pines proposes the earliest date of the second century, CE. He argues that the exposition of the SY bears a significant resemblance to the second century Neoplatonic Jewish-Christian work, the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, which uses wordplay similar to that appearing in the SY.<sup>20</sup> Pines compares the term *sefirot* in the SY to the term *ektaseis* (extensions) in the pseudo-Clementine homilies, which emanate from and return to the divine realm.<sup>21</sup> Elliot Wolfson believes that this “concept . . . does in fact closely parallel the six dimensions mentioned in *Sefer Yetsirah*.”<sup>22</sup> There may exist some thematic commonalities, such as an emphasis on letter magic and a shared cosmology, but the *Homilies* do not directly refer to the SY, and most scholars do not accept this opinion.

Some believe that there are records of the existence of the SY in the fifth century or earlier. The Talmud mentions either the SY or something like it. *Sanhedrin* 65B mentions a text or tradition called the *Hilkot*

*Yetsirah* (Rules of Creation), probably a thaumaturgical<sup>23</sup> work of the Talmudic period (from about 220 to 500 CE).<sup>24</sup> Others believe that this passage refers to an early version of the SY.<sup>25</sup> This source presents the *Hilkot Yetsirah* in a positive light. The permitted thaumaturgical practices associated with it are favorably contrasted with forbidden magical practices described in the text. However, because of the difference in the title, some scholars<sup>26</sup> argue that this is not a reference to the book later known as the SY, but instead to some other tradition. While there is a strong tradition of interpreting the SY according to the Talmudic description of the *Hilkot*, that is, as an aid to mystical creation, we have no manuscript of the SY contemporary to the Talmud. While it is likely that the *Hilkot* and the SY are related, it is not possible to positively identify the *Hilkot Yetsirah* as the SY.

The next possible reference to the SY occurs in a liturgical poem, or a *piyyut*, by Eliezer ben Kallir who lived in seventh-century<sup>27</sup> Palestine. Joseph Dan, among others,<sup>28</sup> believes he paraphrased the first verses of the SY in a *yotzer*, or a song of praise (*piyyut*) on the theme of creation.<sup>29</sup> Like many others contemporaneous to it, this particular *yotzer* uses a cosmological vocabulary that is shared with the SY.<sup>30</sup> Dan believes that Kallir quoted the SY in one of his poems, and so he argues that it is possible to infer that Kallir was familiar with both its wording and its content. However, some do not accept this,<sup>31</sup> arguing that Kallir does not quote the SY but rather some other source describing a similar cosmology. The question remains open, though most scholars still conclude that the exposition of the SY was composed before Eliezer wrote his poem in the seventh century. Whether or not Kallir directly quotes the SY, most would accept his familiarity with the cosmological model underlying it.

Others, such as A. Peter Hayman, propose that we date the work just prior to the appearance of its earliest manuscripts. These are three tenth-century *Genizah* manuscripts, one of which is the version used by Saadya Gaon (Babylonia, 882–942), definitively dated to 931.<sup>32</sup> In his recent critical edition of the SY, Hayman works to reconstruct the earliest probable text with an extensive examination of the most usable manuscripts, and he proposes a date of the ninth century for the earliest version that it is possible to reconstruct from existing manuscripts, drawing no conclusion about the date of its composition.<sup>33</sup> Realistically speaking then, the terminus a quo for the SY is the fifth century, and the terminus ad quem is the tenth.

There are two other important factors to consider in trying to establish the compositional date of the SY: the existence of different recensions and the content of the earliest extant commentaries. Hayman examines

tenth-century commentaries on the work, concluding that “from the tenth century on . . . it has been recognized that the SY existed in a number of recensions (*nusachot*)—some form of a standard text, a longer version which contained commentary material, and a version which completely rearranged the material and which was attributed to Saadya Gaon, who wrote a commentary on this work in 931.<sup>34</sup> The word counts ranged from 1,300 to 2,737,<sup>35</sup> with variations even among different manuscripts of the same recension.<sup>36</sup> Both the long and the Saadyan recensions exist in *Geniza* manuscripts that can be positively dated to the tenth century, while some tenth-century commentaries, such as that of Dunash ibn Tamim, quote all three recensions. Saadya, too, cites other versions of the text in his commentary, so it is clear that in the tenth century different recensions were available to both Saadya and Dunash.

The content of the early commentaries is important. It is well known that Saadya’s commentary is polemical; it intervened in a preexisting dispute about the meaning and the function of the SY, with Saadya asserting that it is a philosophical work, over and against previous interpretations attributing to it a magical or a practical function. Haggai Ben Shammai makes this argument in “Saadya’s Goals in his Commentary on the *Sefer Yezira*.”<sup>37</sup> He asserts that “Saadya’s goal in writing his commentary was to detach it from mythical, mystical, or magical elements which had possibly been attached to it by earlier commentators.”<sup>38</sup>

Dunash’s commentary is polemical as well. For example, he argues that the text has been corrupted:

But we have already established that there could be in this book other passages that Abraham the patriarch [never said] coming from the comments in Hebrew, to which ignorant people have added to the end, and the verity was lost meanwhile.<sup>39</sup>

These are fighting words, aimed at gaining some control of the work and dismissing undesirable interpretive practices.

This means that the SY existed, first, before Saadya encountered it, and second, long enough for it to accrue three different recensions, as well as an interpretive tradition disputed by two different commentators: Saadya and Dunash. It takes time for one work to generate three versions, along with a particular interpretation so entrenched as to be considered worth refuting. Considering these two factors together, it seems reasonable to take more seriously earlier attributions, even if the sources upon which they rely quote the work imprecisely. The Talmudic source mentions the *Hilkot Yetsirah* in the context of golem making via letter magic,

precisely the sort of magical interpretation appearing in later twelfth-century commentaries, and which Saadya opposed. And the Eliezer ben Kallir passage reproduces the cosmology described in the SY. Given these two factors, the SY was probably composed between the fifth century or slightly before, and not after the seventh.

### Medieval Views of Dating and Authorship

Early commentators believed that the SY was transmitted by God to Abraham, who used it himself for the purposes of creation.<sup>40</sup> According to Cordovero, in his sixteenth-century commentary on the work, this is the majority opinion.<sup>41</sup> Some earlier post-thirteenth century commentators ascribe the work to the scholar and mishnaic figure, Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the first century of the common era (50–ca.135 CE).<sup>42</sup> Earlier commentators of the twelfth-century Unique Cherub Circle attributed the SY to the fabricated figure of Joseph ben Uziel, grandson of the prophet Jeremiah. Ben Uziel is first mentioned in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, and he is the reputed author of the works of this circle.

The first perspective expresses the view that it precedes the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, assuming a hidden/revealed esoteric/exoteric relationship between the SY and the Torah. The second perspective supposes that the concepts elaborated in this work were consonant with the ones associated with the Oral Torah, a late-antique work itself. While it is not possible (nor necessarily desirable) to prove that the SY is either a three-thousand-year-old work by Avraham Aveinu, or a second-century work composed by Rabbi Akiva, or a prophetic transmission to the grandson of Jeremiah, it *is* possible on the basis of these medieval attributions to draw some conclusions about its function for medieval authors.<sup>43</sup>

These ancient attributions establish the SY as a sacred text, which sheds light on the hermeneutical processes applied to it. This is to say that its readers understood that the text had exoteric and esoteric meanings, revealed cumulatively in the course of interpretation. Because Torah (and the sacred Jewish texts included in that very broad category) is understood as a gradual and continuous revelation, differing readings of a particular text are linked as ongoing elaborations of a unified truth. Casting the SY as canonical served its medieval commentators in other ways as well.<sup>44</sup> The commentator on a text coterminous with either the Bible or the Oral Torah exercised authority from a safe distance; in expressing novel ideas he appeared to follow the thread of a long tradition. Alternatively, as expressed by Dunash in the passage above, some commentators saw their

work as restorative; their commentaries allowed the reader to recover some sense of the “original” text. In some cases the writers believed that the true path to uncovering the “original” text lay in excision, and they saw their work as corrective.

This is consonant with medieval Jewish thought on interpretation; its purpose was the revelation of hidden but intended meaning, and each commentator exercised the opportunity to help bring it out,<sup>45</sup> perhaps by altering the wording or by excision, but most often by exegesis as they interpreted this sacred text in the light of others.

The medieval conception of authorship foregrounds the relation that the commentator establishes with the text. Either way, the commentator must address a body of interpretive literature when approaching the work and see in it the gradual unfolding of meaning, some of which is relevant to the interpretive project and some of which is not.

The codicological tradition manifests these hermeneutical practices by grouping texts and commentaries together. It is rare that the SY appears independently. Instead it is usually found in kabbalistic varia, collections of kabbalistic works. It is also unusual that a single version or commentary appears without any of the others. Kabbalistic varia often include more than one version of the SY and numerous commentaries. This is, in a sense, a manuscript family appearing in various configurations in larger manuscripts containing kabbalistic varia. This way of presenting and encountering the SY persists into the present day. The most important recensions and commentaries are usually published together in a book called the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*, or the “full version.” This is one of the first few Hebrew incunabula, printed in Mantua in 1562. But in these manuscript families certain commentaries are left out—mostly the earlier philosophical ones. The collections are diverse, but they share a practical or mystical bent in their interpretation, leaving out the ones that dispute this. Thus, many versions and commentaries of a certain sort are used and preserved side-by-side, consistent with the hermeneutic applied to sacred texts as well as with the scribes’ agendas.

### The Commentaries

The commentators’ views of the work differ in the most fundamental ways as they argue for different semantic meanings and radically divergent views of its purpose. By the tenth century there were already three separate commentary traditions, arguing different uses for the SY. These are magical, philosophical, and theosophical. Commentary traditions may be distinguished by their understandings of four different aspects of

the text of the SY. First, they may be distinguished by their understanding of the origin and the ontological status of the letters and divine names. Second, based on this understanding they express different conceptions of the letters' relationship to divine power, with some believing in their direct creation by the divine and from the divine body, while others propose the existence of mediating agents in their creation and use. Third, the commentaries express different ideas about the purpose of the text, whether it is for action or knowledge. Fourth, they show different views of the relation of the created world to the divine, expressing different ideas about the circumstances under which God acts in the world and about the role of human operators in influencing divine action. Different epistemological views result from differing perceptions of the relation between the divine and the created world; some argue that it is possible to gain knowledge of the creator via the created world, while others argue that it is not.

These different interpretations of the SY express different conceptions about the relationship between the created world and the divine. These in turn were expressed in their understandings of the letterform and how it works. Magical commentaries worked on the assumption that the letters have a close relationship to the divine, derived either from divine substance or from divine breath, that they were used directly to create, and that human operators could use the letters to emulate the divine creation. Philosophical interpreters argued that the text was merely descriptive, that the letters used to create the universe had a mediated rather than a direct relation with the divine, and that human operators could not use them to create anything in the material world. Like magical interpretations, theosophical commentaries express the idea that the letters have a direct relation to the divine. Their writers believed that the letters had genuine and direct power to create, but unlike magical commentaries, knowledge of God is the primary goal, rather than action based on that knowledge.

These divisions are visible even in the first, tenth-century generation of commentaries. This group includes those of Saadya Gaon, Dunash ibn Tamim, and Shabbetai Donnolo.<sup>46</sup> The first two are Babylonian in provenance, and they are philosophical works, grounded in the intellectual culture of tenth-century Islam.<sup>47</sup> They attempt to situate the cosmology described in the SY within that described in the Bible, and to reconcile its cosmogony with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, current in tenth-century Babylonia but not yet established in Byzantium.

While there are no earlier textual witnesses or commentaries, these philosophical tenth-century works do not appear in a vacuum. Instead

they already dispute previous, unnamed interpretive traditions positing its theurgic and divinatory functions.<sup>48</sup> The third commentary, the *Sefer Hakhmoni* of Shabbetai Donnolo, emphasizes the divinatory and theological purpose of the SY. Shabbetai's commentary is less focused on disputing magical claims, and more focused on integrating the SY with the received astrological, magical, and linguistic traditions of Byzantium. It works to establish the SY as a justification for reading the created world as a usable source of knowledge of the divine.

As discussed above, the philosophical commentaries both presuppose and combat the magical interpretation of the SY, articulated in the Talmud in its discussion of the *Hilkot Yetsirah*. According to the Talmud, the *Hilkot* is used by Rava Hanina and Oshaia to create a calf, to be slaughtered for Shabbat dinner. *BT Sanhedrin* 67a asks:

What [magic] is entirely permitted? Such as [the magic] performed by R. Hanina and R. 'Oshaia, who spend every Sabbath eve in studying the Laws of Creation, by means of which they created a third-grown calf, and ate it.<sup>49</sup>

The rabbis study the *Hilkot Yetsirah*, and with it they create a calf. Other passages suggest that the rabbis knew and used letter magic. For example, *BT Berakhot* 55a conveys the traditions that "Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, creative magic is recognized not only as integral but as an indicator of elite status: "Rava said: If the righteous desired it, they could be creators."<sup>51</sup> In this instance creative ability is an index of virtue.<sup>52</sup> This magic, then, is integral magic.<sup>53</sup> It is a form of theurgy, institutionally sanctioned within Jewish legal texts. And even though the *Sanhedrin* text does not explicitly link the *Hilkot* with letter magic, the *Berakhot* passage shows that letter magic was known to the editors of the Talmud, also as a form of integral magic.

All of the interpretations that follow engage this magical view of the SY, and they do it with the tools made available to them from within Jewish thought and from the cultures surrounding them. The SY may predate these Talmudic passages, and it may not. But the Talmudic account provides valuable evidence for a tradition of Jewish thaumaturgy in late antiquity. The best way to consider this passage, then, is to think of it as indicating a tradition with which the SY was identified, whenever it was composed. While the magical interpretation of the SY is primary, subsequent interpretive traditions try to mediate this magical one in relation to their contemporary intellectual climates.



Saadya Gaon engages these magical interpretations, but thinks about the SY with the rationalist tools provided by Muslim Kalaamist thinkers. With them, he aims to transform the SY into a philosophical treatise on the nature of creation. In order to do so he must neutralize the magical elements of the work. Saadya's *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah* is very much engaged with the elite rationalist, philosophical, and fiercely aniconic culture of his time and place. Indeed, in his commentary he demonstrates his familiarity with contemporary philosophy by refuting 12 different cosmogonic views before presenting his own.<sup>54</sup> Saadya's methodology bears an affinity to Kalaamist thought, which was distinctive in part because of its negative linguistic theology, based on a radical doctrine of divine incorporeality. The emphasis on incorporeality discouraged symbolic representation of the divine. As a result it minimized the connection between God and divine names, which described God and attributed to him positive, embodied qualities. Kalaamist thought also aimed to establish revealed, that is, scriptural tradition as the basis for all scientific and philosophical inquiry, and to synthesize revealed tradition with science. Thus for Saadya, the SY presents three problems: the first is the nature of the letterforms, which possess real power because of their close relationship to the divine; the second is the narrative of the SY, which does not conform to the cosmogonies of the Bible, and the third is the relation of the divine to the created world. In his interpretation of the SY, he tries to intervene in its magical treatment of symbols, to situate its speculative aspects in the context of Biblical traditions, and to replace its astrological doctrines with astronomical ones that do not treat the heavens as a source of divinatory knowledge. In this way he excises its magical qualities.

Saadya's attitude toward the letterforms is an important component of the rationalist philosophical view he presents. He intervenes in the idea of a direct divine creation of the letterforms with his doctrine of the *Bat Kol*, the daughter of the divine voice. He quotes from *Nevi'im* (the book of the *Prophets*) to insist that the *Bat Kol* was the first created thing, followed by the visible air, in which the Creator formed ten numbers and twenty-two letters. Thus letters are created with the mediating agent of the *Bat Kol*, and so they bear an indirect relation to the divine. According to Saadya, therefore they have no power.

In Saadya's work, the created world does not provide direct knowledge of the workings of the divine. Moreover, even the letters used to create it are not directly connected to God. Thus, the relation of the created world to the divine is also mediated, first by the divine voice, second

by the daughter of the voice, and third by the letterforms. In this way he uses the *Nevi'im* to assert that divine speech precedes the creation of the letters, and that the letters are the agents of divine speech rather than of the divine body, which reestablishes the primacy of the divine voice as it appears in Genesis. The greater the distance between the letters and the divine, the less power they have, and the less “magical” and more “philosophical” the text. This commentary emphasizes the transcendent aspect of the divine over the immanent one.

Saadya's Byzantine contemporary Shabbetai Donnolo (Byzantine Italy, 913–982) also worked to harmonize SY with contemporary thought, but his goal was to reconfigure the work as a divinatory-theosophical treatise, revealing the operation of divine providence in the structure of the physical world, and showing how to gain knowledge of the divine by reflecting on its created elements. His commentary, the *Sefer Hakhmoni* (approximately, the Book of Wisdom) is distinctive for its epistemology; the reader can learn about God from divine creations. For him, the SY is a practical text, used for astrological divination and attaining knowledge of God.

The figuration of the letters is central to Shabbetai's theosophic view. He articulates a close relation between the letters and the divine, and he views the *sefirot* as agents of divine prophecy.<sup>55</sup> Shabbetai argues that both the dimensions of the universe and the 22 letters are made directly from the divine spirit. He writes in his commentary on SY12 (“Two, breath from Spirit”),

How? God issued one breath out of his holy spirit. With his breath that he blew and issued out of His spirit, He engraved and carved out the space of the world and the four corners of the earth, each infused with the breath that comes from the domain of God.<sup>56</sup>

In this passage he claims that God uses his own breath to blow and carve out the dimensions of the world, and that as a result divine breath is part of them. This is all the more apparent in the analogy Shabbetai uses to explain this, comparing God to a glassblower, “Similarly, the Lord who is great, mighty, and awesome, issued a breath of air from his Spirit, and by his great strength, the space of the world was stretched as far as he told it . . .”<sup>57</sup> The same applies to the 22 letters: “They share the same air, the air that God blew and issued from his Holy Spirit.”<sup>58</sup> Ontologically they are consubstantial with God.

Similarly Shabbetai supposes a consubstantial relation between the letters and the created world as well, so that the letters are literally

present in the three most important parts of all living creatures: the torso, the head, and the belly. In his commentary upon SY30, he writes that “every living thing has a torso, the males and the females, and these are *Aleph, Mem, Shin*, and *Aleph, Shin, Mem*.”<sup>59</sup> He repeats the same formulation with different letter combinations for the head and the belly, with different combinations of the three mother letters of *Aleph, Mem, and Shin*.<sup>60</sup> In this way the letters are the breath of the divine, and they are present in the three component parts of every living thing.

*Sefer Hakhmoni* expresses a strong interest in divination, with lengthy passages describing how it is possible to tell future events with prophecy received via the *sefirot*, and by the proper understanding of the planets and constellations. He argues that knowing their ways helps to predict the future. And in his commentary on SY43 he argues that the created world is a source of information about its divine creator. “The world on its own and by itself testifies about him.”<sup>61</sup> For Shabbetai, created things are a valid source for knowledge of God.

Shabbetai pays less attention to thaumaturgy, but he does discuss the use of the letters in interpreting SY18, which describes the process of divine letter combination to create the world. SY18 reads: “Twenty-two letters of foundation, fixed on a wheel with 231 gates. The wheel rotates forward and backward: And this is the sign of the matter: if for good there is nothing higher than pleasure, and if for evil, there is nothing lower than pain.”<sup>62</sup> Shabbetai responds: “How? If you set your mind, by means of this group of letters, to act for good, to elevate God greatly, then there is nothing higher than pleasure. But if for evil there is nothing lower than pain.”<sup>63</sup> The text describes the ritual of letter combination, focusing on intentionality, whether for praise or for other purposes, making the distinction, it seems between integral and alien magic. This means that he acknowledges the practical use of the letters and in this the magical use of the text, but its focus is epistemology rather than practical action.

As it stands, then, Shabbetai posits a direct and consubstantial relation between creator and letters, and between creator and created world. Shabbetai Donnolo emphasizes an immanent view of the divine over a transcendent one, and while he acknowledges the practical application of this view, he focuses on knowledge instead. This typifies a theosophic outlook.

Commentaries of the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries continued this thaumaturgic tradition, especially the Ashkenazim, the Jews of Italy, France, and Germany, whose writings contained references to and

recipes for the creation of an artificial anthropoid, or a golem.<sup>64</sup> Many of these writers believed that the text was practical in its aim. At the same time, other commentators from Southern France and Northern Spain emphasized and developed the theosophical aspects of the text, seen already in Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century commentary. These newer commentaries developed the emanational theology of the SY, eventually transforming the ten *sefirot* introduced in the SY into the divine pleroma that is the central symbolic system of the thirteenth-century *Zohar* and of kabbalah as we know it.<sup>65</sup>

The differences in the various interpretations of the SY can be tied to contemporary attitudes toward symbols, toward the created world, and toward the divine. Magical commentaries posit a more direct relation between the letters and the divine; they see the divine names as active in creation, and they believe in the possibility of the effective use of both letters and the divine names. Moreover, because God creates in this text, they see human creations as praise of God, as an action in *imago dei*. These tend to emphasize an immanent over a transcendent view of the divine.

Philosophical commentaries (such as Saadya's) generally argue that the letters are not created from the divine substance, and that divine names are not ontologically related to God. As such they cannot be used performatively to effectively use divine power. All of these are rooted in a worldview that emphasizes transcendent over immanent aspects of the divine.

Theosophical commentaries differ from magical ones in their aim rather than in their point of view. They see a direct relation between the divine, the letters, and the cosmos created with them. They too emphasize an immanent view of the divine, but they, like the philosophers, see knowledge rather than action as the most fitting sort of praise. However, theosophs and magicians are generally not too far apart, since they share a worldview and differ only in their aims. And it is relatively easy to move from the theoretical to the practical, so that this distinction is less meaningful than it ought to be.

This counters much of contemporary scholarship on kabbalah. We have tended to think of theosophy and magic as divergent traditions issuing from different and incompatible worldviews.<sup>66</sup> Yet it is clear that various elements from early philosophical interpretations find their way into later magical ones, and that theosophical texts move from theory to practice more easily than we have thought. It is clear too that magical texts present a worldview that does not significantly differ from that articulated in "theosophical" ones. In light of these factors, our categories need

reexamination, and indeed, the material examined in the succeeding chapters will aid in this endeavor.

### Conclusions

Historical debates on the nature of the SY are not only significant in terms of understanding the work itself, but also in terms of understanding religion taxonomically. The SY offers many opportunities, then. It provides an opportunity to think about textuality—that is, what it means to call something a text when this one is clearly not a unified text in the traditional sense. Because of the varied interpretations, it also provides an opportunity to examine the role of reception in establishing meaning. And because of the nature of its varied receptions, the commentaries provide an opportunity to explore ideas about the nature of religion, whether it is better defined by theological conceptions or by practical applications. More importantly these commentary traditions offer an opportunity to examine the relationship between theology and action.

The problems raised by the SY, its commentaries, and its diagrams similarly shed light on scholarly debates about the mystical significance of magical activity. Those privileging theosophical kabbalah over practical kabbalah have done so on the supposition that magic derives from mysticism and divests it of meaning in its focus on accessing power. For example, Rachel Elior argues, “Magical language uses names and meaningless words to create a connection with a supernatural power. The person who uses this language chooses to give up meaning and intelligibility in favor of control, in a formulaic meaningless mode, of hidden powers that might affect the revealed realm through invocations and adjurations.”<sup>67</sup> They have done so both consciously and unconsciously, it seems, acting on Émile Durkheim’s distinctions between religion and magic. Durkheim believed that magic and religion fulfill different social functions: whereas religion serves the group, magic serves the individual. Magic, then, is theologically insignificant because it is individual rather than communal, and it merely addresses personal needs. Contemporary scholars have introduced taxonomical categories emphasizing the structural similarities between magic and religion. Moshe Idel employs the term “integral magic” to show that magic is part of religious life. And yet in many cases the boundaries of integral magic have not been expanded to include practical kabbalah, which is in many cases merely an application of the same principles underlying theosophical kabbalah. Similarly, we have yet to adequately address the theological significations of some forms of integral magic and its potential for meaning to the community as a whole.

In this way the SY, its commentaries, and its diagrams appear at the center of a debate on the nature of kabbalah, and even more, on the nature of religion. The diagrams show that the texts containing them do not much address the philosophical perspective, expressing instead both practical and theosophical views, which turn out to be linked. The diagrams play a key role in this exploration because they are by their very nature practical. As cognitive maps, they act as an invitation to travel and as a template for organizing information. As pedagogical aids, they convey information, as religious symbols they acts as models of and models for a worldview, and in their illustrative function, they often provide instructions for ritual action. In all of these functions they are practical. As such, the many diagrams provide opportunities to consider the significance of applied kabbalah.



## CHAPTER 3

### GENRE AS ARGUMENT IN THE *SEFER YETSIRAH*: A NEW LOOK AT ITS LITERARY STRUCTURE<sup>1</sup>

The semantic difficulty of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (SY) is widely attested by its varied commentary tradition. The diverse body of commentarial literature demonstrates the difficulty of establishing the meaning of the work. As discussed in [chapter 2](#), the tenth-century commentaries do not appear in a vacuum. Instead they already dispute previous, unnamed interpretive traditions that posit magical functions for the work. This chapter endeavors to explain why. In order to do so, it is necessary to look differently at the SY to try to understand the way it generates meaning. Because the work is complex in both its semantic meaning and its reception, this chapter will examine its structure. A structural approach to the text is useful in two ways: first, a better interpretation of the SY sheds light upon the worldview of its readers, and second, understanding the worldview of the readers allows insight into its ritual uses and their meanings. The ritual uses are articulated in the text of the SY, its commentaries, and the diagrams. Therefore, the relationship between structure and function can pave the way for understanding the relationship between word, image, practice, and meaning.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the commentaries on the SY express different ideas about its meaning and function. Is it a philosophical, theosophical, or a magical text? The commentaries disagree, and there is no scholarly consensus. These disagreements regarding the meaning of the text derive in part from cultural differences in its audience over time and space. But first and foremost, they stem from its polysemous literary style;<sup>2</sup> this is not to be underestimated. The book is written in language that is spare, cryptic, and seemingly self-contradictory. For example, in all three recensions the first verse alone contains a number of words with multiple significations, while the second contains a confusing



*hapax legomenon* that is central to its meaning. The translation of SY1:1 follows:

By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom Yah, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God, God Almighty, high and exalted, dwelling forever, and holy is his name, carved out. He created this universe with three groups of letters (*sefarim*), with *sefer*, *sefer*, and *sefer*.<sup>3</sup>

This requires some explanation. The Hebrew *Hakak Yah* is here translated as “God carved out.” But these words might mean that “God carved out” the “thirty-two wondrous paths” or that the “thirty-two wondrous paths” were “carved out of God.” Each of these is a reasonable translation. This manuscript then supplies nine names for the divine, while others supply four, or ten, or only one.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this verse asserts that God “*bara et olamo, b’shloshah sefarim, b’sefar, v’sefar, v’sefar*,” that he “created his world in (or with) three *sefarim*, in *sefer*, and *sefer*, and *sefer*.”<sup>5</sup> *Sefarim* is the plural of a root word with many meanings, including book, number, story, speech, or even sapphire, among others. It could refer to letters as well because numbers are represented with letters in Hebrew. We expect some development of this category, as the text breaks it down into three separate subcategories, but alas, they thrice repeat the polysemous *sefer*, this time in the singular: “*sefer, sefer, and sefer*.” This conveys no more information than before. In this way the text creates an expectation for well-articulated categories, but frustrates it immediately.

The same dynamic occurs in the second verse, which breaks down the 32 paths into 10 *sefirot* and 22 letters. However, the category of “*sefirot*” is also poorly articulated. Once again it is merely another form of the word root *sefer* of verse one. One might expect examples of items fitting into this category, but precisely the opposite occurs. The *sefirot* are described in SY2 as *eser sefirot b’limah*, which can be translated as ten of a cognate of the word *sefer*, modified by the word *b’limah*, a *hapax legomenon* indicating, by its component parts, *b’li*, without, and *mah*, meaning “what,” so that together they likely denote, “without what?” or “without substance.” Thus, the writer creates undefined polysemous categories that purposefully avoid conveying concrete information about their referents. And these are the basis of all creation, which is the subject of the text and which, we might imagine, the reader hopes to better comprehend.

At the same time, the SY presents an unmistakable call to action. The text narrates the divine creation of the universe by the manipulation of the 22 letters of the alphabet. Various portions of it describe the divine manipulation of the letters, while others contain instructions for

its readers to do so. This is evident in recurring phrases within the text: SY4 directs the reader to "Get the thing clearly worked out and restore the creator to his place."<sup>6</sup> Other passages, including SY6 and 24, instruct the reader to "know and ponder and form,"<sup>7</sup> a list of verbs that progressively become more active and direct. The list begins with the verb, "know," moves to the more active "ponder," and from there to the transitive, active "form," which specifies direct action on an object.<sup>8</sup>

In the SY, then, we have an interesting dilemma: readers experience difficulty fixing its semantic meaning, while at the same time, the text asks them to complete actions based in the structure of the cosmos that it describes in this manner. As a parallel case, it is worth considering the debate sparked by Fritz Stahl's 1979 article asserting the meaninglessness of ritual. Stahl argues that ritual is meaningless because "it is pure activity without meaning or goal."<sup>9</sup> When he says rituals have no meaning, he does so in part because he believes that they have no referents—they do not refer to any object existing in the material world. This may be just one article, written decades ago and effectively rebutted by scholars of religion, but it is an argument heard over and over again by scholars of religion. The argument goes as follows: if it is not possible to fix the semantic meaning of the text, then the text is meaningless.

Yet sacred texts are typically polysemous. Scholars of midrash such as David Stern argue that polysemy is a deliberate strategy that makes it possible to include the varied communities using the texts, and that it contributes to their longevity as they are more easily applied in different times, places, and situations.<sup>10</sup> This explanation can be applied to the SY, used by practitioners of magic, theosophs, philosophers, and contemporary non-Jewish readers alike. But given this wide range of interpretation, how is it possible to say that the work means anything at all? In an article challenging Stahl's claims, Hans Penner posits that, "The fact that we have not been able to adequately resolve the problem of the meaning of myth and ritual by determining their reference should alert us that we may well be asking the wrong question."<sup>11</sup> He argues: "Given the modern developments in linguistics, we can no longer assume that the meaning of something is its reference."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, then, we have asked the wrong questions of the SY as well.

If the semantic meaning of the text is difficult to establish, if its reception is varied and even contradictory, our best hope lies elsewhere. The field of semiotics can help identify it. The contemporary study of semiotics is typically<sup>13</sup> divided into three branches: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. These three branches name three different modes by which signs generate meaning. Thus far we have discussed two of these three in relation to the SY: semantic meaning generally refers to the meaning of

signs, especially the relation between signs and the objects to which they refer.<sup>14</sup> Applied here, this is the attempt to establish the referents of particular words and sentences appearing in the SY. As discussed above, the text frustrates this effort to establish the signification of its most essential vocabulary. On the other hand, syntactics studies relations among signs in a formal structure, such as genre. The third branch of semiotics is pragmatics, which concerns the relations between signs and their effects on those who use them. The commentary tradition reflects the “pragmatics” branch of semiotics. The commentaries are divergent because of the polysemous semantics of the SY, and because of the diversity of its readers across time and space. Because both the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the text are unstable, and the structure of the work is well articulated, its syntactics (the formal, literary structure of the work) play a greater role in generating meaning in the SY than they might if the semantic meanings were more easily established.

Claude Lévi-Strauss argues for the importance of syntactics in making meaning. He writes that in mythology as well as linguistics, formal analysis immediately raises the question of meaning.<sup>15</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, the meaning of myth is not in its material referents, but in the structures of narrative.<sup>16</sup> And as such, meaning is not isolated within the specific semantic parts of the myth, but rather within the relations of these parts. In his work he argues that the composition of the myth can refer to the human mind or to the social structure of the group that generated these myths. In a similar fashion, David Stern argues that according to the writers of Midrash, “To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human existence modeled after God’s creation of the world.”<sup>17</sup> In a manner analogous to the thought of Lévi-Strauss, Stern writes that interpreters of midrash believe that the structure of their own myths emulates that of the divine mind. Either way, the structure of the myth is mimetic.

The literary structure of the SY is also mimetic, referring instead to its most important theme, the structure of the cosmos. Its generic structure reproduces and communicates conceptions about the created world and how it works. The author has chosen a literary structure that, when visualized, emulates the circular structure of the cosmos it describes. The SY produces a model of the cosmos as the basis of natural law, articulating universal structures meant to guide human behavior. Structure and application work together. Similarly, the generic structure fulfills a teaching function by which its reader is instructed to visually map the structure of the text and the cosmos, and emphasizing certain parts over others. Also important to its pedagogical role, its structure might fulfill a mnemonic

function.<sup>18</sup> Semantic polysemy participates in the construction of this model, drawing attention to its generic form and reflecting conceptions about complex relations between referents, and between the reader and those referents. This pattern is typical of sacred texts; it is often difficult to fix their semantic meaning. Yet, those that hold the texts sacred see them as authoritative, presenting arguments for action in the form of particular ritual practices and the forms of community organization and institutional authorities.<sup>19</sup>

To that end it is worth considering whether the semantic complexity of the SY is meant to stand as it is, or whether it is meant to be glossed and explained. In a recent conference paper, Benedek Lang argued that “coded” texts, specifically esoteric ones, are coded *only* to be decoded.<sup>20</sup> Often they include detailed instructions for accomplishing precisely that. For example, complicated charts and diagrams for performing magical or mystical operations are often coded, and as such they are nearly incomprehensible on their own. Yet these same texts containing the coded instructions also contain keys. According to Lang, the point of this is to involve the reader in the text, in ritually decoding it and enacting its instructions. Because comprehension requires immediate application, this mode of composition facilitates a deeper involvement with the text. Lang’s model is useful for characterizing the goals of the SY. The text contains a puzzle, but it also contains a key. It may not explicate every aspect of the work, but it will direct the reader to make meaning of it. While the polysemous language of the SY communicates conceptions about the complexity of the created world, it also directs the reader’s attention to other modes of meaning-making employed in the text, and its literary genre is one of them.

Genre is a form of syntactics that contains conventionalized instructions for reader reception, and it is key to making sense of the SY.<sup>21</sup> These instructions provide valuable clues for interpreting and using the work.<sup>22</sup> I propose that there is a discernible pattern in the organization of the SY, and that this pattern is a ring composition. The ring composition is a literary form commonly used in the Hebrew Bible, and in other late-antique and early medieval works. It has a chiasmic structure, A-B-C-B-A, which works as follows: first there is an introductory section, a prologue that presents the theme and context. The story then proceeds toward its crucial center: the turning point and climax. Once there, the beginning is invoked again, and the tale reverses direction. The second half of the story echoes the first, as if the writer is walking backward through the plot. The ending is a return to the beginning.<sup>23</sup> In the ring composition the center is most important to the message. This is where the theme introduced in the beginning is theorized and applied, and it is

where the work's most important questions are answered. So in order to make meaning of the text, the reader must visualize its elements in spatial relationship to one another.

Ring compositions are common in biblical and classical literature, on a small and large scale. Contemporary scholars have identified chiastic structures in the Hebrew Bible, showing that they are key to conveying meaning.<sup>24</sup> In his analysis of Genesis, Gary Rendsburg argues that its editors used chiastic and parallel structures to organize their material. Throughout his analysis, Rendsburg defines symmetrical units through shared vocabulary and themes.<sup>25</sup> He shows that catchwords often effect a smooth transition between consecutive units, much as in the fully developed ring structure. Already part of the Hebrew literary tradition, these chiastic structures undergird the larger form of the ring composition. The best-known exemplar of the ring composition is the biblical book of Numbers. In her final book, *Thinking in Circles*, Mary Douglas shows that the book of Numbers, which generations of readers have considered disorderly and chaotic, is in actuality an orderly ring structure.<sup>26</sup> It is a double-banded ring, according to Douglas, that works to "bridge two worlds,"<sup>27</sup> that of Exodus and Leviticus, in which the Levites figured hardly at all, to the world of *Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah*, in which they are given special duties and rich properties.<sup>28</sup> The alternating bands of the ring juxtapose these two worlds and bring them together in the latch, the closure of the ring structure.

This structure was also widely used in classical works. In his analysis of Pindar's poems, Glenn Most finds a chiastic structure serving to develop the plot, arguing that structure and function are closely related.<sup>29</sup> Others have made similar arguments for Homer's *Odyssey* and other classical works.<sup>30</sup> Hence the ring structure was common in antiquity, in both Jewish traditions and in the wider Mediterranean world.

It is not so common in the present, however. Douglas argues that our unfamiliarity with ring composition has led to contemporary misinterpretation of ancient texts.<sup>31</sup> It is well established that the ring composition was used and recognized in antiquity into the early Middle Ages. It became less common as the Middle Ages advanced, until the present, in which it is barely recognized. I contend that this is the case with the SY: our unfamiliarity with its structure has clouded our conception of the work. This is true because genres encode expectations and they limit the meaning-potential of a given text.<sup>32</sup> For an audience to make sense of any text, it requires certain competencies that are sometimes called "cultural capital." Generic knowledge is one of these competencies, and like most of our everyday knowledge, genre knowledge is typically tacit

and gained only through the experience of repeated exposure.<sup>33</sup> Alastair Fowler suggests that “readers learn genres gradually, usually through unconscious familiarization.”<sup>34</sup> Because we do not typically encounter ring compositions in our daily lives, we do not undergo this process of gradual and unconscious familiarization, and so we are not likely to recognize a ring composition.

If we are unfamiliar with the genre, we miss the writer’s instructions for reading it, we experience it differently than if we shared its author’s conception of its form, and, possibly, we misunderstand it. For example, readers familiar with a ring composition will visualize its components, imaginably mapping the piece. In so doing they will relate and compare the parts opposite one another in the ring, listen for the turn, and then connect it to the first and last narrative units. This means that their experience of the work is different from that of those who do not interpret it in this manner. Thus despite the linguistic complexity of the work, early commentaries on the SY did not treat the work as opaque,<sup>35</sup> while later sixteenth-century commentaries such as Moshe Cordovero’s did so.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the ring structure is important to the SY in elucidating its argument in three ways. First, it instructs the reader to visualize the structure of the narrative. In so doing, it serves to reinforce the concentric cosmological model the text describes. Second, the ring structure emphasizes key questions by virtue of their placement in it. In this it serves as a teaching device. Third, it highlights instructions for action by placement. In probing these questions, and highlighting instructions for action, the structure of the piece can also shed light on problems in its interpretation, namely, what is the purpose of the text? Is it philosophical, theosophical or magical? In directing the reader to pay special attention to certain parts of the text, it conveys information about its application.

Douglas provides seven rules for identifying ring compositions. According to her, all rings “must first include an exposition or prologue that states the theme and introduces the main characters.”<sup>37</sup> For example, this means that the second section from the introduction shares themes and vocabulary with the one directly opposite it in the ring, second from the close of the ring, and that the second section speaks to the first. Second, “the composition is split into two halves, the first working toward the turn of the ring and the second working back toward the beginning . . .”<sup>38</sup> Third, “these two halves have parallel sections that are thematically related . . .”<sup>39</sup> Fourth, it must possess indicators to mark individual sections, such as the repetition of key words or phrases.<sup>40</sup> Fifth, the rings are “‘centrally loaded,’ so that their most important message is delivered at

the turn or the center of the ring.”<sup>41</sup> One significant clue for this is the repetition of key terms or themes appearing in the introduction. Sixth, “there are rings within rings,”<sup>42</sup> such that the main ring may be structured by smaller, subsidiary rings. Seventh, and finally, “the ring must achieve closure at two levels. By joining up with the beginning, the ending signals completion and recognizably fulfills the initial promise.”<sup>43</sup>

The SY fits Douglas’s description of a ring composition. It is a master ring consisting of a collection of primary rings, which in turn contain subsidiary rings that develop aspects of the material narrated in the primary rings (see [Figure 3.1](#)).

It is a composition split into two halves, with parallel sections thematically related, and these conclude with a latch, which achieves closure of two different narratives on two different levels. The two narratives discussed in the SY consist of the answers to two questions. The first question is that of the divine creation process. The text asks repeatedly: “How did He combine them?” The second is that of its use by human operators. This consists of challenges and instructions addressed to the reader, such as “know and ponder and form,” or “go out and calculate . . .” Both are answered in relation to the development of the key numeric categories in the work, apparent in their patterned repetition.

### Methodology

The remainder of this chapter shows how the SY conforms to the criteria outlined by Douglas, and uses the ring structure model to produce meaning. Given the variability in the manuscripts, as well as the differences between versions, it was not easy to examine this as a “text.” Neither was it possible to consider all the manuscripts with all their variants. This rules out the possibility of a definitive structural analysis. To get as close as possible to this, I chose to examine A. Peter Hayman’s best, earliest MSS of all three recensions of the SY. In determining the best ones, I largely accepted his opinion. Therefore, I have relied exclusively on MSS A, K, and C. MS A is a tenth-century copy of the Long Version.<sup>44</sup> MS C is a tenth-century copy of the Saadyan Version,<sup>45</sup> and MS K is a thirteenth-century copy of the Short Version, and the earliest that Hayman considered.<sup>46</sup> In each verse I identified the words and themes appearing in all three versions. Then I chose the one that best typified the group and used it to establish the theme of the verse of that number. For the diagrams, I have relied exclusively on A, the earliest and best exemplar of the Long Version. On a larger scale, in order to get a sense of the shape of the work, I noted the repetition of key questions, themes, and phrases in all three versions. Then I traced their recurrence throughout, using them to plot the points of the structure of the work.

### **The Rules for Ring Composition as They Apply to the *Sefer Yetsirah***

The previous section outlined the different characteristics of the ring composition. This one shows specifically how the SY meets those criteria.

#### ***The Introduction***

According to Douglas, all rings must first include an exposition or prologue that states the theme and introduces the main characters. In the SY, verses 1–16 comprise the introduction to the text as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom, Yah, the Lord of Hosts, The God of Israel, the Living God, God Almighty, high and exalted, dwelling for ever and ever, and holy is his name, carved out. He created his universe within three *sefarim*, in *sefer*, and *sefer*, and *sefer*. (SY1, MS K)

This section introduces the numeric categories that will be developed throughout the work. It introduces the thirty-two paths, consisting of a group of ten and another group which is further divided into three groups. SY2 clarifies the divisions in these groups: “The ten *sefirot* are the basis, and the twenty-two letters are the foundation; three primary letters, [seven] double [letters] and twelve simple [letters]” (SY2, MSS K and C). Each of these categories becomes its own primary ring; this first ring, containing the introduction, develops the category of the ten *sefirot*. Ring two discusses the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Ring three describes the three mother letters. Ring 4 concerns the seven double letters, and Ring 5 narrates the actions of the twelve simple letters. Ring 6 is structured differently, lacking the verbal cues that identify it as a ring. It repeats the themes of the introduction and the individual rings, and acts as a latch, linking the previous rings together. In this way Ring 1 acts as an exposition, presenting all of the major categories developed in it, including thirty-two paths, ten *sefirot*, twenty-two letters, three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve simples. These terms are elaborated and theorized throughout, until they have all been discussed. The ten *sefirot*, developed first in the introduction, appear once again as a category of ten in the last ring. The work ends, and the latch closes as Ring 6 summarizes the divine creation process and then models its application.

#### **Rules Number 2 and 3: Two Halves, Thematically Related**

The composition is split into two halves with the first working toward the turn of the ring and the second working back toward the beginning.



These two halves have parallel sections that are thematically related. Aside from phrases and themes, there are also recurring questions and instructions. These, too, help to shape the SY and convey its message. The question is asked in the first half and answered in the second. The key question addressed throughout is, "How did he combine them?" This exploration of the divine creative process is coupled with instructions for the human reader. For example, the reader is directed to "know, ponder, and form." Like the question, "How did He combine them?" the directive to "know ponder and form" occurs only in the first half of the work, with concrete examples of items created by these processes occurring after the turn.

Generally, Rings 1–4 ask the question, "How did He combine them?" and the second half answers it with concrete examples of objects made with that combination, up to the turn in 4, which both asks the questions and answers it concretely. For example, Ring 2 asks, "How did he combine them? And Ring 6, opposite it, refrains from asking the question but asserts: "In some cases these are combined with those . . ." The same dynamic occurs in Rings 3 and 5: 3 asks the question, "How did He combine them?" and 5 supplies a material example: "There was formed with *Heh* Aries, Nisan, the liver, sight and blindness" (SY54, MS A). It is important that Ring 2 asks this question and supplies an example of the way that the letters were combined, but it does not name anything created in the physical world with them. Ring 4, the turn, is split according to this pattern. The first half of the ring asks the question: How did He combine them? And it answers the question in the first part of the ring by supplying the categories created by the letters, such as planets in the universe, days in the year, and the apertures in mankind (39, KAC). SY40 is the actual turn and it asks: "How did He combine them?" SY40 answers the question by theorizing: two stones build two houses, three build six; four build 24 . . . . This does not explain precisely what was built, and neither does it provide the correct letter combination. Instead, it provides a mathematical theory that the reader might apply to letter combination to create unspecified objects. The second part of Ring 4 (the beginning of the second half of the composition as a whole) does specify material objects created by letter combination. SY41 supplies a catalog of objects made by combining the seven double letters, the first appearing in the book, and it reads as follows: "He made Bet rule, and bound it to a crown, and combined one with another, and formed with it Saturn in the Universe, the Sabbath in the year, and the mouth in mankind."<sup>48</sup> SY41 continues to enumerate the elements created with

each of the seven double letters. Hence, the turn at Ring 4 makes the transition from theoretical to practical.

The instructions to “know, ponder, and form” receive a similar treatment: they are articulated in imperative form in SY4, 6 (MSS A and C, but not K), and 24, but only applied in the second half of the work. The turn repeats the instruction and elaborates upon it, commanding the reader: “From here on go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear” (SY40). Past the turn, the second half of the ring describes what was “formed” with the letters. We do not encounter this sequence in the imperative form again, but the latch reports the action as Abraham has already accomplished it. The final verse reads: “When Abraham our father observed, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him.”<sup>49</sup> He has fulfilled the instructions articulated in 4, 6, and 24, and he has been rewarded for it.

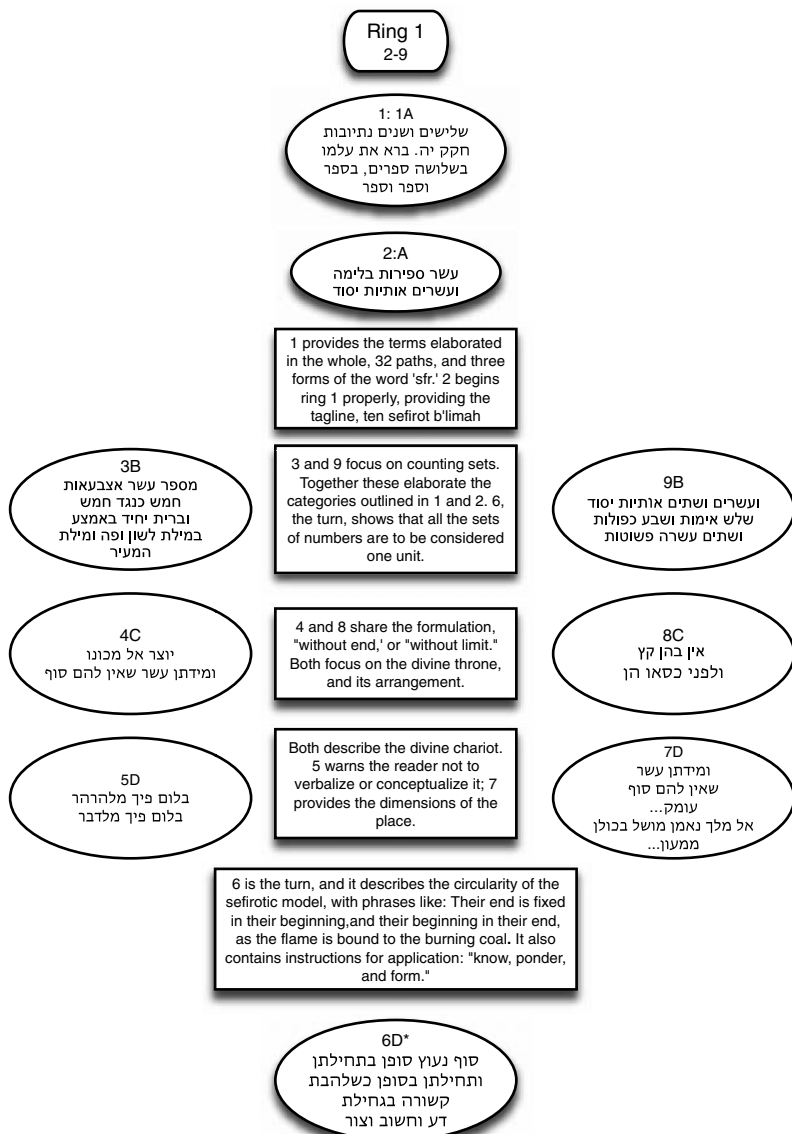
#### **Rule Number Four: Indicators for Sections**

Fourth, it must possess indicators to mark individual sections, such as the repetition of key words or phrases. It is possible to identify the rings in the SY by looking for repeated words, phrases, and themes, beginning with the first lines of each verse. Each ring begins with a verse that presents the terms to be elaborated in that unit, and it ends with a verse that repeats some of this introductory material. The first verse also contains the phrase that will be repeated in each of the verses in the ring. I am calling this the tagline. The first line or two of each ring contains the tagline, and it introduces the terms that the ring will develop. For example, the first ring begins with the phrase *eser sefirot b'limah* (ten *sefirot* without substance), and it repeats that phrase at the beginning of each verse. The same is true of each ring, and even of those subsidiary rings within them. Subsidiary rings often repeat a phrase different from the tagline, usually taken from inside the verse. A list of the taglines for each ring follows, succeeded by a text-diagram of the structure of each ring.

#### **List of Rings and Their Taglines, Followed by Structural Diagrams**

##### **1. 1–10: Primary**

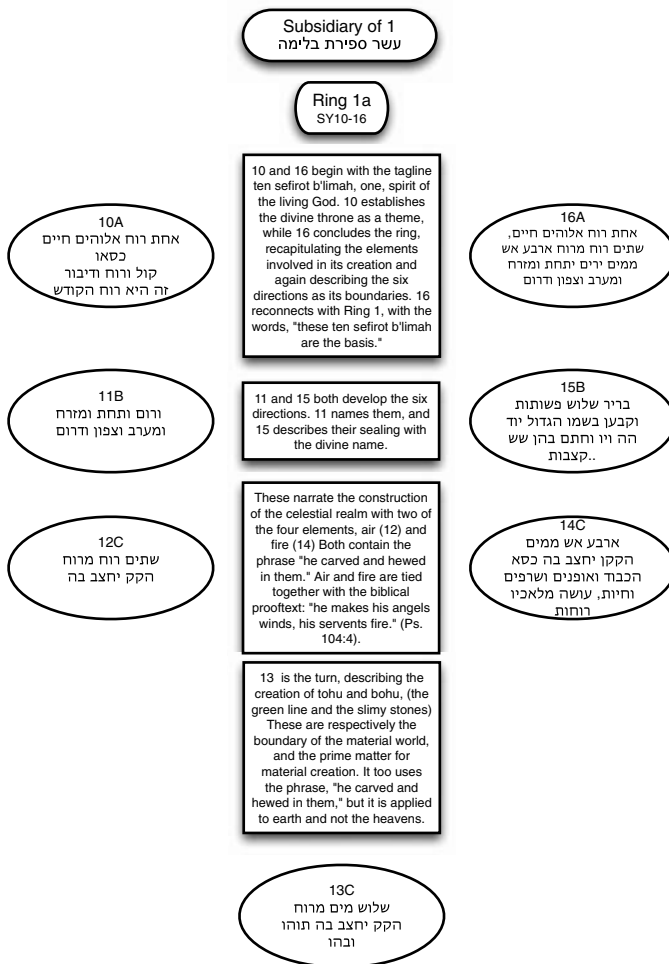
Ring 1 develops the category of the ten *sefirot*. Its tagline is “ten *sefirot* without substance,” (*Eser sefirot b'limah*).



**Figure 3.1** Ring 1: Ten *Sefirot* without Substance.

**1a. 11–16: Subsidiary, Included within 1**

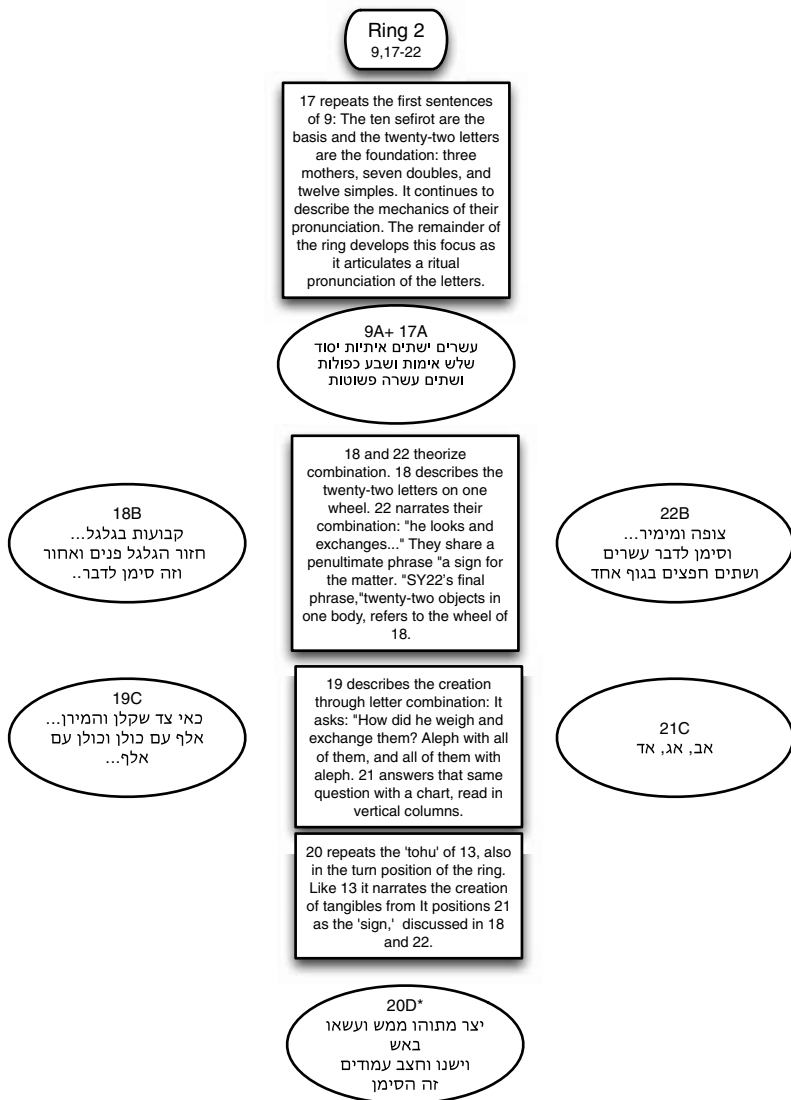
Ring 1a describes a process of development in which one *sefirah* leads to the next. It identifies the three as the first elements of the ten that then give rise to spatiality. Its last line contains the tagline identifying it as part of Ring 1, and this is how we know that the subsidiary ring is concluded. Sixteen begins with the words: “these ten sefirot without substance” (*iluser sefirot b’limah*).



**Figure 3.1a** Subsidiary Ring.

## 2. 17–22: Primary

This ring is introduced with materials repeated from Ring 1, in verse 9, and this shows that Ring 3 continues to develop themes laid out in Ring 1. Its tagline is *esrim vshtayim otivot yesod*, 22 foundational letters. It develops the theme of creation by combining them: “twenty-two foundational letters,” (*esrim v’shtayim otivot yesod*).

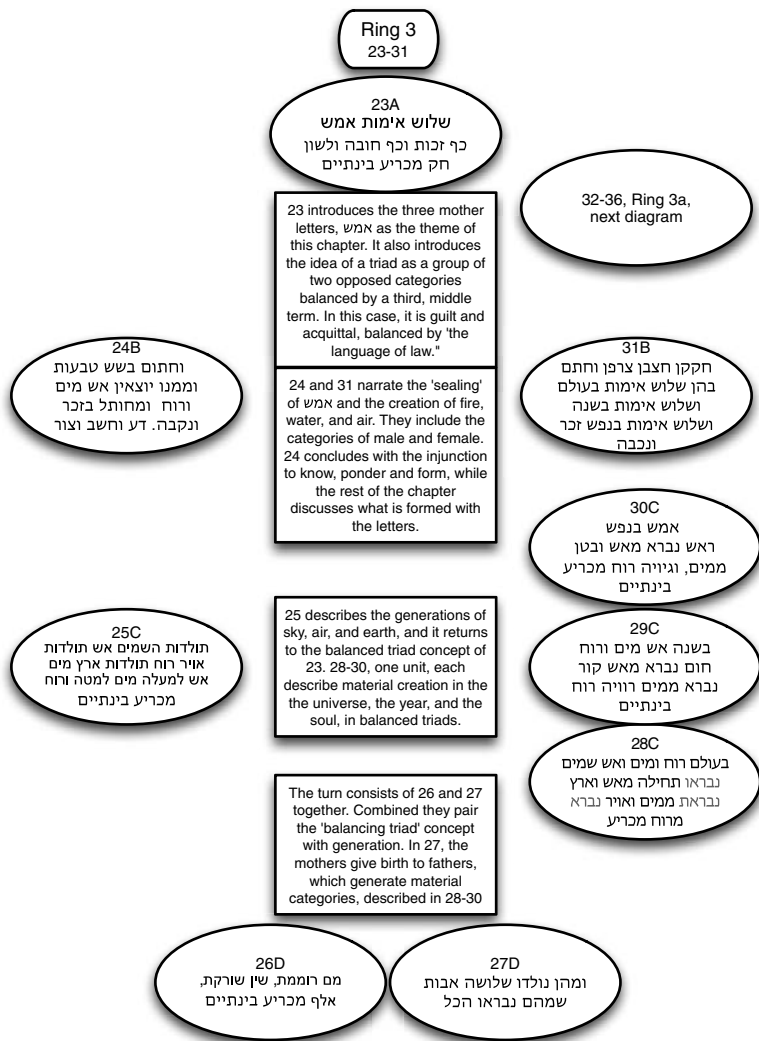


**Figure 3.2** Ring 2: Twenty-two Foundational Letters.

**“twenty-two foundational letters,” (esrim v’shtayim otot yesod).  
23–31/36: Primary**

This ring describes the three mother letters. Its tagline is “three mother letters, *Aleph, Mem, Shin*.” *Shloshah imot AMSH*.

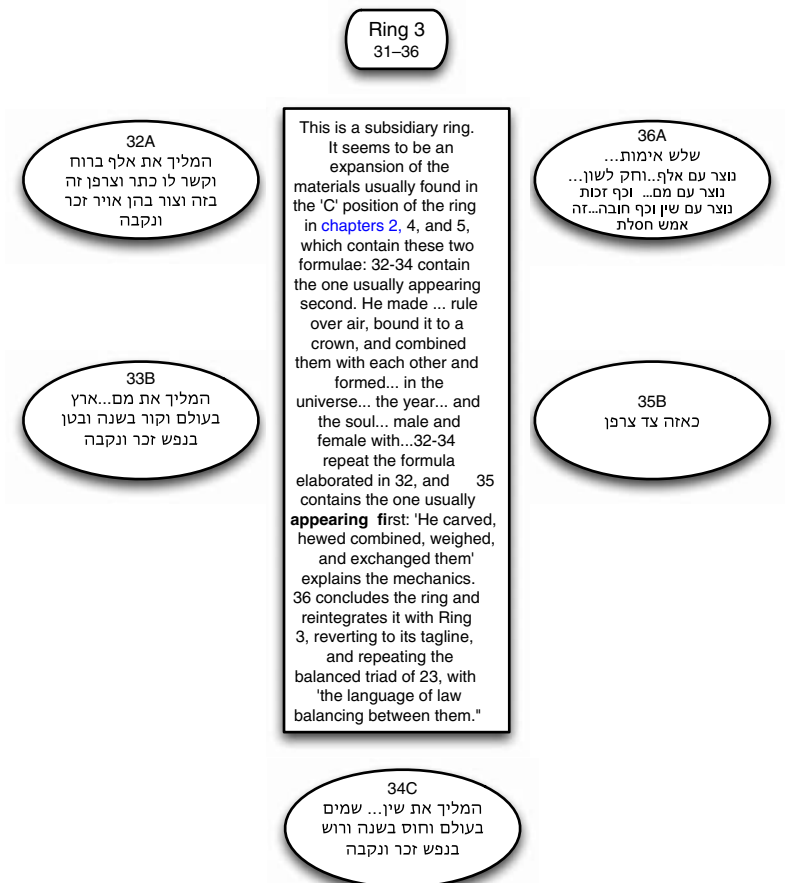
In addition to their shared tagline, many of the verses in the primary part of this ring end with another shared line: “air holding the balance between them”: (*Avir makri’a bintayim*)



**Figure 3.3** Ring 3: Three Mothers: Aleph, Mem, Shin.

### 3a. 31–36 *Subsidiary, Included within Ring 3*

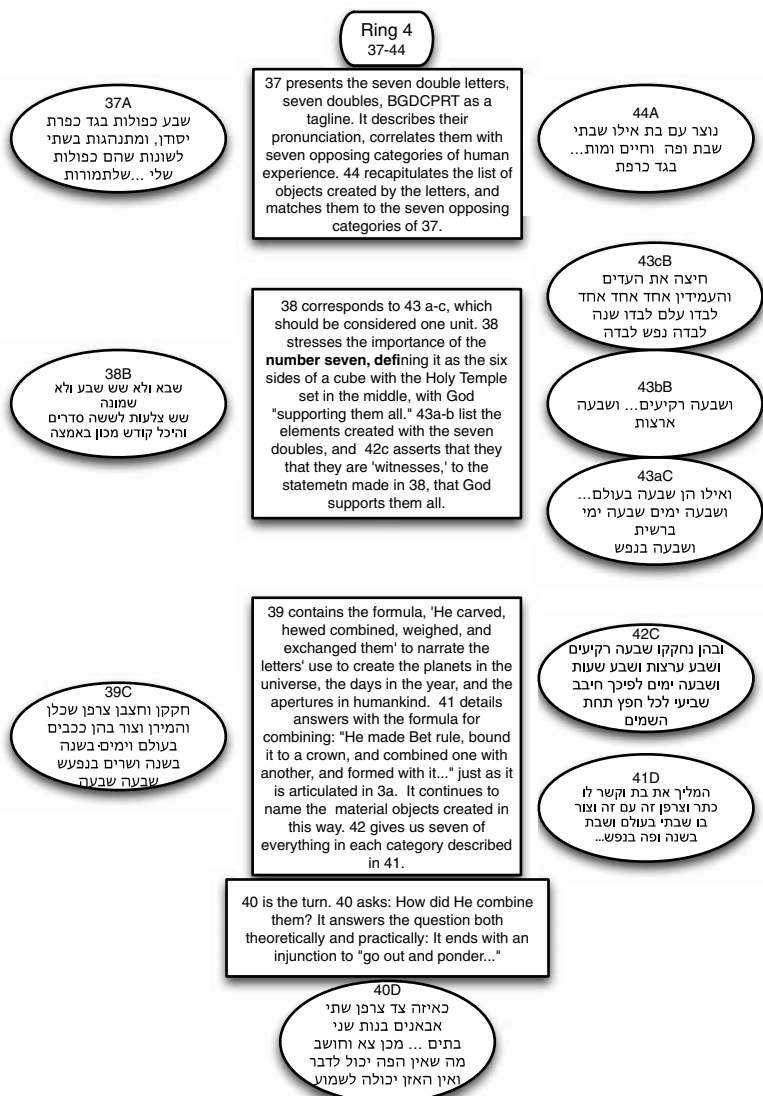
Ring 3a develops the theme set out in Ring 3 by listing the items created with the three letters. It describes what they created, how they did so, and the categories that organize them: the universe, the year, and the soul. These verses are highly formulaic. They are all structured much like SY32, which proceeds as follows: He made Aleph rule over air, and bound it to a crown, and combined them with each other, and formed with them air in the universe, humidity in the year, and the chest in mankind, male and female- male with Aleph-Mem-Shin, and female with Aleph-Shin-Mem. In verses 32–35 this formula is repeated with changes in terminology according to the letter described.



**Figure 3.3a** Ring 3a: Ruling, Combining, Crowning.

#### 4. 37–44: Primary (Including the Turn, at SY40)

This ring describes the seven double letters. Its tagline is: **גב תרפכ עבש תולופכ**



**Figure 3.4** Ring 4: Seven Doubles, BGD CPRT.





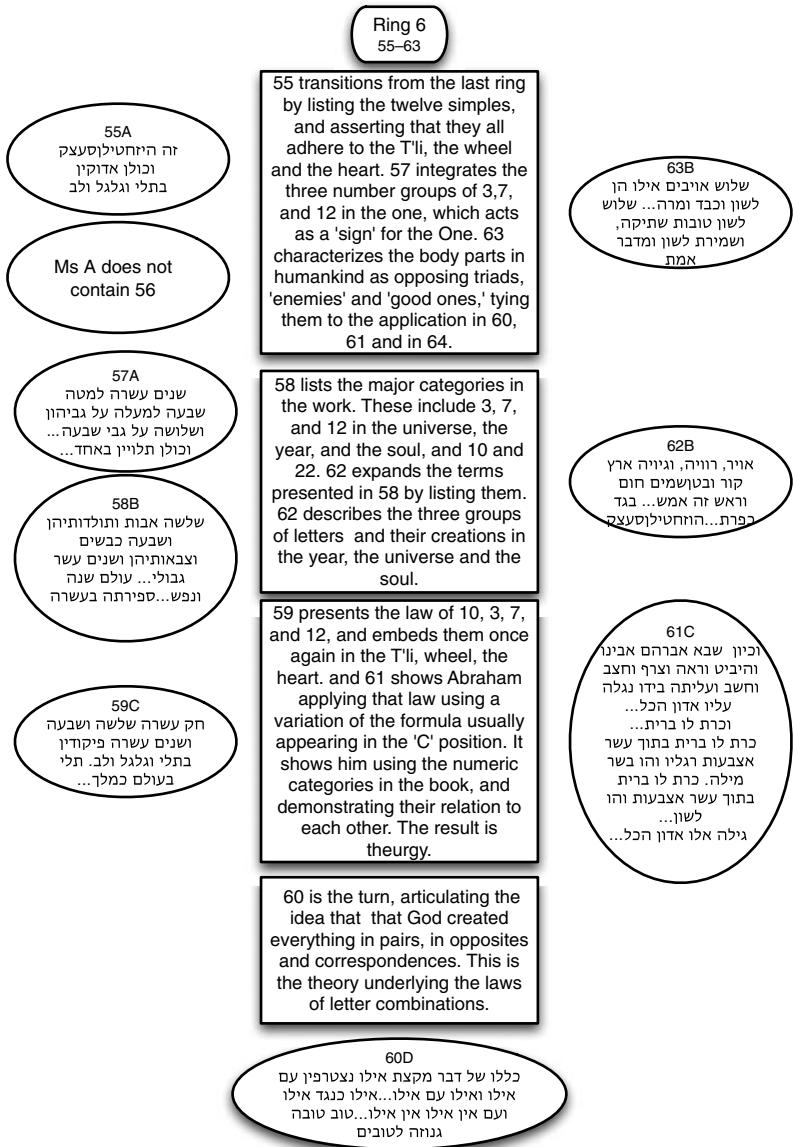
### 6. 57<sup>50</sup>–64: *Concluding Ring*

This links all the rings together, and the end to the beginning. It does not have a tagline; instead, all of its verses relate to the other rings. They do so by further developing the terms presented in them and placing them in relation to each other and to new terms. Its primary functions are to map and model, so that each of the groups is placed in contiguity to others and organized within a larger rubric governed by the *T'li*, a master constellation thought to move all of the other constellations. The *T'li* was visually represented as an *ourobouros*, a snake eating its tail, so it represents eternal cyclical motion.<sup>51</sup> The *T'li* functions much like the master ring does, containing within it the orbits of all the other astrological elements. The instructions contained in the work are then modeled by the figure of Abraham who uses them to create and receives a reward for it. There are many key phrases and formulations repeated from earlier rings. The section begins as follows: “Twelve below and seven above on top of them, and three on top of seven.” SY58 includes the category of ten, such that in the first two verses of this ring, the text recapitulates the thirty-two paths and all their constituent elements.

### *Centrally Loaded*

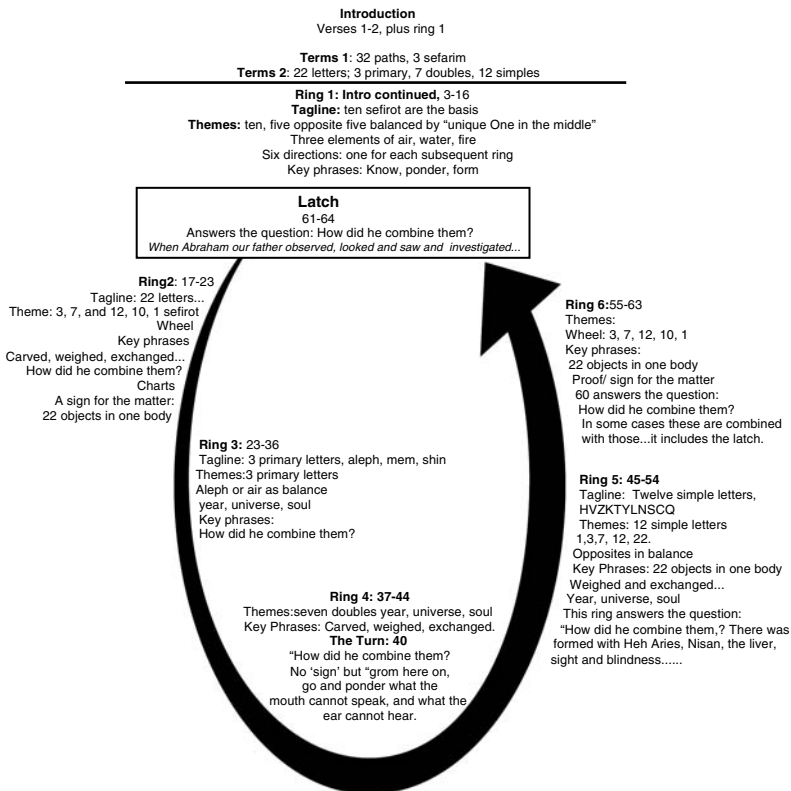
Now that the ring structure is apparent, it is necessary to discuss the way the structure confers meaning on words appearing in key positions. According to Douglas's fifth rule, the rings are “centrally loaded,” so that their most important message is delivered at the turn or the center of the ring. One significant clue for this is the repetition of key terms or themes appearing in the introduction. The master ring also follows this pattern. Ring 4 is its turn, and it recapitulates the terms supplied in Rings 1 and 2, and theorizes their function. This ring explicates the main ideas in the text: creation with letterforms. It begins with the main question asked in the introduction, and elaborates upon it, theorizes it, and provides formulae describing their use and instructing the reader to do so as well. Similarly, it elaborates the instructions provided for the reader in the first half of the ring. These plots, the one occurring inside the text in divine action, and the one outside the text in the actions of the reader, are actualized together in the latch when Abraham successfully completes the operations described in the text.

Significantly, Ring 4 elaborates on the “God carved” of SY1, with the phrase, “He carved, weighed, exchanged.” It asks the central question in its first half: “How did he combine them?” Then it answers it in the second half in the form of a catalog. While earlier rings, such as Ring 2,



**Figure 3.6** Ring 6: Concluding Ring: The T'li.

answer the question with formulae described as “a sign for the matter,” Ring 4 provides concrete examples in its second half. It develops the second plot, elaborating the instructions provided for the reader, directing him outside the narrative to “go and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear.”<sup>52</sup> This instruction to “go and ponder what the mouth cannot speak . . .” is central to the meaning of the text because it draws attention to the inscrutability of the SY’s semantic reference and directs the reader to take action. Specifically, it asks the reader to take the indeterminacy of the semantic meaning as a starting point for action. This is one of the three most important verses in the text and as such it is key to establishing its significance and its use.



**Figure 3.7** Master Ring: The Structure of the SY.

### Rule 6: Rings within Rings

Sixth, as we have seen in the diagrams, there are rings within rings, such that the main ring consists of smaller ones. This is true on a small and large scale in the SY, which is structured as a large ring made up of smaller ones. There are three different sorts of rings in this work. The first is the master ring, and it comprehends all the others, arranging them in ring form. This is the larger structure of the SY, a ring made of all the other rings. The second is the primary, simple ring-unit, identified by the repetition of the same phrase at the beginning of each verse contained in it. The third sort is a subsidiary ring developing one of the verses within a primary ring. This pattern is clear in the list of taglines provided above. Rings 1a and 3a are good examples of this. Each of these repeats a single phrase occurring in one of the verses in the primary ring without containing its tagline. For example, Ring 1a develops the theme of the ten *sefirot* of Ring 1. The tagline of the primary ring reads “ten sefirot without substance (*b’limah*).” But Ring 1a does not contain that line. Instead the center of all its verses contain the phrase “ten *sefirot* are the basis.” The last line of Ring 1 proper, SY16, returns to the tagline “ten *sefirot b’limah*,” and closes the ring.

### Rule 7: The Double Closure of the Latch

Seventh, and finally, the last ring must achieve closure at two levels. By joining up with the beginning, the ending signals completion and recognizably fulfills the initial promise.<sup>53</sup> The first closure occurs in SY57–60, which restates the divine actions narrated in the development of the numeric themes of ten, twelve, seven, three and one, with SY57 and SY58 reproducing the order of the rings.<sup>54</sup> SY57 sums up the structure of the work, repeating important vocabulary from SY19–22, specifically the conception that combination of the twenty-two letters in their three groupings acted as a sign for “the matter.” The text reads:

twelve below and seven above on top of them, and three on top of seven.  
And from the three of them he founded his abode. And they all depend on one, a sign for the One who has none second to him, a King unique in his universe, for he is one and his name is one.

Here, “the matter” is identified as God, and so closure is achieved where this was unexplained previously.<sup>55</sup> SY61 also emphasizes the role of the ten-group by restating its relation to the covenant, as the introduction does. It reads: He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of

his hand . . .”<sup>56</sup> These verses recapitulate the actions described in Rings 2–5, the formation of the created world with the three groups of letters. This is the closure for the strand of the text that develops numeric categories.

The second closure occurs in the final portion of the text in SY61–64, which shows the application of its theories. It narrates Abraham’s success in combining letters, and his consequent reward. The final verse shows the biblical Abraham following the earlier instructions (SY4, 6, 24, 40), repeating the directions “carve and hew” and “know, ponder, and form,” and following them with the word “succeeded,” so that when Abraham carries out these actions, he also completes the text.<sup>57</sup> It reads: “When Abraham our father observed, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him.”<sup>58</sup> It grounds this knowledge in the structure of the cosmos itself, one of the main subjects of the book. “The omnipresent revealed to him his secret. He drew them out into water, he burned them into fire, he shook them into the air, he branded them into the seven, he led them into the twelve constellations.”<sup>59</sup> Clearly Abraham has ritually used the letters, following the instructions contained in the SY to do this. As a reward, God appears to Abraham and embraces him: “[A]nd he made him sit in his lap and kissed him upon his head.”<sup>60</sup> This action literally brings the two plots physically together by placing its two main actors in an embrace.<sup>61</sup> In so doing it provides an example of human success in performing the letter-combination ritual, it restates the main numeric categories of the introduction, it grounds this knowledge in the created world, and it completes the plot and closes the ring.

Thus the latch brings us back to the beginning via the middle. The turn includes two formulae for both divine and human creation with the letters, and the SY ends by asserting the dual use of the letters, by God and then by human beings. Thus, the beginning, the middle, and the end of the SY work together to create a blueprint for the process of divine creativity and show that the reader is instructed to imitate it.

To sum up: the SY is divided into an introduction, two halves, a turn, and a latch. The introduction lays out key terms, categories, questions, and instructions. The first half of the ring poses these questions and repeats these instructions. The second half answers them by example and shows their application. The turn theorizes the questions posed in its first half, provides material examples of their application in its second half, and instructs the reader to go out into the world, think beyond the text and the senses, and to try to do what God has done in the introduction. The latch reintroduces the main terms and categories, and in narrating

Abraham's success in letter combination, and emphasizing his reward, models the applicability of the text's instructions as well as their value.

Most important here is the message conveyed by the structure. It brings us a long way toward answering key questions about the work: is it a philosophical, a theosophical, or a magical text? From the beginning, the SY is action oriented, describing the divine action of letter-permutation while addressing the reader in the imperative to "know, ponder, and form." The turn addresses both of these, further theorizing the question and sending the reader out into the world once again, with the words "from here, go. . ." Finally, the text concludes with a model of its application. The SY is itself a model, presenting in ring compositional form a cosmos that was also conceptualized via the interrelation of its elements on a ring model. The relation of the elements to the ring structure is theorized in the latch with the addition of the *T"li*, a circular entity motivating the circular orbits of the constellations and planets. This embodies the structure of the work as a whole. It ends with an example for using the model, as it shows Abraham completing the instructions provided in the text and receiving a divine reward. There is a great deal of thinking described in the SY, but this thinking is geared toward action at every significant position in the ring-composition plot. It is, then, a text about transforming thought and language into action and objects. And as such it is practical in its aim.

This understanding of the structure allows a new look at the various commentary traditions attached to the SY. Saadya wrote against the grain of previous interpretations, and even against the grain of the text as he worked to reconcile it with his own notions of biblical cosmogony interpreted according to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. These sorts of rationalist interpretations changed the structure of the work, and reconceptualized some of its most important aspects. They did so for ideological reasons, and because the semantic inscrutability of this text allowed it. Shabbetai Donnolo's astral-magical interpretation shows an interpretation consistent with the directions provided the reader. He places it in the tradition of thaumaturgy described in the Talmudic narratives, but resituates it in the astral-magical outlook current in tenth-century Byzantium. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ashkenazi commentaries describe golem creation, also emphasizing the instructive aspects of the text. They interpret the text both according to the astral-magical bent of Donnolo's work as they emphasize astrological conditions in the process of creation, and in the vein of the Talmudic sources narrating the use of the *Hilkhot Yetsirah* to produce a living creature.

In thinking this way these writers privilege one aspect of semiotics over another. This is to say that choosing one mode of semiotic analysis

over another is in actuality to choose one interpretation over another. And yet, the text directs us to do so via its literary structure. Its ring structure is crucial in understanding the practical function of the text. If the ring structure is really there, then its practical function must be asserted. And because the SY does perform a practical function, the diagrams accompanying the text perform a vital role in elucidating it and giving meaning to it. The SY is a mythological narrative describing a cosmology and providing instructions for acting upon it. It is, then, a ritual script accompanied by diagrams that are both cosmographic and ritually instructive.





## CHAPTER 4

### THINKING IN LINES AND CIRCLES

The previous chapter discusses the ring structure of the *Sefer Yetsirah* (SY). It shows how the literary structure, or the syntactics, asserts the primacy of the practical interpretation of the work. Similarly, it shows the literary structure of the work reproducing the structure of the cosmos it depicts. In this way there is a strong relation between syntactics and worldview. The current chapter continues this discussion, attending to the various cosmological narratives constituting the worldview expressed in diagrams from two thirteenth-century manuscripts, and framing these in relation to visual syntactics. It examines the diagrams as a setting for action, explores the modes of conceptualizing action within the cosmos depicted in them, and historicizes these concepts. This sets the scene for the next two chapters, which discuss the uses of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century diagrams of the SY.

The relationship between syntax and worldview exists because the diagrams function cosmographically, as cognitive maps modeling the cosmos and providing instructions for navigating it. The structure of the diagrams replicates the structure of the cosmos, so that the construction of meaning is a journey. When viewers work to make sense of the diagrams, they mentally travel the cosmos depicted in them. In this way the diagrams are, in Clifford Geertz's terminology, both "models of" and "models for."<sup>1</sup> They visually represent a significant aspect of the structure of the cosmos, and at the same time, in representing it, they orient the viewer so that the act of interpretation is also an act of navigation.

And yet they do not offer a single route. The diagrams show various cosmological concepts and their relation to one another. These various modes of making meaning and of depicting relationships show the confluence of worldviews attendant upon interpreting the text. Similarly, they show different modes of application. These work together to aid the viewer in conceptualizing the cosmos and acting upon it.

This chapter examines two early diagrams of the kabbalistic *ilan*, or tree. One is a tree-shaped diagram entitled the *Ilan haHokhmah*, or the Tree of Wisdom, and the second is a round model of the *sefirot* (without a title) that accompanies it in two of the three manuscripts. They both immediately succeed a copy of the SY, and they both appear in kabbalistic varia. The first diagram appears in three different manuscripts that I know of: MS Parma 1390 (Italian, 1286), BN 763 (Italian, 1284), and MS Milano Ambrosiana (ADX) 52 (Italian, 14th c.). In MS 1390, the diagram appears on folio 94a. In BN 763, the diagrams can be found on folios 34b and 35a, and in ADX 52, on 129b and 130a. In BN 763 and ADX 52, it is paired with the second diagram, a circular model of the *sefirot* complete with their names. Parma 1390 includes a different circular model of the *sefirot* in a section that is not adjacent to the *ilan*.

In each manuscript, there is a common sequence of identified works. There is usually a copy of the SY, Abulafia's *Hayyei Olam Ha Ba*, a commentary on the SY by Yaakov HaKohen<sup>2</sup>, and a commentary that is attributed to Nahmanides by some of the most important scholars, but that does not appear to be his. In all three cases the diagrams follow fragments of this commentary,<sup>3</sup> and they always occur close to golem recipes, with a discussion of the dangers inherent in the process.<sup>4</sup> Giulio Busi provides an excellent description of the diagrams, and he argues that the diagram represents a "metaphysical tradition of an ambiguous nature."<sup>5</sup> While this is certainly true, their function has yet to be analyzed.

The diagrams appearing in these works are cosmographical, maps aimed at establishing an authoritative view of the cosmos, and drawing upon a variety of cosmological models to do so.<sup>6</sup> Mapping is a process that involves both "a complex architecture of signs (graphic elements with internal forms and logics capable of theoretical disconnection from any geographical reference) and visual architecture through which the worlds they construct are selected, organized, and shaped."<sup>7</sup> As such, maps employ symbols (graphic and linguistic) with their own unique syntax in order to convey information. Even more importantly, they stand on their own and communicate on their own, with or without the existence of the territory of which they speak. And this territory may be geographical, imaginal, contemplative, or spiritual.<sup>8</sup> They are systems of symbols that do not need a concrete referent to convey meaning.

Maps are also geared toward action.<sup>9</sup> Denis Cosgrove writes that "acts of mapping are creative, sometimes anxious moments of coming to knowledge of the world, and the map is both the spatial embodiment of knowledge and a stimulus to further engagements."<sup>10</sup> Hence they are not aimed merely at knowing but also toward doing. Kabbalistic maps

present a special case, both in terms of their referents and the sort of action they stimulate. Brian Lancaster, a scholar of psychology and mysticism, argues that “the impetus to generate models is fundamental to the mystical endeavor.”<sup>11</sup> In his opinion, all mystical works generate models of the cosmos at the same time that they provide instructions for navigating these models. They differ from conventional maps insofar as they represent the spiritual and narrate both human and divine action.

In Jewish mysticism especially, language is essential to map-making. The maps come from linguistic narratives, and language holds a special place in the Jewish mystical cosmology. Moshe Idel writes that kabbalists view language as “the spiritual underpinning of reality”<sup>12</sup> and that Hebrew letters act as “a mesocosmos that enables operations that can bridge the gap between the human—or the material—and the divine.”<sup>13</sup> In this process of meditating on the Hebrew letter as a bridge from the human to the divine, mystical thinkers have generated visual maps as well, including, for example, mandala images, temple plans, medicine wheels, and the kabbalistic tree of life, which are intricate, often beautiful, expressions of this function.<sup>14</sup> Thus mystical thinkers in general, and kabbalistic thinkers in particular, begin the process of mapping with language and continue that process with the creation of diagrams and illustrations.

Yet the kabbalistic view of linguistic symbols identifies them as the substance of the cosmos itself. The letters appearing in kabbalistic diagrams are symbols. The letterform is the main creative unit in the SY, and the diagrams accompanying it depict its use in the creation, as well as the objects created with it. It can also be used to link creator and creation.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the letter is the instrument of creation, and creation itself a link between human and divine (creator and creation), and the mode of representing these relationships. Thus letters are meaningful all by themselves, on multiple levels. And viewing the diagram is a richly significant action.

The viewer acts on the diagram by apprehending relations between its parts, and in this, navigating the diagram. Viewers apprehend these relations in three different modes. First, a viewer perceives relationships between the graphically depicted elements according to a circular model. This is to say that the diagram has a ring-composition syntax, and it is possible to discover its narrative by conceptualizing its components as a chiastic structure. Second, a viewer finds relationships between the elements in a linear order, reading from top to bottom, side to side, or bottom to top. Movement in space means movement in time. Third, the diagrams convey meaning through language. This is and is not ordinary language. It is ordinary insofar as it refers to the text it accompanies as

well as the other texts thought to apply to it. It is extraordinary language in three ways: first, this language functions as sacred text; second, the linguistic symbols are microcosmic, reflecting the structure of the cosmos they describe; and third, it is magical language because it either possesses creative power, or it describes language with creative power.

The diagram is a composite form, consisting of visual and linguistic symbols combined. The diagrams communicate by their visual syntax, as well as their linguistic content. Considering these together, we find that they can shed some light on an ongoing debate. No one really knows the source of the sefirotic cosmological model, despite their centrality as a symbol of the system of ideas comprising kabbalah. Idel argues that

among all the topics within the Kabbalah, the *sefirot* enjoyed the greatest popularity in its presentations. Time and again, the list of names of the *sefirot*, with the anthropomorphic pattern, is repeated as the core of this lore.<sup>16</sup>

Thus an important part of kabbalah is the knowledge and the recitation of its cosmology. Kabbalistic texts not only inform the reader of this cosmology but they perform it as well, repeating the list of the *sefirot*, their anthropomorphic characteristics, and their relation to one another and to the created world.

While the diagrams occur somewhat later, the *sefirot* as we now know them first appear in the *Zohar* (written 1280–1286) and in the works immediately preceding it. Gershom Scholem argued that the sefirotic cosmology appearing in the *Zohar* was developed in the twelfth-century work *Sefer HaBahir*, among the kabbalists of Provence and Gerona.<sup>17</sup> Idel also sees the sefirotic cosmological model developing among the twelfth- and thirteenth-century kabbalists of Provence and Gerona, but he shows that two different versions of it appear in their writings. The *Bahir* presents a mythical and instrumental view of the *sefirot* in which they figure as vessels for divine energy, while Rabbi Isaac the Blind<sup>18</sup> sees them as part of the Godhead. These two different conceptions of the sefirot are accompanied by two different sets of symbols organized in two different ways: the world tree and emanative models of the *sefirot*, progressing from top to bottom, or in a chiastic structure progressing from top to bottom to top again.<sup>19</sup> This point of view is explicit in R. Isaac's *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah*. The works of the Gerona school express both these viewpoints, often simultaneously, and so does the late thirteenth-century *Zohar*. These writers narrated various conceptions of the *sefirot*, and even within the same texts they described different models of their relationships to each other. In this way, they articulated a variety of cosmological models.

It is necessary here to distinguish between the linguistic description of the *sefirot* and their visual representation in the form of a sefirotic *ilan*, the well-known tree-like, and humanoid structure depicting the *sefirot* in order of emanation and in relation to each other. As noted above, early kabbalistic literature expresses multiple viewpoints on the nature of the *sefirot*. So too does the *Zohar*, which is known for its extensive attention to the *sefirot*. Different conceptions of the *sefirot* would imply different cosmological models. These different models are indeed represented in the diagramming tradition. But over the course of time, the sefirotic tree became the authoritative model, the cosmography.<sup>20</sup> However, in the Middle Ages, circular models were as common as linear models. Scholarship has focused on the linguistic representation of the *sefirot*, rather than on their visual representation. Thus, while we know the textual views of the nature of the *sefirot*, we do not yet know when or how the sefirotic *ilan* began to function as an authoritative representation of the sefirotic cosmos. The diagram below is one of the earlier representations of the sefirotic *ilan*, or the kabbalistic tree.

This diagram comes from a fourteenth-century Provençal manuscript of kabbalistic varia, JTS 1609, folio 132a. It depicts the ten *sefirot*, in order: *Keter* (Crown), *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), *Hesed* (Lovingkindness), *Gevurah* (Severity), *Tiferet* (Beauty), *Netzach* (Eternity),

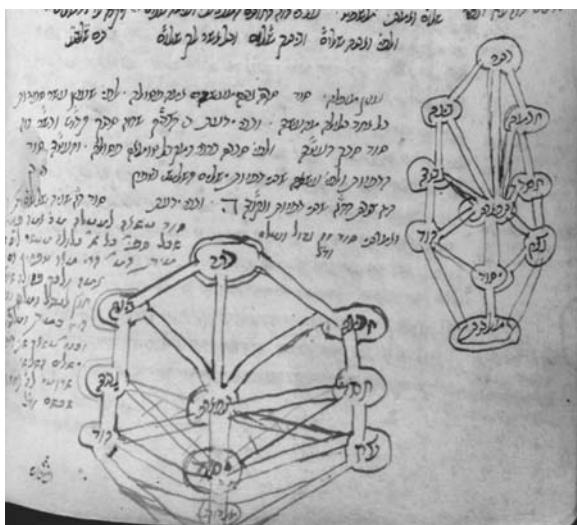


Figure 4.1 JTS 1609, Folio 132a

*Hod* (Majesty), *Yesod* (Foundation), and *Malkhut* (Kingdom). These are variously understood as aspects of the divine, vessels for divine energy, and parts of the divine substance itself. The diagram is conventionally modeled simultaneously upon the human form and a tree. As a human form, *Keter* corresponds to the crown of the head, and the other *sefirot* to other parts of the human body. As a tree, it is inverted, with roots in the heavens and branches in the created world.<sup>21</sup> This is one of the earlier diagrams of the *sefirot* in this form. This illustration shares the structure of the tree diagram used by modern Jewish kabbalists.<sup>22</sup> These diagrams are uncommon in earlier works, becoming more common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. More usual are round diagrams of the *sefirot* in the same order, as examined below, and illustrations of them mapped onto Hebrew letters, especially Aleph and Shin, and upon ritual objects like the menorah.<sup>23</sup> In these other depictions, the same ten *sefirot* are used to label different parts of these letters or objects.

The diagrams analyzed below provide an important link for understanding the development of the sefirotic *ilan*. We see in these late thirteenth-century diagrams models that bear structural resemblances to the later sefirotic *ilan*, but with significant differences as well. The diagrams here depict the world-tree and sefirotic structures separately, which are later fused in the sefirotic *ilan*. In their earlier separate lives, these symbols represented different visions of the cosmos. The world-tree symbol was common in *Midrash*,<sup>24</sup> while that of the *sefirot* occurs along with the world-tree symbol in the commentary literature of the twelfth century.<sup>25</sup> The diagrams cannot pinpoint precisely when the traditions were fused to create the now-conventional sefirotic *ilan*, but they can supply some information about the textual traditions to which they are related. These differences between these and the later sefirotic *ilan* have largely to do with their relationship to the SY, as they appear appended to the work in MS Parma 1390 and in BN 763.

Taken together, these three manuscripts present an interesting scenario. It is one very useful for considering how, where, and when people used the sefirotic cosmology appearing in the *Zohar*. As it stands, we have two late thirteenth-century manuscripts written in Italy. They each contain two different cosmological models, the linear *ilan*, which is not explicitly *sefirotic* but models instead the Yetsiratic cosmos, and the circular model of the *sefirot*. These two were made during the very same years in which the *Zohar* was composed in Northern Spain, a short distance away. While the *sefirot* are not named in the text of the SY, in these circular models, they are named and arranged in the order in which they appear in the *Zohar* and in twelfth- and thirteenth-century

commentaries (such as the one discussed here) that accompany the SY. Northern Spain was the locus of the *Zohar's* composition, while the manuscripts are Italian, and in each of these places we have thirteenth-century textual witnesses to the existence of some aspects of the *sefirotic* cosmology appearing the *Zohar*.

But there is more. In these three Italian manuscripts, we find the short version of the SY, accompanied by the same commentary on it. While the diagrams represent developments in the iconographic tradition of kabbalah generally, they also relate to the cosmologies described in the SY, deeply rooted in its literary structure. The diagrams appearing in the two thirteenth-century manuscripts narrate an important chapter in the interpretation of the SY specifically, and in the development of kabbalistic symbols generally, because they show the juxtaposition and the intersection of two ways of organizing space and thought, linear and circular. These two ways of thinking manifest themselves as well in the creation of the two different sorts of cosmological and cosmogonic models: the downward, linear emanation, and the round, cyclical model of the cosmos typical of the ring composition.<sup>26</sup> These two ways of mapping reflect two ways of thinking, and together they produce the sefirotic *ilan* that is familiar today.

### The Ilanot

The *Ilan HaHokhmah*, or The Tree of Wisdom diagrams are different from many contemporary *ilanot* because they do not exclusively illustrate the *sefirot*. Instead they visually represent the progression of creation as it is narrated in the SY, which includes the *sefirot* at the beginning of a longer visual narrative. In the diagrams, this narrative is broken down into three separate units, in a sequence that begins at the bottom and ends at the top, connected by a vertical line that becomes the trunk of the tree (*ilan*), and leads into the branches appearing at the top of the diagram. The diagram combines several smaller, visual narrative units, some of which conventionally appear as discrete diagrams in later manuscript commentaries upon the SY, and some of which do not. These include depictions of the three elements of air, water, and fire,<sup>27</sup> and the space cube illustrating the six directions.<sup>28</sup> The unlabeled wheel does not commonly appear in later diagrams, but the round sefirotic wheels (appearing on the facing page) frequently occur in later manuscripts.<sup>29</sup>

The diagram includes three main visual narrative units that depict the creation as it is described in the first parts of the SY. The first alludes to



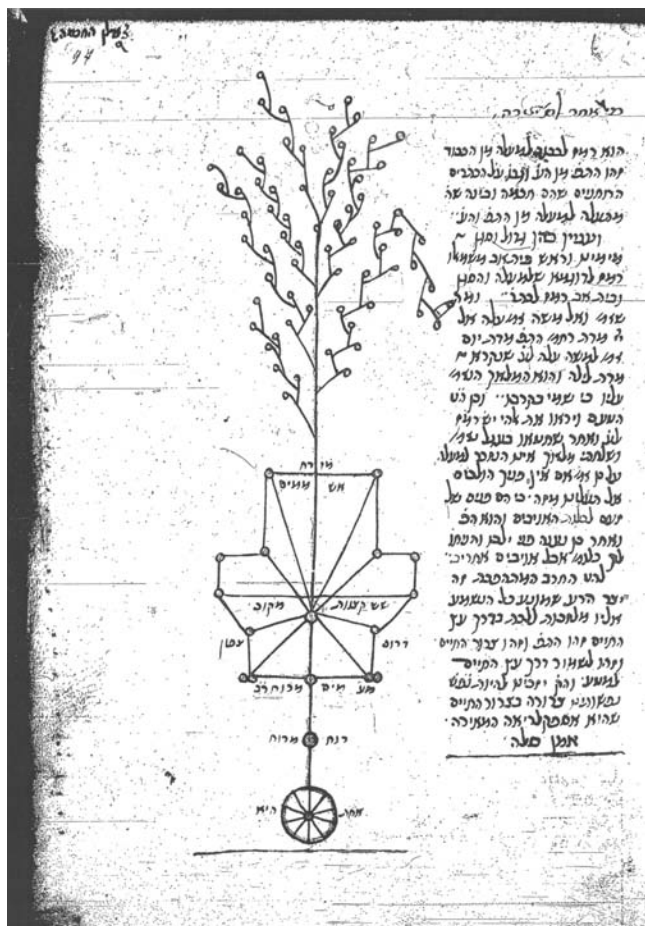


Figure 4.2 MS Parma 1390, Folio 94a

the *sefirot*, but does not include their names or articulate their relation to one another. The second shows the creation of spirit (air), water, and fire, and within them, the six directions. These are labeled. The third section contains no text, and it consists only of branches and leaves, suggesting the physical world. These visual narratives follow quite closely the textual narrative of the SY. Specifically, they follow the narrative of Hayman's MS A, Vatican, 10th century., which is a particularly detail-oriented manuscript of the short version, paying special attention to specifying the relationships between elements and groups of elements. The *Ilan HaHohkma* reaffirms the connections between these terms that are specific to MS A.

### Unit 1: The Wheel

The first narrative unit visually represents the first chapter of the SY. It consists of a wheel with ten spokes, and a dot in the middle. It is labeled *achat hi*, meaning “she is one.” This is interesting in two ways: first because the entity is feminine, and second, because while it consists of many parts, it is to be considered one unit. Because there are ten spokes, because they are feminine, and because they occur at the beginning of the sequence, they refer to the ten *sefirot*, which are also grammatically gendered feminine. These were used to create the first ring of the SY. They are represented just as they are described in SY, as five opposite five, with a dot at the center to symbolize “the unique one exactly in the middle.”<sup>30</sup> So this unlabeled wheel with ten spokes and one dot in the middle visually represents the unnamed *sefirot*, “five opposite five, with the unique one exactly in the middle.”<sup>31</sup> The narrative of SY continues to describe the creation of the three elements from spirit (or air): air, water, and fire, and then the six directions.

#### Section 1a: The Link

The first unit is linked to the second by a vertical line with a dot in between the first and second sections. It indicates the end of the first narrative unit and the beginning of the second. This dot is labeled *ruach mi ruach*, meaning spirit from spirit (or air from spirit), as expressed in SY12, following 10 (11 is missing in the short version), which tells the reader precisely how to group the cosmological elements presented in the text. Verse 10 of this manuscript reads:

ten *sefirot*, that is to say (*k'lomar*), one: the spirit of the living God. Twice blessed is the name of the Life of the Worlds, Voice and air (*ruach*) and word—this is the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

With the word ‘*k'lomar*’ (that is to say) this passage begins mapping the ten *sefirot b'limah* (described in the first verses of the work) onto those terms appearing in the next narrative section describing the spirit of God, the three elements, and the six directions. In this way, the ten *sefirot* are equated with ten elements described in the next narrative section. This means that the two narrative units, the description of the ten *sefirot b'limah* and the description of the next ten elements, are linked not only sequentially but also thematically. It matters that they are not linked by analogy as in other texts, but explicitly, both verbally (with the addition of “that is to say”) and visually with the repetition of the round form in the second section of the diagram.

## Section 2: The Space Cube

The diagram continues to narrate the cosmology of the SY in the same order in which it appears in the text, SY12–16, with one major difference. The difference is that the verses are not visually presented in the same narrative order in which they occur in the text. The diagram changes it around a bit. It places SY15 between SY13 and 14, so that they form a circular structure around it. SY12 reads “two: air from Spirit,” which is the same text appearing on the diagram. The next words on the diagram represent SY13: “three, water from air.” SY14, however, is represented in the topmost line of this section. It reads: “Fire from water; he carved them and hewed in it the throne of glory . . . and from the three of them he founded his abode.”<sup>33</sup> This shows that the three elements contain the throne of glory, the divine abode hewn out of them. The next verse, 15, details the six directions appearing in the central portion of the diagram. These are associated with the dimensions of the throne of glory. In the diagram, in between the lines labeled “three, water from air” of 13, and the “fire from water” of 14, we find the six directions described in 15. Clearly these are interpreted as the six dimensions of the throne of glory. Verse 16 of the text designates as *sefirot* the elements appearing in the second narrative unit of the diagram, which reads: “These ten *sefirot* are the basis: The spirit of the living God, and air, water, fire, above, below, east, west, north, and south.” Once it is clear that the elements named in these chapters are the *sefirot*, then it is possible to see this second section as an articulation of the first, and to see that this is in fact an interpretation of the initially rather nebulous term, *sefirot*. As a result this enriches our understanding of *sefirotic* symbols and their interpretation in the Yetsiratic traditions.

But why place the directions in between the second and third elements? There are two main reasons: first, the diagram interprets the six directions as constituents of the throne of glory, which are hewed out of the three elements. It is then a natural choice to place them in between the elements so that it looks like the throne of glory is inside, hewed out of them as according to the text. But the second reason is visual analogy. The ten *sefirot* are arranged in the shape of a wheel in Section 1 of the diagram. But they are not labeled as such. Section 2, the “space cube” section, replicates the circular form of the first so as to posit an analogous relation between the combined elements and directions, and the ten *sefirot b’limah*. This is supported by their source text, as the relationship is indeed made explicit in it, in verses 10 and 16, which frame the elaboration of the directional cube. It is explicit because this writer uses specific pointing words, like “these *sefirot*” and “the *sefirot*, that is to say . . .” But this is unique actually; the short version

of the SY included in MS Parma 1390 pays a great deal of attention to transitions and spells out the relationships between terms and cosmological elements in a way that other manuscripts do not. The connection is deepened with their graphic representation in a circular form as they are in the first narrative unit. These diagrams, and this manuscript, are crucial then in showing how the SY was understood, especially in relation to the concept of the *sefirot*, so poorly defined in other manuscripts and text traditions.

### Section 3: The Branches

The third section of the *ilan* is comprised of seven upper branches. Clearly this is an indexical feature because the shape of the top of the tree is identical in all three manuscript witnesses. The copyists did not have to do this, especially because the section is unlabeled. But they did, and this means that by the end of the thirteenth century, from which time we have two copies of this, the diagram already had a conventional form. The two thirteenth-century copyists knew this conventional form, and it remained intact in the later copy in MS Milano, ADX 52. It is the branches, then, that identify the *ilan* as an *ilan*, and that is why they are reproduced so carefully. Similarly, they may also identify the *ilan* with the “tree that is all,” visually representing the SY itself, its whole structure, as a model of the cosmos.

The seven branches could refer to any number of different elements in the SY and outside it; in its shape it recalls the seven-branched menorah from the Holy Temple, which continues the celestial temple motif from the previous section. In this way, if the six directions stand in for the divine chariot (*merkavah*) of the celestial realm, the seven-branched menorah recalls the Jerusalem Temple because of its traditional placement there. The seven branches might also condense several other groupings of seven elements appearing in the SY, including the seven double letters, the seven opposites, the seven planets, and others. The straight lines of its branches end in circles, which could denote leaves, fruit, or both. These designate the realm of the created world, with the leaves and the fruit of the tree referring to both embodiment and wisdom. They signify both because according to the SY, the next narrative section describes the creation of material things. And according to the label of the diagram, this is the tree of wisdom, and its branches logically bear its fruit.

The fruit serves several purposes that become clearer in the translation of its adjacent text, included below. The text, a conclusion to a commentary on the SY, focuses on Moses’s vision of the divine narrated in Exodus, so often described as a vision through the “speculum that shines.”<sup>34</sup> The text attributes the vision to prayer and letter combination, which culminate in a celestial vision and the transformation of the seer.

So while this describes Moses's actions and their results, it is also a model meant for replication. As such the text and the diagram work together. The text discusses the mechanics of this process, and the tree is provided as a map to show the locations of powers and the paths of ascent and descent for prayers and letter combinations. The text reads as follows:

The conclusion of the SY:

It is a hint to the fastening (wrapping) above, from this respect. This is it [the prayer of fastening] and on His back are the crowns of prayer of those that are wise, and they are the buildings that rise above to the top from the prayer of intermingling, and this matter of them is chief and important. From among us, the head of the household, the father from his left side is a hint for the model that is above, and the chief and father of the house is a hint for the crown.

And what was the brightness on which the resplendent Moshe rose? On this brightness rose the image of the heat of his prayers, the measure of day of Moshe's resplendence. It rose to the realms above that are called the measure of night, and this is the angel of the eternity of God, and his name is in *Korban* (sacrifice). And indeed, in the prayers of the wise and the fear of God there is an exalted clue. And afterwards his line is drawn in the circle of his brightness.<sup>35</sup>

"And I sent up to him an angel that is not remembered" (alt: angel that is not mentioned).<sup>36</sup> If none of your countenances<sup>37</sup> are going on his ascent, he is resplendent. This is because these are the countenances of anger at the voices of the enemies, and he is the countenance [of which I speak]. And after that the countenances will be answered, they will depart and He will console you with his tablets [the Torah]. But His enemies, on the other hand, their works of sorcery are destroyed and are overturned. [For the righteous] the entire spirit is deterred from the evil urge, and from this [they turn] to the honor of walking in the path of the tree of life. This is the prayer, and this is it, the bundle of life. And this is it, to keep the way to the tree of life.<sup>38</sup> And [the righteous] they will be purified to be the soul of our souls, bundled in the bundle of life, so that she is a speculum that shines, amen *selah!*<sup>39</sup>

This commentary describes the methods Moses used to complete his journey, through prayer so intense that it generates heat, and letter combination (discussed in formulae that are not included here.) These allowed him to ascend the celestial realms and travel the way of the tree of life. The result is transformation; he is bundled in the bundle of life, and he does not see through, but himself becomes the "speculum that shines."

This description acts in two ways: first to describe the transformation of Moses, and second, to describe this transformative process in more

general terms, mapping the celestial realms for navigation and naming the techniques for accomplishing this. If it were meant only to describe what befell Moses in the past, it would have been written in the past tense, in the singular voice. But some of the text is written in the future tense and in the plural, which implies that is instructive, and that its audience is plural as well. The commentary concludes with the assertion that “this is the prayer, and this is it, the bundle of life,<sup>40</sup> and this is it, to keep the way to the tree of life.” So, it provides the prayer, maps the tree of life, and explains that using these prayers and traveling this path brings prophecy and redemption. Similarly, it shows the transformation of the viewer, as he prays, travels, becomes purified, and achieves redemption to become the “speculum that shines.” Because the text is introduced as “a hint,” and includes a formula, it directs the reader to do this himself.

The meaning of the diagram, and of the text, hinges on the nature of Moses’s vision, the definition of the speculum that shines,<sup>41</sup> and on its relation to the tree (or the bundle) of life. It is worth comparing this usage to that occurring in earlier sources. According to Exodus 24:10, Moses saw the divine form.<sup>42</sup> *Babylonian Talmud Yevamot* 49b discusses Moses’s vision of the divine,<sup>43</sup> and in it the speculum is the vehicle of prophecy. Yet neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Talmud argues that the Moses *becomes* the speculum. In this text the transformed soul, the soul of our souls (*nefesh nafshotenu*) becomes the speculum that shines. We know this refers to the *nefesh nafshotenu* because the text uses a female pronoun, and *nefesh* is the only female-gendered noun in the sentence. There are two options for understanding the *nefesh nafshotenu*; it might simply refer to *Keter*, the first *sefirah*, which is often called the soul of souls in the Zoharic system.<sup>44</sup> Implicit in this might also be the Neoplatonic model, in which case it might refer to the *nous*, the world-soul. It may also simply refer to the gathering of souls implied by the term “bundle of life,” such that it refers to a collective of redeemed souls. It is difficult to determine from the evidence available here.

But it is important to note that the designation of the soul itself (soul of our souls) as the “speculum that shines” is highly unusual. The “speculum that shines” is usually an instrument, something seen through, and only by Moses. In this case, however, the cleansed soul itself becomes the speculum that shines, or it becomes part of it. It follows next that the soul becomes the object helping others to see. If this is the case, then it is also possible that the “shining” of the speculum ought to be revalenced. Once purified, it is a visible symbol of redemption. This in turn contributes to our understanding of the diagram and of the significance of looking at it. It provides instructions for and participates in the process of transformative viewing.

### Its Relation to the “Tree that is All”

The title of the diagram suggests that it illustrates the “Tree that is All” described in the *Bahir*. It is useful in understanding the signification of the “fruit” appearing on the *Ilan Ha Hokhmah*, and in understanding the function of the tree symbol. Section 84 of the *Bahir*<sup>45</sup> describes the tree of life as

disposed in layers, and they are like a tree: just as the tree produces its fruit through water, so God through water increases the powers of the tree. And what is god's water? It is *Hokhmah* (wisdom), and that [the fruit of the tree] is the soul of the righteous men who fly from the source to the great canal and it [the fruit] rises up and clings to the tree. And by virtue of what does it flower? By virtue of Israel; when they are good and righteous, the *Shekhinah* dwells among them, and by their works they dwell in the bosom of God, and he lets them be fruitful and multiply.

The *Bahir* describes here the tree of life, producing fruit through water. The fruit are the souls of righteous men, the water is wisdom, and the tree flowers by the virtue of Israel. More importantly, people can travel up the tree, and the divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, can travel downward.<sup>46</sup> In this way the *Bahir* and the *Ilan HaHokhmah* share a similar conception of the tree; both imagine that it is meant for use and that it can be navigated. This too provides some insight into the nature of the “fruit” appearing in the diagram above—they are the souls of the righteous, watered by wisdom and dwelling in the presence of the *Shekhinah*. If there is communication between the two traditions, then it shows the function of the “tree that is all” symbol, as it is reconceptualized in relation to both the Yetsiratic model and the sefirotic elaborations upon it.

### What Is It for?

Two relationships are important to understanding the function of the diagram: those of diagram to commentary, and of form to function. With this in mind it is worth considering the commentary preceding the diagrams. It ends on the same folio on which the *Ilan ha Hokhmah* is drawn, showing that the diagram is most likely attached to the commentary. Our commentary is excerpted, and the section appearing in these manuscripts deals specifically with SY1, SY8, SY12 (*ruach mi ruach*), SY13, and SY14, and especially SY16. These passages are concerned with the creation of the three elements of water, air, and fire, and with the geography of the celestial realms as described in Ezekiel and in *hekhhalot* literature.

At first glance, the commentary is most curious. It puts together cosmologies we might imagine separately to tell stories that seem unrelated to the SY, for purposes that also seem unrelated to it. These include models of the cosmos from *hekhalot* narratives and of the sefirotic cosmos as described in the early kabbalistic literature. These three related cosmological discourses provide the setting for the narrative, which recounts events from *The Ascension of Moses*,<sup>47</sup> including his encounter with the burning bush, his ascension to the celestial realms, his conflict with the angels on the way, his protection in a circle of brightness, his encounter with the *Cavod* or divine Glory, and the presentation of the tablets of the Law. The commentary also includes other elements not generally appearing in the Ascension story. One of the most interesting is Moses's mission to carry crowns of prayer to God and place them on his head. The idea of the "crowns of prayer" is common among the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz of Germany and it also appears in Jewish esoteric writings from Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>48</sup> It is the conception that human prayers travel to the celestial realms to be placed as a crown on God's head. In the writings of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, the angel Sandalphon places the crown on God's head. In this account, however, Moses is responsible for carrying them.

The commentary is also geared toward action, as it includes formulae for ascent, or the "fastening" discussed earlier. The writer explains: "That's why I wrote the first formula. I received it thus" (fol. 94a). The commentary concludes with a formula, as received from his teacher. In this way it articulates the relationship between the SY, the sefirot, and the celestial realms, adding to it a conception of the efficacy of prayer. It roots these notions in the biblical account of the giving of the Torah, alluding to the ascension of Moses. As a side note, the combination of these particular narratives fits very well Klaus Hermann's description of the works produced by the Kalonymous circle.<sup>49</sup>

This commentary poses a question worth considering both in terms of the cosmology generally and the diagram specifically, namely: why combine these narratives? In short, the author combines them because they are already combined. There are three related cosmological narratives depicted in the diagrams, which come from the SY, *The Ascension of Moses*, and the narratives from the genre of the *Sifrei Sefirot*, or Books of the Sefirot. But in the mind of the diagrammer and of the writer of the commentary, these are aspects of one cosmology, and the diagram depicts their relation and the mode of acting upon them. This cosmology acts as a setting for the Moses narrative, which does its own work in terms of situating notions of the efficacy of prayer, characteristic of the Italian adaptation of themes appearing in the literature of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. The



diagram, then, visually represents the setting of the narrative; it literally represents the place where the narrative occurs. And at the same time it fulfills a practical function, allowing the interpreter another medium for participating in and even replicating the narrative of the commentary.

In sum, then, the diagram performs five functions; it narrates, maps, instructs, applies, and transforms. It narrates by visually representing the cosmology of the SY as it is described and conceptualized in MS A (reproduced in the Italian manuscripts), which is, as noted above, an exceptionally clear text that pays a great deal of attention to transitions and to articulating relationships between various cosmological elements. It maps as it places the cosmological elements in spatial relation to one another and visually posits a structural relation between them. As a subset of the mapping function, it provides a setting for the SY. It instructs as it helps viewers to visualize the instructions articulated verbally in the text and imagine them spatially. It applies the directives of the SY itself, in 4, which asks the reader to “test and investigate them,” and “understand with wisdom”<sup>50</sup> The diagram is explicitly labeled “*Ilan HaHokhmah*,” the tree of wisdom, and its makers probably thought that the diagram itself helped its viewers to attain wisdom. Finally, these four processes are understood to be together transformative, as the viewer is cleansed, joins the soul of souls, and becomes the speculum that shines.

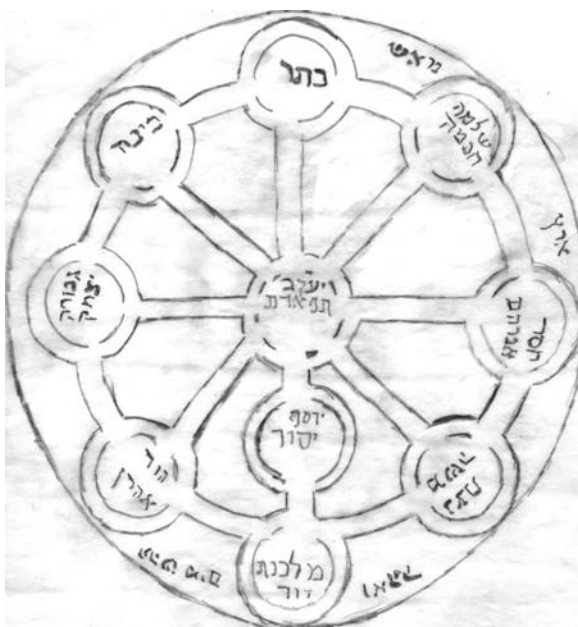
Finally, it is worth reiterating that the diagram shows both linear and circular modes of organizing thought. It shows the three different realms of the cosmos: the *sefirotic* realm, the celestial realm, that is, that of the divine chariot, and the earthly realm, as suggested by the branches and leaves/fruit of the tree. It is arranged like a vertical triptych, showing these three narrative units in a linear relation to one another as the viewer’s eyes move from the bottom to the top of the tree. At the same time it does not proceed in a strictly linear fashion, but with a combination of linear and circular narrative structures.

The first narrative unit is arranged in a circle radiating outward like spokes in a wheel, to suggest the ten *sefirot*. The second narrative unit uses both modes of organization, arranging the three elements of air (spirit), water, and fire linearly from bottom to top, but disrupting the order of the text to place in between them the dimensions of the divine throne, the six cardinal directions, arranged as spokes radiating out from a central point. This central portion of the second narrative unit is structured as a ring composition, and its shape repeats that of the first narrative unit. In this, the *Ilan HaHokhmah* organizes information, thought, and relationships according to both linear and circular models. These circular, ring-composition semiotics are emphasized in the next diagrams occurring in the manuscripts or in those appearing in other parts of the manuscripts.

### Circular Sefirot Diagram

This diagram appears in BN 763 and ADX 52.<sup>51</sup> The one examined here, from BN 763/Code Hebr. 255, picks up where the *Ilan HaHokhmah* leaves off and expands the first of its narrative units. The *sefirot* are themselves modeled on the cosmos of the SY. The round form of the diagram reflects the description of the *sefirot* in SY6: “Their end is fixed in their beginning as the flame is bound to the burning coal.”<sup>52</sup> There are three different sets of terms in this diagram—the names of the *sefirot*, which occupy the center position; the elements of the earthly creation, also depicting the cosmology of the SY; and the names of Biblical figures, written over some of the *sefirot*. Each of these corresponds with a different space and a different narrative section. The central narrative section, and the most prominent one, is the circular model of the *sefirot*. It begins with *Keter* at the top of the page, and ends with *Malkhut* at the bottom as we might expect of a sefirotic tree. Each of the paired *sefirot*: *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, *Netzach* and *Hod*, is located across the circle from its mate. Four of the *sefirot* are not paired, and they are placed in a vertical line down the center of the diagram. These include *Keter*, *Tiferet*, *Yesod*, and *Malkhut*. Eight of the ten *sefirot*, excluding *Keter* and *Binah*, have the names of biblical figures written above them. These are respectively: Solomon (*Hokhmah*), Abraham (*Hesed*), Isaac (*Gevurah*), Jacob (*Tiferet*), Moses (*Netzach*), Aaron (*Hod*), Joseph (*Yesod*), and David (*Malkhut*). The peripheral narrative section, depicting the Yetsiratic elements, begins on the outside of the circle and at the bottom of the page near *Malkhut*, and as we read from right to left it traverses the right half of the circle and ends at the top, with *Keter*. This places three taxonomies in relation to one another: the sefirotic system, the Yetsiratic system of the elements, and the taxonomy of Biblical narrative.

First and foremost, this circular model of the *sefirot* repeats the shape of the wheel from the first narrative unit of the *Ilan HaHokhmah*, and as such it is an expansion of it. The wheel represents the relationship among the *sefirot* described in the SY. Like the *Ilan HaHokhmah*, it contains a wheel unit with a hub and visible spokes. And like the larger diagram, its compositional structure is both linear and circular. But while the *ilan* is a linear structure including circular components, this is a round structure comprehending linear components. While the first wheel of the *Ilan HaHokhmah* consists of ten spokes with a dot in the middle, this one contains eight spokes, each of which is connected to one *sefirah*. The dot in the middle is expanded to a circle, representing *Tiferet*, and *Yesod* is placed in the middle of the bottom-center spoke, in between *Malkhut* and *Tiferet*, creating a separate grouping of those three *sefirot* within the



**Figure 4.3** Drawing of BN 763, Folio 39a

circle, with a linear relation between these four: *Keter*, *Tiferet*, *Yesod*, and *Malkhut*. However, each of these linearly arranged elements relates to all the others, so that this linear unit is not separate from the diagram as a whole. It is instead integrated with it.

The *sefirot* are related to those directly across from each other, those preceding and succeeding them in the ring, and to those thematic elements appearing at the top and bottom positions in the ring, known as “A” and “C.” As in the ring composition, *Keter* is in the “A” position so that it indeed comprehends all of the other elements appearing in the diagram. And, typical of the ring composition, the element in the “C” position, in this case *Malkhut*, manifests and theorizes the material presented in “A” and developed in the sections between them. Once past “C,” the succeeding linguistic elements lead back up to “A.” This makes sense, as *Malkhut* manifests the upper realm in the lower.<sup>53</sup> The logic of the composition demands then that *Tiferet* be placed elsewhere, and so it is placed in the center, linking the paired *sefirot* opposite one another in the circle. This is consistent with its role, as it links all the *sefirot* according to the narratives describing them. So do the lines connecting them, the spokes of the wheel and its perimeter. Many of the *sefirotic ilanot* that

chronologically succeed these depict the same sort of multidirectional relation with the aid of lines drawn between the *sefirot*. Typically there are 32 lines in the sefirotic *ilan*, to represent the 32 paths of the SY, used to create the universe. The lines emphasize the pathways between the *sefirot*, but there are fewer of them here because this is done by organization as well.

Eight of the ten *sefirot* are also labeled with the names of male biblical figures. These are, once again: Solomon (*Hokhmah*), Abraham (*Hesed*), Isaac (*Gevurah*), Jacob (*Tiferet*), Moses (*Netzach*), Aaron (*Hod*), Joseph (*Yesod*), and David (*Malkhut*). The names of the *sefirot* are taken from Biblical passages describing the divine glory. These connections are narrated in the *Zohar*, and in later materials, the biblical figures are considered intermediaries, used to invoke by prayer the power of their own particular *sefirah*. Because of the commentarial allusions to the *Ascension of Moses*, in which Moses carries individual prayers to God, these labels here suggest that the biblical figures act as intermediaries between the viewer and the *sefirot*.

The third taxonomy is depicted in the perimeter of the circle, which is labeled with the elements of water, earth, and fire. These begin at the bottom of the circle, in the “C” position. They start at *Malkhut*, and they circumnavigate the left part of the circle, ending at *Keter*, in the “A” position. As in the SY and the *Ilan HaHokhmah*, the *sefirot* were created, and then followed by the celestial realm, which also contained ten elements analogous to the *sefirot* (consisting of the spirit of the living God, air, water, fire, and the six directions). And from them, the earthly realm was created, designated by the branches and the leaves of the tree.

In this narrative unit, we are squarely in the earthly realm. The inscription alludes to the creation of earth from water: “Meditate on water, this is earth, son of fire.” Earth is not one of the primordial elements but it is created in the later part of the SY, in SY25 and SY33.<sup>54</sup> The combination of fire and water, according to this narrative, makes earth.<sup>55</sup> The beginning of this outer ring is aligned with *Malkhut*, the *sefirah* of manifestation, and its end is aligned with *Keter*, the origin of these. In this way, *Malkhut* is nearest the earthly realm. She is the manifest aspect of the sefirotic cosmos and of the divine presence, and she is located near the earth, produced by the interaction of primordial elements. The perimeter of the diagram, then, depicts the manifest relation between *Keter* and *Malkhut*, and between the sefirotic and earthly realms.

This diagram is also worth comparing to the later-occurring *sefirotic ilanot*, as discussed above. The elements appear in the same order and in the same relation to one another. The ones usually paired in the *sefirotic ilan* are paired in this representation, and in truth, but for the fact this it is a circle rather than a tree, they are quite similar.<sup>56</sup> As in the *sefirotic ilan*,

we find *Keter* at the top and *Malkhut* at the bottom. So too do we find in both related and paired elements directly across from one another. But its shape does matter. There is a significant difference in that the circular model facilitates the conceptualization of multiply directional relationships between the *sefirot*. This model expresses their relationships spatially, by placement, and it shows the flexibility and the multidirectionality of these relations by organizing them according to both circular and linear models. This combination of linear and circular models reflects multiple ways of imagining the cosmos and thinking about the relation of its elements to one another. Most important, this diagram does not replicate the “tree that is all” form, because it is conceptualized as an expansion of its roots, a part of that form.

### The Concentric Sefirot in 2784/1390

The diagram is a famous one; it consists of the initials of the *sefirot*, arranged concentrically, beginning with the *Kaf* of *Keter* on the outside and concluding with the *Mem* of *Malkhut* on the inside. In later manuscripts such as Moshe Cordovero's sixteenth-century commentary, it is juxtaposed with the linear sefirotic *ilan*, in much the same way as the *Ilan HaHokhmah* is juxtaposed with the circular models of the *Sefirot* in MSS BN763 and ADX 52. In MS Parma 1390, folio 24b, it appears between a commentary on the SY and a copy of the *Sefer Hokhmah HaNefesh* (Book of the Wisdom of the Soul, attributed to Eleazar of Worms 1176–1238). It is also very close to a commentary on the kaddish prayer, which appears in all three manuscripts examined here.



Figure 4.4 MS Parma 2784.1390, Folio 7.

### Relations between the Diagrams and the Surrounding Texts

This diagram appears between the *Hokhmat HaNefesh* and the SY. The commentary on the SY does not focus on the *sefirot*, but at its end we find this diagram of them.<sup>57</sup> The inscription lists the seven double letters of the SY. It quotes SY37, which reads: “Seven double letters: BGD CPRT. They are pronounced on the tongue in two different positions.”<sup>58</sup> The diagram inscription continues to spell out the names of the letters and the differences in their pronunciations. Busi describes this diagram, explaining that it is based in a neo-Aristotelian cosmology of emanation, but he does not explain the relation between the diagram of the ten *sefirot* and the seven double letters.<sup>59</sup> The text associates the seven double letters with the lower seven *sefirot*.<sup>60</sup> Yet their initials as depicted here do not correspond with them. A portion of the *Hokhmat HaNefesh* mentions the *sefirot* briefly, describing them “as in the *Sefer Yetsirah*, ten *sefirot* without end, as in the *Sefer Yetsirah*.”<sup>61</sup> It seems then that the diagram represents a cosmology underlying the two works, and that the scribes believed it to link them.

The relation of the diagram to its surrounding texts is noteworthy. In each manuscript, the sefirotic diagrams follow a manuscript of the SY, a commentary on the significance of the liturgy (specifically the kaddish), a commentary on the SY, and finally, a treatise on wisdom (in this case, it is Eleazar of Worms’s *Hokhmat HaNefesh*, and in the previous the circular diagram follows the *Ilan HaHokhmah*). The appearance of these themes reflects the concerns of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*. These thinkers focused on two separate themes of wisdom and repentance. The one most frequently associated with them stresses “the importance of penitence and of God’s covert will; and the other was their esoteric tradition, *torat ha-sod*, about the mysteries of the godhead, and the structure of the soul, and esoteric meanings encoded in prayer.”<sup>62</sup>

These Italian manuscripts are related to the manuscript tradition of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, but not identical to them. They express themes that reflect the concerns of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, but combine them with others native to their own region. The diagrams map the structure of the celestial realms, and the accompanying inscription emphasizes the transformative power of prayer. But these texts in particular do not emphasize penitence as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* do, and the Italian manuscripts use a model of the sefirotic cosmos the others did not. Significantly, the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* do not express a theosophic conception of the *sefirot*, and neither do their *sefirot* possess the same names they receive in the Zoharic cosmology. The Italian manuscripts explore the esoteric themes of *Torat*

*ha-sod* (the secret Torah) and the efficacy of prayer, but they combine them with a theosophic model of the *sefirot*. In this way, the manuscripts combine some Ashkenazi themes with cosmological models current in thirteenth-century Italy.

The diagrams highlight a pivotal moment in the history of kabbalah. They show the visualization of the sefirotic cosmology contemporaneous to the composition of the *Zohar*. The *sefirot* depicted in the Italian diagrams bear the same names as the ones described in the *Zohar*, and they relate to each other and to God and the created world in many of the same ways. Yet, they are not organized like a sefirotic *ilan*, but instead as diagrams of the SY. In this it is possible to view the development of the Italian, Yetsiratic model of the *sefirot* as a response to their provocative description in the SY. These diagrams are valuable insofar as they attest to that pivotal moment. They show the relationship between the Yetsiratic cosmology and the Zoharic one.

The diagrams also show the modes of thinking that produced them; significantly, they show linear modes of thinking coupled and combined with the circular organizational structure characterizing the composition of the SY. We tend to imagine a progression from circular, oral semiotic modes to written, linear ones, and to imagine the kabbalistic cosmology according to the linear, Neoplatonically influenced model of the *sefirotic* tree. According to these assumptions, the existence of these diagrams might pinpoint that transitional moment. In his recent book, *Qabbalah Visiva*, Busi has claimed that the *ilanot* and the circular diagrams represent a dead end in the cosmological tradition.<sup>63</sup> But they do not. Synchronic and diachronic comparison shows the coexistence of both modes of thinking at the time of the composition of the *Zohar*, as well as their continuity in later cosmographical traditions.<sup>64</sup> The circular diagrams make a steady appearance in manuscripts of Italian kabbalah, in Spanish and Italian copies of *Sifrei Sefirot*, of *Ma'arekhet Elohut*, and they commonly appear in Lurianic works such as *Emek HaMelekh*.<sup>65</sup> And they are often accompanied by linear models. Moreover, just as linear and circular modes of thinking are fused in these Italian diagrams, so too are they fused in the cosmological models of the *Zohar*, which has the *sefirot* sometimes operating according to a linear emanation, and sometimes according to the model in which their end is fixed in their beginning as in the ring composition. And sometimes, as in these diagrams, we see both occurring simultaneously.

The ring-composition structure expresses a theosophic worldview in its very arrangement of information, insofar as it suggests an immanent conception of the divine. The arrangement of information reflects a generic choice that needs theorizing. As Frederick Jameson would argue,

genre is significant. According to him it is an ideologically laden method of organizing information. Michel Foucault argues this point as well. In *The Order of Things*, he argues that ordering both expresses and manufactures worldview.<sup>66</sup> It is a sort of habitus. Thus the arrangement of linguistic information expresses ideas, and in our experience of them we also experience the order in which they are grounded. When the scribe creates a diagram depicting a round model of the *sefirot* based on the ring composition, he reinforces that way of thinking and imagining the relations between compositional elements. If this is the case, then theosophic thought comes not only from interpretations that emphasize it, but it is suggested by compositional mode. So too is its practical application.

This theosophic worldview is expressed in the SY itself, in the ring-composition form, the circular shape of the diagrams, and the literal meanings of the text. Yet in the diagrams it is also juxtaposed with the linear modes of organizing information that characterizes much of modern narrative. In short, these two ways of organizing information appear together in these diagrams and in many others that follow. This combination of compositional modes: circular and linear, suggests that the texts and their diagrams propelled thought and action, as well as speculation and travel. They are modes of inquiry and cognitive maps, enabling their users to look for knowledge, to find it in the relations of its compositional elements, and to act. At the same time, they offer an important window into the mindset of those who read and used the SY, showing the various cosmological narratives combined in their worldview, and the manner in which they imagined acting upon it. The next two chapters are devoted to this. These previous chapters have provided a landscape of cosmological views, while the next two will discuss the action unfolding on this landscape.





## CHAPTER 5

### THE LETTERFORMS: HOW DID HE COMBINE THEM?

This chapter explores the function of the letterforms in the *Sefer Yetsirah* (SY). As discussed in the previous chapters, letter combination performs a practical function in the SY. They are the building blocks of creation, used by both human and divine actors. The SY situates the powers of the letters both in the divine and in astrological forces, so that letter combination acts upon God and the cosmos at large. The primary texts vary in crucial details, so they tell different stories about the significance of the act; for human operators, letter combination earns divine favor, salvific knowledge, and/or prophecy. Yet the text does not explain well why or how this works, or the role of astrological forces in the efficacy of letter combination. As such, this chapter aims to better understand the nature of the letters, the source of their power, and their intended application by examining the texts of the SY, relevant Biblical and postbiblical scriptural literature, and the early commentaries on the work.

The relationship between the letterforms and the stars is key to their function in this text and in its later ritual applications. The SY provides some important information about this topic, but it certainly does not tell why or how this relationship works. A better understanding requires that we situate the text within an analysis of a variety of sources. First, these include the texts of the SY, as derived from Hayman's MSS A, K, and C. Second, it includes an analysis of selections from early commentaries on the SY, including Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century work, *Sefer Hakhmoni*, which is crucial to understanding the relation of the messianic narrative to astrological discourse, and so it is included as well. Third, it includes relevant biblical, midrashic, and talmudic sources that help to situate their relation.

Later commentaries add yet another layer of meaning to the act of letter combination. Their authors believed that the effective use of letters was a mode of messianic action. Specifically, some of these commentaries used the SY to develop recipes for golem making, to which they assigned a messianic function. In the commentaries its efficacy is always tied to both letter combination and making changes in the constellations. As such it is necessary to fully situate the relationship between the letterforms and the stars in order to approach the SY-derived ritual of golem-making. Many of the diagrams accompanying the SY provide some instructions for golem making, and so this relationship is central to understanding them.

### **The Nature of the Letters in the *Sefer Yetsirah***

In examining these texts, I ask four questions. First, what is the nature of the letterforms? Second, how are they used and by whom? Third, what is the source of their power? And fourth, to what end are they used? In the texts of the SY, the letters are divinely crafted instruments of creation. Like the *sefirot*, there is some ambivalence about their nature; it is not clear whether they are made out of God or merely by God. The texts show that they are used by God and human operators in a combination ritual modeled on the divine combination narrated in the texts. The source of their power lies in their relationship to the divine and their attachment to the powers of the stars and constellations. Within the texts, their function is effective, prophetic, and salvific. Other sources help to elaborate the fourth question.

### **What Is the Nature of the Letterforms?**

What are these letters and how are they conceptualized? The language used to describe the creation of the letterforms helps to answer this question. They appear in three different capacities in the SY: they appear as divinely created objects, as instruments of divine creation, and as instruments for human creation. In each of these different capacities, the SY uses different groups of metaphors to describe the letters. When they are divinely created, they are described in sculptural terms.<sup>1</sup> When they are the instruments of divine creation, the SY uses architectural terms as well as mathematical or combinatory terms. The use of sculptural and architectural metaphors shows an identity of form with substance that is fundamental to the participatory, iconic relation of the letters to the divine.

SY1 narrates the divine creation of the letters along with the *sefirot*. They are *hakak yah*, with these two words respectively translated as

“carved out” and “God.” But the text is ambivalent about their nature, and it does not say whether they are carved out *by* God or carved out *of* God. Their properties vary according to the translation of *hakak yah*. If they are carved out *by* God, then the letterforms are divine artifacts; they are objects made by God that therefore possess some residue of divine power. If the letters are carved out *of* God, then they are nothing short of divine substance.

Whether the letters are carved or not, their creation is a process of giving form to a preexisting substance that participates in the divine being.<sup>2</sup> Their materiality is important, and this is expressed in a wide range of architectural and artistic metaphors. These are based in canonical Jewish sources, relying upon the cosmogony narrated in the biblical book of Job, and upon *Midrash Genesis Rabba*. The book of Job describes God as a builder, who laid the *even shetiyah*, or the foundation stone<sup>3</sup> of the universe. The SY quotes the book of Job in several key spots.<sup>4</sup> Similar language occurs in *Midrash Genesis Rabba*, which also compares God to a builder,<sup>5</sup> as well as in other kabbalistic sources, so that this trope is both persistent and widespread.

The letters are themselves represented by various architectural metaphors, including stones,<sup>6</sup> walls,<sup>7</sup> and houses.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, they are hewn, as one might hew bricks out of stone.<sup>9</sup> In the SY the letters are simultaneously conceptualized as both foundation stones and the building blocks<sup>10</sup> for the “houses.” The “houses” refer to the created world, and God plays the role of the architect. In this way God is compared to humans who can also take on that task and the roles associated with it. The creation process is itself described in mathematical or combinatorial terms; the stones are not piled together with mortar, but instead they are combined and permuted in specific ways to create the material world.

This conception of the letters fits well into late-antique conceptions of divine names. Naomi Janowitz writes of the perceived efficacy of the divine name in late-antique Jewish culture in her book, *Icons of Power*:

The name is not an arbitrary word chosen to stand for the deity, hence it is not a symbol. Instead, it represents the deity in the less-familiar way in which an icon “stands for” its subject. Just as a line is formally linked with what it represents . . . so too here the divine name is understood to have a formal, motivated relationship with what it represents (the deity).<sup>11</sup>

According to Janowitz, the divine name is iconographic, so that it participates in the object it represents. While Janowitz discusses the power of the divine name in late-antique Judaism, these insights are equally applicable to medieval Judaism, which also invested power in the divine name.

In the SY, the letterforms are material components of the divine name, and they and their creations come to represent the divine because they are consubstantially related. This consubstantial relationship is articulated in SY15, which narrates the sealing of the six primordial directions in the universe. All three texts read as follows: “He chose three simple letters and fixed them in his great name—YHW. And he sealed in<sup>12</sup> them the six edges.”<sup>13</sup> All three texts posit a substantial relationship between God, the Great Name, the letters, and the six directions of the universe. The letters are materially linked to the great name; the “fixing” implies an immovability, and it also implies the melding of two materials. The three letters then are used to seal the six edges, or the six dimensions of the universe. But sealing means creating an impression in a preexisting formless substance, like clay, so that the substance gains its identity from the seal. It is telling that the texts reads literally “sealed in them,” so that the letters are incorporated into the object formed with them. As it stands, then, each entity created with the letters is ontologically related to its creator. In this ontological, consubstantial relation, created objects come to represent their creator iconically. In this the formal relationship Janowitz describes has also become a substantial one, as the difference between these two categories is elided.

### **How Are They Used, and by Whom?**

This conceptualization of the divine creation process lays the foundation for thinking about the way people are instructed to use the letters. If God can be compared to a human builder, then a human builder can take on the role of creator. Their roles are not equal, however. The directions for the human operator resemble the process of divine creation in some ways, but not in others. Divine creation consists of the construction of the letters and their use as creative instruments. God “carves” the letters out of an unnamed substance, and then combines them. Human operators are instructed to replicate both steps in the creation process, but they “carve” the letters out of air, voice, and mouth.<sup>14</sup> The “human” instructions retain the sculptural metaphors, but embody them and map them onto the mechanics of vocalization. These similarities and differences are expressed in a formula for creation elaborated in the text.

### **The Formula: How Are They Used and by Whom?**

The SY treats the letterform as an instrument of divine creation, and the narration of this process serves as a model for human operators to replicate. The call to action is evident in recurring phrases within the text as

well as in the astrological models in which these actions are embedded. The text requests action throughout; SY4 directs the reader to “Get the thing clearly worked out and restore the creator to his place.”<sup>15</sup> Other passages, including SY6 and 24, instruct the reader to “know and ponder and form,”<sup>16</sup> suggesting a progression from the passive, abstract “know” to the transitive but still abstract “ponder” and from there to the transitive, concrete verb “form.”<sup>17</sup> SY61<sup>18</sup> repeats the “know, ponder, and form” instructions, and it follows them with the word “succeeded,” so that when Abraham carries out these instructions, he also completes the text.

In the SY, human and divine letter combination is effective. It is effective when God does it, it is effective when the implied “you” of the operator does it, and it is effective when Abraham does it in SY61. But how do we construe this effectiveness? It is at base a form of religious action, “a practice that renders [religious] discourse operational.”<sup>19</sup> This is a rich rubric for understanding the SY, which narrates this process in describing the creation of the world with letters. Letterforms are both the building blocks of creation and its discourse. In this way, creation is itself the process of making discourse operational.

Letter combination fits Bruce Lincoln’s description of ritual. In *Holy Terrors*, Lincoln defines ritual, a subset of religious action, as “a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper human subject and/or world.”<sup>20</sup> Ritual, then, aims at perfecting the human being and creating an ideal world. According to Genesis 1, human beings are created in the divine image. Ritual practices are aimed at actualizing that creation. If God is a creator by nature, when people imitate God by creating, they actualize their creation in the divine image and move toward the condition of the proper human subject. In this way, letter combination is a religious ritual, rendering operational the discourse of the SY, as well as Jewish biblical and midrashic discourses. The perfection of the human subject signifies not only in and of itself, but also in terms of the larger goal of the ritual practice, which is the transformation of the world. This is how the *imitatio dei* of the SY becomes meaningful within messianic narratives.

In order to better understand how human beings are instructed to imitate the divine, and the theological meaning of that action, it is worth examining the formulae for the creation of and with letterforms provided within the text. The text provides three creation formulae, occurring in SY17 SY18, and SY19–20. SY17 explains the vocalization of the letters, SY18 narrates the divine creation of the letters, and SY20 describes the process of letter combination for creation of the material world, executed by God and meant for imitation by human operators. The SY describes the human creation as follows in SY17: “The twenty-two letters: they

are hewn out of the air, carved out by the voice, fixed in the mouth in five positions.”<sup>21</sup> This focuses on the letters’ sounds so that when people pronounce them, they emulate the divine work of creating them, introduced in SY1, recast here in linguistic terms, and elaborated in divine ones in SY18.

The enunciatory instructions link human and divine combination ritual.<sup>22</sup> The manuscripts posit an ontological relation between the tongue and the letters. MSS A and C list the letters and then explain: “They are bound to the tip of the tongue as a flame to the burning coal.”<sup>23</sup> The flame and the burning coal are viewed as existentially related, even consubstantial, and so too are the letters and the palate. The text humanizes the letters by identifying them in terms of their position on the tongue as they are enunciated. The letters are bound to the human form, and they become what they are when people pronounce them.<sup>24</sup> Thus, when people pronounce the letters, they emulate the divine work of carving them, introduced in SY1 and elaborated in SY17. Just as God created the letters in the past, human operators do so in the present. This is why the reader is addressed in the imperative several times throughout the work, instructed to “know and ponder and form” and to “restore the creator to his base.”

While SY17 describes the nature of the letters, SY18 narrates the mechanics of divine creation, breaking it down into six separate steps: carving, hewing, weighing, exchanging, combining, and forming: “Twenty-two letters: he carved them out, he hewed them, he weighed them, exchanged them, and combined them, and formed with them all the life of creation.”<sup>25</sup> While the text names these steps, it does not explain or describe their execution.<sup>26</sup> SY17 describes very well the process of vocalization. The letters are created as the speaker breathes, forms the sound in the mouth, and sends the air to the right position on the palate. In SY18, the reader does not walk away with instructions for doing any of these things (carving, hewing, weighing, exchanging, or forming) except for the fifth step, that of combining. This is described in SY18 and 19. SY18 explains: “They are fixed on a wheel with 221 gates.”<sup>27</sup> The wheel rotates backwards and forwards.” MS K places the wheel on the *T’li*,<sup>28</sup> more commonly known in astrological discourse as the Dragon, situating creation in astrological entities.

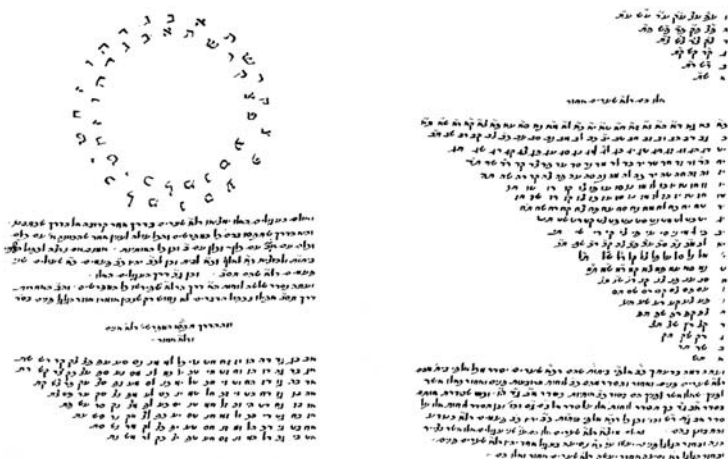
In SY19, the text hones in on step 5, combining, and poses this question: “How did He combine them?”<sup>29</sup> In SY19–21, the text answers this question in three ways: first ekphrastically, then theoretically, and finally, graphically. SY19 explains: “Aleph with them all, and all of them with aleph. . . . And they all rotate in turn . . .” It then describes them as “fixed in a wheel” that “rotates backwards and forwards.”<sup>30</sup> This wheel appears

SY21<sup>33</sup> contains variable interpretations of the verbal description in SY19: there are a number of different charts that follow the verbal description.<sup>34</sup> While the texts describe the form as a wheel, most of the in-text charts appear in table form. The charts below represent conventional interpretations of SY18–19. Below, I include three images from Moshe Cordovero's *Commentary on the SY*, JTS 1584. It is a sixteenth-century manuscript. It includes the most common letter combinations in chart and wheel form, as they are described in the texts. These charts are conventional, and they represent well the variety of configurations of the

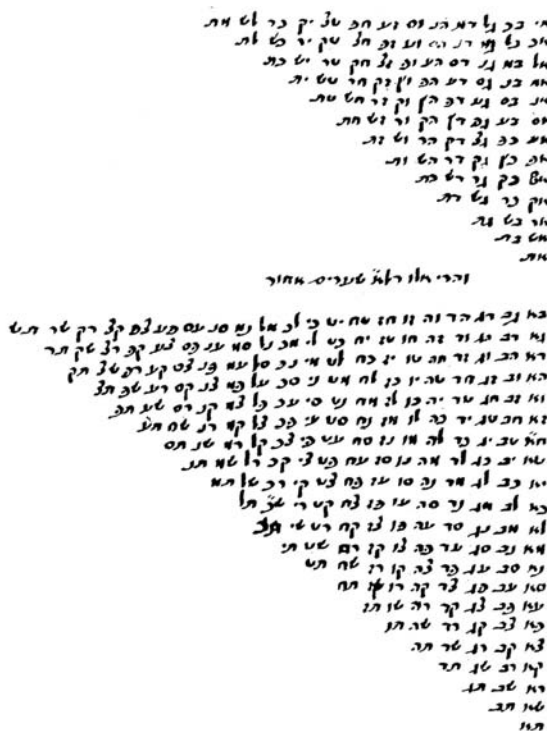
[illegible]

**Figure 5.1** JTS 1584, Folio 18a





**Figure 5.2** JTS 1584, Folio 18b



**Figure 5.3** JTS 1584, Folio 19a.

charts in both wheel and table forms, as well as the manner of combining the letters derived from the instructions in the text. I have used a later manuscript because it presents all of these forms together.

The first is a table arranged exactly as described in the SY, with the first line reading *Aleph-Bet*, *Aleph-Gimmel*, *Aleph-Daled*, and so on. The second line begins with *Bet* and puts *Aleph* at the bottom, so that the second line is shorter than the *Aleph*-line by one pairing. The pattern repeats until we reach the last letter, *Taf*, which is only paired with the penultimate letter, *Shin*.

The next page repeats the pattern, beginning the full set of pairings with *Bet* and placing *Aleph* at the bottom, giving it the shortest line as *Taf* had in the previous chart.

The third chart is a wheel, with two rings of letters. The outer ring begins with *aleph* at the top, just right of center, and the inner ring places the last letter of the alphabet, *Taf*, just below the *aleph* in the same position, but skewed slightly to the left so that *aleph* is aligned with *Taf*, *Bet* with *Aleph*, *Gimmel* with *Bet*, and so on.

These charts and others like them commonly occur within the texts. But do they signify only divine action? While SY18 narrates the divine creation of the letters and then the universe, its first two steps (hewn and carved) echo the narrative of SY17: "The twenty-two letters: they are hewn out of the air, carved out by the voice, fixed in the mouth in five positions."<sup>35</sup> This describes human enunciation of the letters' sounds so that when people pronounce the letters, they emulate the divine work of carving them, introduced in SY1 and elaborated in SY17. In light of these considerations the table at SY20 most likely signifies dually, serving as a sign for the divine process of creation that occurred in the past, and for the letter combinations to be performed by human operators. These are instructions for people to emulate divine action.

If this is the case, then these verses actually perform double duty as a narration of past events and as a ritual description. SY18 provides the "divine" formula consisting of a technical vocabulary articulating six different steps in the process of divine creation without elaborating upon any but the fifth step of letter combination.<sup>36</sup> The fifth is remarkably well articulated, with both verbal and visual description of the process in the form of charts that are incorporated into the text. This mimetic narrative functions as a ritual description; this is evidenced by the "human" formula of SY17, as well as by the fact that the text follows the description of the letter combination step with a table showing how this is done. This table appears even in the earliest texts.<sup>37</sup>

Their position is important too. The charts appear in the first half of the composition, at the turn of Ring 2. This is the "theoretical" portion of the ring, which introduces concepts and principles. As such it is

an exposition of the creative process without reference to the products. These are articulated fully at the turn of the master ring composition in Ring 4, when the SY details the objects created by each letter in the combination process. This exposition has a double function, both describing the process of divine creation and providing some instructions for replicating it. The ritual instructions included in the “theoretical” first half of the ring are answered in the second half, as Abraham uses the formulae successfully at the close in SY60.

The positioning is also important within the individual ring. The human and divine formulae are placed together on one side of the turn, with the letter charts opposite them. This implies that they are companion pieces, with the ritual descriptions on one side and the chart on the other. The chart explains what God did, and it provides concrete instructions for people. Just as God crafts the letters with his own hand, people themselves create the letters by speaking them, so that this ritual is an analogy to the first creation. This portion consists of a mimetic narrative, so carefully articulated that it seems to encourage emulation in the form of a ritual serving specific purposes in the text.

### **The Source of Their Power: Letters and Astrology**

In its last verses the SY theorizes the power of the letters and shows the application of the combination ritual. The majority of the SY, from SY12–54, describes the objects created with each letter, according to the three groups of the three mother letters, the seven doubles, and the twelve simples. This continues until the last section, from SY55–64, which embeds the powers of the letters in astrological elements. The final portion of the text also provides an example of human success in performing the letter-combination ritual. In this way the letters derive their power from three sources: their divine creator, the human ritual actor, and the astrological elements in which they are embedded. Thus the middle of the work includes two formulae for both divine and human creation with the letters, and the SY ends asserting the dual use of the letters, by God and then by human beings. It shows their rootedness in the planets and constellations, in the three elements of air, water, and fire, and in human language.

SY59 grounds the power of the letters in three newly introduced astrological elements. These are the *T’li*, the wheel,<sup>38</sup> and the heart. This verse expresses their relationship as follows: “The Hook (*T’li*) in the universe is like a king on his throne: the celestial sphere in the year is like a king in a province; the heart in man is like a king at war.”<sup>39</sup> Each of these metaphors embodies the same figure of the king, who holds less power as he moves further from his home territory.

These astrological elements serve to theorize action in the SY. The first parts of the SY explain the creation of the universe, while the middle section provides a ritual description for human emulation of the process, and this last portion explains the powers that move events in the created world. This last section articulates a theory of efficacy. The *T'li* is at the center of the theory, but the text is not clear about its identity. As such it is necessary to turn to the commentaries to understand it. Many of the commentators who examined this chapter (such as Shabbetai Donnolo) believed that the *T'li* had real power, governing the constellations, which in turn determined (or influenced) human destiny. Others, such as Saadya, disputed this view, believing it to be a point at which orbits intersect.<sup>40</sup> Some diagramming traditions depict the *T'li* as either a dragon or a snake eating its tail. The wheel is widely translated as the celestial sphere with all its stars and constellations, and the heart is understood to be that of the human being. Either way, in the SY and many of its commentaries, the *T'li* is the force moving the celestial spheres, and as such it is the agent of human destiny. As it stands then, the *T'li* turns the wheel, which in turn directs the heavens and in this the human being. If it is possible to influence the *T'li*, it is also possible influence human destiny, the celestial sphere, and the cosmos at large.

The penultimate verse, SY60, recapitulates the process of combining the letters, and affirms their grounding in the astrological forces described in SY59. SY61 fixes these forces in the rubric of human language. This is the secret that explains the potency of the combination ritual. The last two verses show the combination ritual acting on the constellations. SY61 reads:

He bound twenty-two letters into language, and the omnipresent revealed to him his secret. He drew them out into water, he burned them into fire, he shook them into the air, he branded them into the seven, he led them into the twelve constellations.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, the power of the letters is bound within human language. It is worth noting that the work pays attention to the process of binding and sealing. SY32–34 discusses the use of the three mother letters to create elements in the material world, the universe, the year, and the human being. Before the creation process, the letter is “bound to a crown.”<sup>42</sup> The crown precedes creation, and binding the letters to language makes an analogy to that process, rendering human language capable of creation. This follows with a narrative of the progressive embedding of one group of elements into the next, recapitulating the plot of the SY. In sum,

SY61 locates the power of the letters in language, and then in the three elements of water, fire, and air, in the seven, and in the twelve groupings. The secret, then, is the consubstantial and ontological relationship between the letterforms, human language, and the created world. In this, language is powerful, and it is a part of both the divine and the created world. This secret is attained and enacted through the use of the letters in the combination rituals described in the text.

### **To What End Are They Used?**

#### ***Letter Combination, Golem Making, and Astrology***

The SY clearly asserts that the letters have powers. The ending lines describing these powers and their applications vary from version to version. Many argue that these endings were added at a later point.<sup>43</sup> But interestingly, even the earliest manuscripts have endings describing Abraham's success in combining the letters and its salvific rewards. Because they are present in each version, they seem crucial despite their variability. In this it is clear that the "secret" of the SY is meant for application and that the texts of the SY prescribe meaningful action. Its purpose is theurgic, for all these stories end with the appearance of God as Abraham succeeds in creating and summons God himself.

In later sources, letter combination could perform a divinatory function as well as a constructive function. This is to say that the letters were used to achieve prophecy, as narrated in the SY itself, and in some commentaries, to create the artificial man, or the golem, described in Talmudic texts. The question remains, however, regarding the source of their power and how it was theorized. And while the SY narrates Abraham's ritual performance, most likely as an exemplar for its readers, it does not explain why it follows the textual material rooting the powers of the letters in the constellations. To get a better grasp of this, it will be necessary to look at some early commentaries as well as at biblical, talmudic, and midrashic sources on astrology. The commentaries will answer some questions about the *T'li*, while the biblical, talmudic, and midrashic sources will situate the *T'li* in terms of Jewish astrology. This will essentially explain how the Yetsiratic cosmology fits into preexisting Jewish cosmologies, and it will shed more light on the significance of the letter-combination ritual.

In the rabbinic materials and some Ashkenazi commentaries, letter combination was used to create a golem. The golem is an artificial anthropoid, a pile of mud or dust sculpted into the shape of a human

being and brought to life by the performance of rituals consisting of letter combination and circumambulation. Some people believed in the creation of a material golem, while others thought it imaginal. The golem-creation ritual worked in two ways: first, it worked as a form of sympathetic magic, and second, the same letter combination used to make the golem also served to change the structure of the heavens, rearranging key constellations. The rituals of golem creation described in the commentaries mime actions occurring in narrative of the resurrection and the afterlife. By acting out these narratives, the performers sought to actualize them. The commentaries describe modifications to the cosmos whose effects are not understandable without recourse to earlier texts. They describe the reconstruction and restoration of broken constellations, the Pleiades and Orion, which according to some narratives, propel the *T'li*, which in turn moves the rest of the constellations. If these stop, then so too does time. Letter combination is intended to work in these two ways to bring about resurrection, stop time, and hasten the afterlife.

This messianic aim becomes clearer upon examining Talmudic and Midrashic myths about the constellations of *Kimah* and *Kesil* combined with commentaries that relate letter combination to these myths. *Kimah* and *Kesil* are prominent in the commentary tradition and the diagrams examined in [chapter 6](#). They refer respectively to the Pleiades and Orion (or Ursa Major). For various reasons, Orion and Ursa Major were often conflated. In the Bible, the Talmud, and the Midrash tradition *Kimah* and *Kesil* are important for understanding time. Their movement propels the constellations, which in turn cause the progression of time. Messianism entails the cessation of time, and as such, altering the progression of time has a theological import.

*Kimah* and *Kesil* appear in Biblical literature and the *Babylonian Talmud*. In the Bible they play an important role in narratives recounting a different cosmogony from the one appearing in Genesis. One of the most important is the book of Job. In it, God recalls the creation process as he asks Job, “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades (*Kimah*) or loose the cords of Orion (*Kesil*)? Can you bring out the constellations in their seasons, or lead out the bear with its cubs?”<sup>44</sup> Binding the chains of the Pleiades and loosing the cords of Orion are associated with the progression of the seasons and the movement of time. God created the seasons, God ensures their progression, and God can stop them by altering those constellations that drive the process.

The astrological importance of *Kimah* and *Kesil* is even more evident in the *Babylonian Talmud*, in which it is clear that these constellations

are responsible for the cycles of time. In these narratives the great flood of Genesis was caused by the removal of two stars from the Pleiades (*Kimah*), so that the heavens could open and release the rains. The Babylonian Talmud narrates this as follows: "When the Holy One . . . wanted to bring a flood upon the world, He took two stars from *Kimah* and brought a flood upon the world."<sup>45</sup> Here, *Kimah* refers to the Pleiades. When he wanted to stop the flood, according to the same verse, he removed two stars from *Kesil* to replace them.<sup>46</sup> *Kesil* refers to either Ursa Major or Orion, but here it more likely indicates Ursa Major, as the missing stars are described as the "sons" of the Great Bear. They were placed among the sisters of the Pleiades, so that the Great Bear constantly pursues the Pleiades, seeking the return of her two sons, while the Pleiades seek their missing sister, both causing the movement of the heavens.

According to Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century commentary on the SY, their movements affect the *T'li*, which moves the constellations across the sky. Shabbetai argues in both his *Commentary on the SY* and his *Sefer Mazzalot* (Book of the Stars)<sup>47</sup> that the *T'li* is moved by these other constellations. Many of the Ashkenazi commentaries rely upon his work. In Shabbetai's understanding, the *T'li* is powerful, but its powers are linked to those of other constellations, specifically those of *Kimah* and *Kesil*.

The constellations have a complex and variable relationship to each other in Shabbetai's thought. He believes that *Kimah* refers to the Pleiades and *Kesil* refers to Orion, but in his system Orion is the same as the Great Bear.<sup>48</sup> According to him, the Great Bear (and as a result of their association, Orion too) is the same as the Wain.

And in his view the Wain is the constellation that moves all the other constellations. It performs the same function as the *T'li* (Draco), and sometimes it is associated with it. This is not simple; he expresses two attitudes toward the relationship between Draco and the Wain; in the *Sefer Hakhmoni*, he "claims that the Wain is close to the Dragon (*T'li*), with its extremities attached to the Dragon's ring,"<sup>49</sup> so that in pursuing the Pleiades (*Kimah*), *Kesil* moves the Dragon, which moves the other constellations. In other texts, Donnolo claims that the *T'li* and the Wain are one and the same. Either way, the constellations move because the *Kesil* pursues *Kimah* to recover her missing sons. In Shabbetai's thought these are attached to the *T'li* and they propel it. When *Kesil* recovers them, the movement of the constellations will stop, as will time, and with this will come the redemption.

This messianic function of letter combination is theorized and explained by its linking function. The letterform links the three cosmological levels of the SY, the universe, the year, and the soul, and on

another level it links these three aspects of the created world to the creator. At the same time, the power of the letters is embedded in astrological forces, so that they link God, people, and the stars. In this way the text supplies a theoretical framework for an astrological view of causality combined with its practical application in the formula for creation by letter combination. Thus, when the letters are manipulated, so are these other elements and forces in which their power is embedded.

Some of the commentaries that follow suggest that people can aid these constellations in their quest by “moving letters.” Both the Pseudo-Saadya and the Joseph Ben Shalom Ashkenazi commentaries posit that combining letters affects the cosmos. In the commentary by Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi,<sup>50</sup> the ritual of letter combination moves stars from Taurus to Cancer to replace *Kimah*’s lost stars.<sup>51</sup> The Pseudo-Saadya also sees the permutation of the letters as a means to restore the Great Bear’s missing sons, and in so doing to bring redemption. This is explored in greater detail in [chapter 6](#).

In the SY and its commentaries, the letters act like tiny handles for big machines, so that in moving them it is also possible to move those forces and entities in which they are embedded. This serves in turn to theorize the powers of the letters and the effectiveness of combining them. This concept is particularly important in understanding the messianic function of letter combination, which involves reconstruction on two levels. First, key constellations are made whole as they recover their missing stars, and second, as discussed below, bodies are reconstructed and resurrected. According to Jewish narratives on the causes of celestial movements, this recovery has the effect of stopping time. And at last, the divine is also moved and therefore transformed, as according to SY4, which asks the reader to “restore the creator to his place.”<sup>52</sup> The SY posits that the manipulation of letters was intended to produce practical, messianic effects.

Thus it is clear here that the effective use of the SY and its religious function are combined. Letter permutation is restorative in two ways: within the SY, it “restores the creator to his base,” and in the commentaries it restores the cosmos to its prior state, before the movement of the constellations. The texts and commentaries embed the effective practice of letter combination in Jewish narratives of time, restoration, and redemption so that it differs remarkably little from nomian ritual.

According to Lincoln’s definition of ritual discussed above, letter combination is indeed a practice that renders discourse operational in the effort to produce a proper human subject and/or world.<sup>53</sup> And these rituals aim at both. Letter combination is an effective practice that uses



integral Jewish narratives to pursue goals derived from those narratives. Indeed, within Judaism the proper performance of ritual acts is messianic in its nature, since that is the end goal of much of religious practice. The SY and its medieval commentaries show that the construction of the golem serves a messianic purpose that is the end goal of its effective function. Both the effective function (i.e., it has a magical as well as a mystical function) and its messianic aims are intrinsic to the text itself.

## CHAPTER 6

### GOLEM DIAGRAMS: GOLEM MAKING, ASTROLOGY, AND MESSIANISM

This chapter examines the use of letter combination to create the golem. It shows that the purpose of the medieval golem differs from both rabbinic and contemporary popular-culture conceptions of it. Similarly, it considers golem making in terms of totemization, or the process of turning an object into a subject. While the golem is animated by rituals resembling totemization, the golem itself differs primarily in its instrumentality. Its function is not relational, and therefore it is not a proper subject. Instead, it is used to effect metaphysical changes, including the resurrection of the dead and the reconstruction of the cosmos. From the late Middle Ages onward, the golem has lived a varied and interesting life in the popular imagination. Both rabbinic and modern sources show its social function, but medieval sources give the ritual a theological telos. In the Middle Ages, this is the true function of the golem. As such the golem gains its power through the process of totemization, but once created, it acts as an agent and not as a totem.

#### I. Social versus Theological Function

Most of the extant golem recipes come from twelfth, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century commentaries on the SY. The commentaries analyzed in this chapter include Eleazar of Worms's early thirteenth-century *Sefer Tagi*,<sup>1</sup> R. Aharon Berakhiah of Modena's sixteenth-century *Ma'avar Yabok* (The Ford of the River Yabok),<sup>2</sup> and Abraham Abulafia's thirteenth-century *Hayyei Olam haBa*.<sup>3</sup> The diagrams analyzed accompany the Pseudo-Saadya Commentary (12th c.)<sup>4</sup> Abraham Abulafia's *Hayyei Olam Ha'Ba* and *Tehilat Yetsirah* (13th c.), and the Commentary of the Pseudo-Rabad (Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, 13th–14th c.). By this point, there are a few variations

on a relatively consistent recipe for creating the golem. All of the recipes are based on interpretations of the ritual instructions elaborated in SY18–21, and on the narrative of SY61, in which Abraham himself uses the letters, becoming “successful in creation.” Moshe Idel shows that the process consists of two steps: “The common elements of these techniques are two: the material employed to create the golem is dust, eventually kneaded with water, and the pronunciation of combinations of letters over the shaped body, in order to animate it.”<sup>5</sup> While the recipes differ in some of their particulars, they hold these steps in common.

The animation portion of the ritual commonly involves two actions: recitation of letter combinations and ritual dance. These are enacted concomitantly. The recitation consists of combinations of either the tetragrammaton (the four-letter divine name)<sup>6</sup> or combinations of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, from which the divine name is said to emerge.<sup>7</sup> This is based on the kabbalistic concept that the divine names are the “souls” of the other letters.<sup>8</sup> This same notion is reflected in the “sealing of the six directions” in SY15 with the divine name, which precedes the exposition of three groups of the 22 letters of the alphabet. In the golem recipes, the letters of the divine name constitute the very soul of the creature. The operators combine this with a ritual dance, a *makhol*, in which they circumambulate the creature while reciting these permutations. There are a fixed number of circumambulations, combined with particular recitations. Hence the object is first made and then animated with the repetition of the alphabet and ritual movement.

It would then seem to behave like a totem. Several theorists have considered totemism; the most important of these is Émile Durkheim, who saw the religious animation of objects as the reification of group identity; that is, the values of the group, its community structure, its worldview, were projected onto an object to animate it.<sup>9</sup> According to Durkheim, this investment happened in the process of ritual design, or decoration. In the inscription onto the totemic object, the object came to represent society, the divine, and the order of the cosmos.<sup>10</sup> In Durkheim’s view, this reification process made the totem sacred to the group, so that came to represent the group as a whole. As it became a living symbol representing the community that made it, the totem was transformed from object to subject, and it became capable of interacting with that community.

The golem possesses many qualities associated with the totem. It is made with the letters of the alphabet. The alphabet constitutes the linguistic structure of the universe, and it bears the values of the society that uses it. The letters are embedded in the creature to bring him to life, and he is animated by a recitation of the alphabet, which is “danced”

into him. In later legends, the golem is animated with an inscription of letters in his forehead. Thus he is transformed from object to living being. However, once animated the golem is an incomplete creature; he possesses only two of the three parts of the soul that human beings have; he lacks the highest part and cannot act on his own volition or speak. In this way the golem is neither object nor person, neither lifeless matter nor volitional being. Instead the golem is a combination of these and he is entirely instrumental, and so the golem functions in a manner more complex than as a reification of fixed communal values and identities, or as a living representation of God and community.

The components of the ritual performed to raise the golem act on the cosmos in two ways: as discussed in [chapter 5](#), the letter combination acts on the constellations to stop their orbit and in so doing to stop time, and the ritual circumambulatory dance of animating a golem preenacts the resurrection of the dead, described in the Hebrew Bible. This preenaction is a form of sympathetic magic, apparent in the recipes and their commentaries. Sympathetic magic operates on the basis of imitation, in which an operator completes an act in the earthly realm in order to bring about a similar action in the celestial realm. Both of these together, the ritual dance and the letter combinations, aim to bring the messianic period. In this way the telos of the golem-making ritual is theological; it has social aspects, but its primary purpose is to alter the cosmos and end history and the social as we know it.

This is not the scholarly consensus, however. Many have written about the golem, but most have done so from an insider religious position or an imaginative perspective.<sup>11</sup> Those scholars who have studied the golem have discussed it in terms of its social function, for individuals and groups. The golem does act on society in both rabbinic and modern sources, but this is not the case in the medieval commentaries. In his analysis of the earliest sources for the golem legend, Idel acknowledges its theological import, but emphasizes its social function. In the Talmud, individuals created the golem as a public testament to virtue.

Rava said, "If one is righteous, he could create worlds [like God]." As it says, "For your sins separate you from your God." Rava thereby created a man, and sent him to Rav Zeira. He spoke to him but he did not answer. Rav Zeira said, "You are from the *chavrei* [sorcerers], return to your dust." (Sanhedrin, 65b, 67b)

Idel believes that in this source, the golem is used for something like a college prank,<sup>12</sup> with one magician creating a golem and dispatching it to his colleagues as a way of displaying his virtuosity in public.

But according to this passage, there is another important aspect of the golem-creation ritual. Rava makes a theological statement about human nature and about the human relation to the divine.<sup>13</sup> He asserts that human beings are created in the image of a creator God, but it is only their sins that separate them from God and curtail their creative abilities. The successful creation of the golem attests to human virtue as well as to human frailty. They can create as God did, but they can only do so imperfectly, as the creature lacks a soul and cannot speak. Even in this rabbinic source, golem creation expresses and enacts a particular view of the human-divine relation.

In considering medieval sources, scholars generally divest the golem-creation ritual (rabbinic and medieval) of any mystical or theological meaning.<sup>14</sup> Idel argues that “medieval sources help us to consider the Ashkenazi practices as magical ones, without the need to project a mystical interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> A. Peter Hayman makes another social argument. He argues that the impulse to create the golem is a reaction to a lack of political empowerment. Hayman believes that the practitioner “functions like a magician who by his knowledge of the correct formulas can compel the gods to appear and do his bidding.”<sup>16</sup> He roots this desire for power in its practitioners’ lack of sovereignty since the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile from the holy land. These suppositions about the social function of the ritual require reexamination in light of the further evidence.

### I. a. Ritual Preenaction of the Resurrection

The medieval sources tell another story. Most of the extant golem recipes come from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century commentaries, and they tell of a ritual that is theologically instrumental. Its messianic function is widely attested in them. The various components of the ritual are themselves significant. Once again, the golem-construction ritual consists of the formation of the body out of dust or mud, letter combination, and a concomitant ritual dance (*makhol*) to animate it. As discussed in [chapter 5](#), the letter combinations used to construct the golem also serve to reconstruct *Kimah* and *Kesil*. The formation of the golem’s body and its animation with ritual dance serve to preenact the resurrection of the dead, and thereby to bring it about by sympathetic magic. This relationship is apparent in the commentaries containing golem recipes, and in the diagrams accompanying them. This section analyzes commentaries already discussed by Idel in his book *Golem*. While his analysis is excellent, the messianic components of the texts have been left out of it, with

the exception of the Abulafian material, the messianism of which is presented in opposition to the other authors.<sup>17</sup>

The early thirteenth-century commentary of Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer Tagi*, shows the messianic function of the golem-creation ritual. In it, creation by letter combination preenacts the resurrection of the dead. The commentary reads:

In the future, the righteous will cause the resurrection of the dead [like] Eliyahu, Elisha, [and] Ezekiel, as it is written: "The seal (*hotam*) will be changed into clay." Why is it not written "made" [instead of changed]? Because it [the verse] hints at the righteous who know how to create by means of the combination of letters, and they created a man by means of the *Sefer Yezirah*, but he was not similar to the man created by God in his wisdom . . ."<sup>18</sup>

In this passage letter combination is used to create a golem, which in turn causes the resurrection of the dead. The word "seal" refers to the letters of the tetragrammaton "sealing" the six directions in SY15.<sup>19</sup> The sealing in SY15 completes the creation of the six directions: North, South, East, West, up, and down. This is the origin of space, and later, with the creation of the constellations, the *Sefer Yetsirah* (SY) narrates that of time. If the seal is changed to clay, time is unmade. Similarly, if the seal is changed to clay, it is also transformed to the primal matter from which humans are made. It is also the material from which the golem is made, and transforming the seal to clay allows people to reenact the divine creation process. It is constructed from clay as permutations of the tetragrammaton are recited over it, just as the letters are combined to seal the six directions of the universe.

Here too, the author is careful to distinguish this sort of creation from the first, divine creation. Because of the nature of the letters in the text, they are either part of the divine, or divine artifacts, so that those permuting the letters use God to change the nature of the physical world. This process is ritualized when they animate earth with the divine name. It is presented outright as a method for bringing about the resurrection of the dead. In this, the construction of the golem mimes the resurrection of the dead, enacting the script provided by the Hebrew Bible in order to bring it about.

The later writings of R. Aharon Berakhiah of Modena's sixteenth-century *Ma'avar Yabok* (The Ford of the River Yabok) also show the link between the "dance" of golem making and the dance occurring in the afterlife. It provides another example of preenaction of the resurrection of the dead. In other commentaries on the SY,<sup>20</sup> the operator is instructed

to circumambulate the inert form of the golem to animate, and to reverse the circumambulation to return it to its inanimate form. This action is called a *makhol*, or a dance. R. Aharon links that dance to the one performed in the afterlife, in the Garden of Eden:

And the secret of this going around is in the form [*dugma*] of that dance [*hola*] that God will prepare for the righteous in the Garden of Eden, since then the Maiden of Israel will be delighted, in that dance [*makhol*].<sup>21</sup>

The secret, it seems, is one of sympathetic magic. The golem-making dance, performed below, will prepare the righteous for the one performed in the afterlife.

Similarly, in Abulafia's thirteenth-century *Hayyei Olam haBa* (Life of the World to Come), he discusses the creation of the golem in messianic terms. The golem-making ritual requires the recitation of permuted divine names. Abulafia provides five permissible reasons for reciting the divine name. Golem making corresponds to the fifth reason: "the fifth intention is to write and learn signs of wonders, to change the parts of nature in the hour of need, as God commanded it to you."<sup>22</sup> Here letter permutation physically alters the created world, in "the time of need." Moreover, this is viewed as a command. As such, the commentaries assert the significance of the individual steps of the golem-making ritual, letter combination, and the "dance." The golem ritual employs letters combination to change the structure of the cosmos. The "dance" preenacts the resurrection of the dead and therefore works toward it according to the principle of sympathetic magic. Therefore, the commentaries show that the combination of letters can change the structure of the physical world. And while scholars have not emphasized this function, these changes are, first, considered obligatory, and second, messianic in their aim.

## **II. The Golem in the Diagram: Sources, Ritual Instructions, Explanations**

Many of these commentaries contain diagrams as well, which either explain individual steps in the recipes or posit the efficacy of those steps. The recipes generally contain instructions for two different sorts of letter manipulation. This is because all of the methods require the recitation of two different sets of letter combinations. The first is the combination of the 22 letters of the alphabet, as described in SY18–21; the second is the permutation of the letters of the four-letter divine names, best described in SY15. Combination refers to the pairing of each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, one with the other, as described in SY18–21. The

permutation operation refers to the rearrangement of the letters of two four-letter divine names, YHVV and AHYH. The first set of combinations creates the body of the golem, and the second set of permutations creates its soul. It is possible to find diagrams of each; however, diagrams of the permutations of the divine names far outnumber those of the letter wheels or walls because so many manuscripts contain the first few combinations in SY21, thus showing a pattern that the reader can discern and then repeat.

I focus here on three sorts of golem-making diagrams. There are cosmological diagrams, alphabetic charts and wheels, and volvelles showing permutations of the divine name (accompanied by astrological words or images). The cosmological diagrams do not show the steps of the ritual, but instead they work to theorize its efficacy. The alphabetic wheel diagrams are aimed at showing how to combine letters. The volvelles show how the permutation of the divine names affects the cosmos. The diagrams generally work to situate the ritual process in the operating cosmology of the users and their understanding of the teleology of the text.

The cosmological diagrams depict the planets and stars and the *T'li*, and they work to ground the power of the letters in these elements. Some illustrate the passage describing the powerful role of the *T'li* in SY59, while others focus on the astrological correspondences of the 12-group described in SY52–54. The cosmological diagrams of SY59 show the power of the *T'li*, and they depict a model of the cosmos, seven planets and twelve constellations, with an *ourobouros* representing the *T'li* at the center. This just precedes Abraham's successful creation in SY61. SY59 discusses the power of the *T'li* over the constellations, and it maps together various groups of 1, 3, 7, and 12. SY59 theorizes the power of the letters to create by grounding them in forces widely considered to drive the course of events. The diagrams illustrating SY52–54 focus on correspondences within the smaller unit of the 12-group, but they are often more anthropologically focused, correlating each of the 12 letters to one of the constellations and to various human experiences and personality types.

The letter wheels come from Abulafian commentaries on the SY, and they interpret SY18–21 and SY15. These theorize the emergence of the divine names from the 22 letters of the alphabet, and they show the combinations necessary for creating the golem. The letter wheels illustrate the instructions supplied by the commentaries.

The volvelles are based in SY15 and SY59. In SY15 each of the six directions is sealed with one permutation of the letters YVH, the three letters comprising the tetragrammaton. These are the same letters that are later permuted in the second step of the creation of the golem, and



so these diagrams show the role of the divine name in restructuring and reconstructing the universe. They ground the process in the operation of the cosmos as described in SY59. These diagrams accompany commentary discussing the reasons for permuting letters and the effects of doing so, as do the diagram inscriptions. These diagrams, therefore, act to theorize that power. Thus, the diagrams of SY15 introduce the instruments to be used in the making of the golem, grounded in SY59 to show how they work.

### Sources

There are several important sources for the golem-making diagrams. As discussed above, the ones analyzed here include the Pseudo-Saadya Commentary, Abraham Abulafia's *Hayyei Olam HaBa* and *Tehilat Yetsirah*, and the Commentary of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi. The diagrams appearing in these commentaries are among the most common diagrams of the SY tradition as a whole. Five diagrams are analyzed here. First is a cosmological model of the heavens with the seven planets, the twelve constellations, and the *T'li* in the middle. This diagram typically accompanies the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary on SY59. This is analyzed first because it theorizes the relationship between the letters and the planets and constellations. Second is a set of Abulafian letter wheels representing combinations of the 72-letter divine name. These conventionally accompany Abraham Abulafia's *Hayyei Olam Ha Ba*, and *Tehilat Yetsirah*. Third and fourth are a pair of diagrams accompanying the Commentary of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi (known as the Pseudo-Rabad). The first accompanies commentary on SY54, and it is a wheel-shaped diagram of the twelve simple letters and the objects created with them. The second is a volvelle with permutations of the tetragrammaton and the rotations of the constellations of *Kimah* and *Kesil*. The diagrams model the cosmos and the mode of action on it. The glosses sometimes explain what to do, but more often they explain the intended results of the ritual and why it matters. Finally, these last two are compared to the working volvelle of SY Mantua, the 1562 editio princeps of the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*.

#### II. a. The Pseudo-Saadya Commentary

Scholars believe that the Pseudo-Saadya commentary was produced by an anonymous member of the Special Cherub School in Ashkenaz in the second half of the twelfth century.<sup>23</sup> The text is first cited in early thirteenth-century works. Elhanan ben Yakar (London, 13th c.) quoted it in a commentary he wrote at the beginning of the thirteenth century,<sup>24</sup>

hence the twelfth-century date. The main themes of the commentary include letter magic, golem making, and astrology in the SY. The Pseudo-Saadyan commentary aims to integrate the SY and its attendant practices with the central Jewish narratives of Torah, Talmud, and Midrash, completely ignoring the differences among them.<sup>25</sup> The commentary generates meaning by juxtaposition rather than by argumentation, and by analogy, much like the SY. It is important because it is relatively early, composed in the twelfth century, and it makes a strong statement about the connection between letter combination, astrology, golem making, and messianism. It was widely quoted in other commentaries, and in this respect it was apparently well known. Therefore it provides a precedent for the others to follow.

The commentary works to integrate the narratives of the SY and its attendant ritual practices with established Jewish discourse by reinterpreting the salvific function of the letter-combination ritual. The Pseudo-Saadya uses analogy to interpret golem making in light of Jewish narratives about the messianic period, including those concerning the cessation of time and the resurrection of the dead. He begins with the idea that the power of the letters is embedded in the stars. The next step is tying letter combination to manipulating and eventually repairing the constellations. He draws upon Midrashic and Talmudic traditions that tie the motions of the heavens to the progression of time and the cessation of their motion to the end of time. The third step is likening the various stages of the golem-creation ritual to the stages of the resurrection of the dead. In this way he aligns the various components of the golem-making ritual with canonical descriptions of the resurrection.

This goal is apparent from the start. The opening paragraph of the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary describes creation of the golem, working to validate the ritual by claiming ancient authorities performed it, first Abraham and Shem, and then Jeremiah and Ben Sira.<sup>26</sup> Next it discusses the principles of creation, commenting on the first verse of the SY. The writer returns to the theme of golem making throughout, recounting other instances as follows:

R. Saadyah explained that the dance (*makhol*) means that when someone goes as in a dance (movement) when he wants to create and it [the creature] turns to its primal state by the backwards dance. And I heard that Ibn Ezra created a creature in the presence of R. Tam and said: See what [power] God gave to the holy letters; and he said "Turn backwards and it turned to its primal state . . ." There is no speech but the syllables [containing] the letters AH AY AV and they emerge from the letters HVY, which

are the soul as we explained above. This is why they and their pronunciation are fraught by God with power to make a formation [*yezur*] and give it [that is to the golem] vitality [*hiyyut*] and soul [*neshamah*].<sup>27</sup>

The Pseudo-Saadyan commentary recounts the creation of the golem by several important commentators on the SY, linking it to the power of the letters. Recounting other tales of golem making serves to grant authority to the endeavor itself, and to establish of the validity of the instructions it offers.

This passage also explains the creative power of the three letters of the divine name. It expresses the idea that these three letters form the souls of the other letters. Idel shows that the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary cited above breaks down the golem-creation ritual into two separate letter-combination steps: the first by the combination of the regular letters of the alphabet, and the second by the combination of the letters of the divine names. These correspond to two stages of creation: the formation of their limbs and their animation, and the infusion of the soul into the golem.<sup>28</sup> In the construction of the golem, the operators permute the three letters of the tetragrammaton (*Heh* repeats in the four-letter name, YHVVH, and so it is counted once), and those letters that are said to “emerge” from it. It is the letters of the divine name, then, that constitute the soul of the creature. Thus their relationship to the other letters is analogous to their function in the body of the golem. The divine names are the souls of the other letters construed as the body of the alphabet, so in the body of the golem, the letters of the divine name infuse its soul while the other letters create its body. This explains the prevalence of the divine-name charts and volvelles in other works, as well as their link to golem making. The volvelles show the proper combination of these letters mapped onto the cosmological models to which they are linked. These diagrams show the link between the planets and the letters, and the commentary explains the end goal of combining the letters.

The passage quoted above shows a belief that the letters used to create a golem act as a two-way street, just as in the SY. The Pseudo-Saadya works to integrate these notions of effective action into integrally Jewish conceptions of efficacy. In the SY and in this commentary, the letters’ power is embedded in the constellations, but they can also be used to modify the constellations and in so doing, to influence human destiny. According to the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary, the letters create planets, but the planets are construed as forces “intervening between the letters of alphabet, source of everything, including human life and fate.”<sup>29</sup> Free will exists because “The constellation’s decree can be changed by God.”<sup>30</sup> This doctrine of determinism is modified by

the power of human ritual action. In the text, letter combination is an effective ritual, capable of changing God's will and therefore the course of the stars. In this way, even though the power of the stars intervenes in that of the letters, the letters can in turn affect the course of the stars. The Pseudo-Saadya believes that the divine will can be changed by prayer and repentance. According to him, since the stars are the agents of human destiny, letter combination and prayer and repentance are both effective in changing the course of the stars. This serves to situate combinatory practices in relation to previously recognized integral Jewish notions of efficacy.

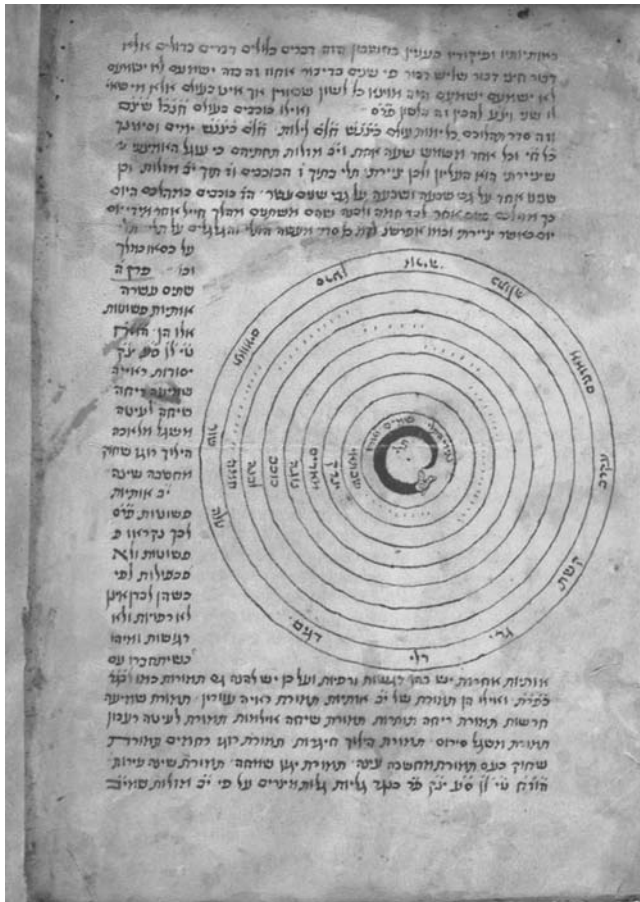


Figure 6.1 JTS 1895, Folio 17b

### Manuscripts

This diagram comes from JTS 1895 (fol. 17b), a fourteenth-century Spanish manuscript containing the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary on the SY. The diagram appears thrice more in the materials I have examined, including MS Harley 5510 (fol. 233b), in Hebrew University Manuscript 7, 1343–1344, Private collection (fol. 39b),<sup>31</sup> and in the 1562 Mantua editio princeps of the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*. However, the appearance of the diagram in the editio princeps indicates its conventionality; if it appears in the earlier copies of the commentary and in the first printed edition, it was probably well integrated into the manuscript tradition. The text in the printed book follows that of the manuscript, and there are very few variations.

### Verse

This diagram comments on verse 59, and it appears on the second-to-last folio of the manuscript, giving it an important place in the interpretation of the work. Verse 59 reads:

There is a law of three, and seven and twelve. They are present in the *T'li*, the celestial sphere, and the heart. The *T'li* in the universe is like a king on his throne; the celestial sphere in the year is like a king in his province; the heart in mankind is like a king at war.<sup>32</sup>

As discussed above, SY59 occurs close to the latch of the ring composition. As such it synthesizes the systems previously articulated in the work. It adds the figure of the *T'li*, or the dragon, and this is the synthetic element. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *T'li* orders the other systems and moves the cosmos.<sup>33</sup>

The accompanying text in the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary shows that the diagram is practical. It states that the diagram is meant to show how permuting letters can be used for “turning the face” or changing the course of the constellations, each associated with a particular quality or action. It shows cosmological elements associated with the 12 letters, their order, their orbits, the relations between them, and how they are governed. It consists of ten rings in total, with nine rings around the graphic image of the *T'li* at the center. Counting the *T'li* as a ring, that group totals ten. The *T'li* is labeled and then glossed. The gloss reads: “The *T'li* rules over the heavens and the earth.” The next seven rings show the planets, while the outermost tenth ring depicts the constellations, divided into 12 equal sections without the aid of lines. Linking them all is a series of groups of dots, among the planetary section, spiraling outward and linking the three

sections. The order is hierarchical: the *T'li* rules the planets, the planets rule the constellations, and the constellations control human fate. The letters affect the whole chain of command, as they can be used to alter the aspect of the constellations influencing humans. The letters are described in the text and implied but not depicted in the diagram.

### Numbers and Semantics

The diagram depicts three different sets of elements. These are the twelve constellations, the seven planets, and the *T'li*. The ten *sefirot* are implied by the ten-ring structure of the whole. Each of these sets of elements is read in a different direction. In the center, the snake chases its tail from right to left, moving in the same direction as the text. In reading the text, the viewer navigates half the circle. The next seven rings are read from the center out. They begin just left of center, and we can read them as a list from top to bottom. Finally, the outer ring is oriented differently, as the words may be read from the outside in, no matter from what angle the viewer approaches. Each of these represents one of the three number groups of the SY: the seven, the ten, and the twelve. The three different groups themselves represent the three-group of the work. The single object, the *T'li* at the center of the diagram, unifies all the other numeric systems—the seven, the twelve, and the three groups. The groups of dots act as a macro orientation. They are staggered to circumnavigate the center seven rings, and because they do not extend to the inner or outer circles, they show the connection of all three modes of orienting the viewer—the semicircumnavigation of the center circle, the center-out reading of the middle seven rings, and outward-in reading necessitated by the positioning of the words in the outer circle.<sup>34</sup>

The physical features of the manuscript are helpful in understanding how the diagram works. The positioning of the dots suggests that the diagram was used for a kind calculation or measurement, requiring that its user turn or manipulate the page, or perhaps match it up with some other diagram. The dots might have been used as a guide.

Another of its physical features suggesting practical use is the slice along the left side of the page. This seems to show that the diagram has been cut out of the book and glued back into it. However, since the book has been rebound, we find the same slices on every page. Just the same, there are also three horizontal creases in this page, and none of these appear on the other pages of the book. This leaves two possibilities: the page was cut out, carried around, and put back into the book, or, it was added later, when the book was rebound. Because the diagram is set into the text and not on an otherwise blank page, because that text is in the

same hand as that of the previous and the subsequent pages, and because the text on the diagram page continues that which appears on the previous page, it is clear that the page was indeed cut out and then replaced. The content demonstrates this as well. The diagram was cut out, folded in fourths, and possibly carried around for a practical purpose that may have required the use of another diagram or image.

### **Text**

The accompanying commentary explains the purpose of the diagram. The first line reads: "His letters and his carving are like an answer in this design." The diagram shows how the cosmos works, what it means, and how to change it. Specifically, it expresses the point of view that the letters carved out by God in the first part of the SY may, if examined properly, provide insight into the workings of the divine. This knowledge is an answer. But what is the question?

The text accompanying the diagram on folio 17b is divided into three thematic units: the first explains the power of the letters; the second portion is written in the first person, describing the order of the diagram; and the third explains how letter permutation changes the course of events by listing the two aspects of each of the seven double letters, along with the qualities of the twelve constellations. Thus, the diagram answers the question of the use of the diagram. Its purpose is to explain how to use the letters to influence the planets and in so doing to change the structure of the cosmos and bring about the coming of the messianic period.

### **The Translation: Folios 17b–18a**

#### ***Section A.***

His letters and his carving are like an answer in this design. Crowned things, great things, only it is an utterance of grace, a mighty utterance, a twofold utterance within an utterance, one holding fast to the other. He will listen to his people, not listen to his people, not listen to his people, listen to his people. That was the source of all language, that is like a base, surely a reed [for writing] in this world, but only for one who moves [letters], repeating and answering him, to prepare this by dividing language.

#### ***Section B.***

And these are the stars in the world [abbrev] and this is the order in which they will orbit. All the seasons in the world, all the nights, all the days,

and all that is living is your sign. And each one of the sun's hours, and each one of the twelve constellations is on the back of the other, because of the orbits passing between them. Thus I drew him who is most high and therefore I have drawn the *T'li* in the middle of the stars, and the seven [planets] in the middle of the twelve constellations, and so his one sign is on the back of seven, and seven on the back of twelve. It is as though the stars are from the orbit of the day, so that from one single orbit, they heat up, and they turn his face so that they change from the surrounding orbit whatever day it is, like the day I drew this. I will explain it clearly, to take the entire order of actions of the *T'li*, and the circuits of *T'li*. A *T'li* on his throne is like a king on his throne.

### **Section C.**

Verse H: Twelve simple letters follow here: behold, *Heh Vav Zayin Het Tet Yud Lamed Nun Samech Ayin Tzadi Kuf*. Their basis is seeing, hearing, smelling, talking, eating, sexual intercourse, action, walking, anger, laughter, thought, and sleep. Twelve simple letters, and so they are called by Him, and not doubles. According to what is here neither cure nor harm is possible on its own, nevertheless if they will gather together different letters, there is in them harm and cure. And therefore, here there are also permutations like BGDCFRT. These are the permutations of the twelve letters, permutations of smelling with those who cannot smell, permutations of hearing with deafness, permutations of talking with holding back, permutations of satiation with desire, permutations of sexual intercourse with impotence, permutations of walking with lameness, permutations of anger with mercy, permutations of laughter with grief, permutations of thought with pleasurable gaze, permutations of sleep with watchfulness. Twelve letters in different permutations toward uncovering of the exile in Egypt, according to the twelve constellations that are from the twelve.

### **Section A: The Power of the Letters**

This section treats the letters as microcosm; they represent the whole. At the same time, they also possess power to act upon the whole. In this way they depict the two-way relation between microcosm and macrocosm, as celestial powers are embedded in them, and as they are able to manipulate those forces. In acting as “an answer in this design,” they provide clues about the workings of the divine, much as they function as a “sign for the matter” in SY20 and 21. Here “crowned” letters serve as prayer, described as an “utterance of grace,” gaining God’s attention, who will then decide whether to “listen to his people” or “not listen to his people.” The letters, here, are “a reed for writing in this world” but only for “one who moves letters.” Letter combination serves to “prepare” or facilitate this change. In



this way, creation and change are conceptualized as writing, and the person who performs letter combination can achieve this while others cannot.

### ***Section B: The Purpose of the Diagram***

This section is written in the first person, and it explains the purpose of the diagram. It continues to describe the order of the heavens while developing concepts about the relation between microcosm and macrocosm. All the stars, and all their cycles signify their creator:

And these are the stars in the world [abbrev], and this is the order in which they will move (travel, orbit), all the seasons in the world, all the nights, all the days, and all that is living is your sign.<sup>35</sup>

Thus the diagram represents the iconicity of the cosmos and the power inherent in it. The diagram, a representation of the stars, is also a sign for their iconic function.

The text emphasizes human influence on the stars. Through letter permutation, operators gain the power to “turn his face” so that constellations change from their usual orbit. The diagram plays a pivotal role. The author asserts its efficacy when he claims that letter permutation can “turn his face so that they change . . . like the day I drew this.” Finally the author quotes the SY to assert the powerful role of the *T’li* in this process: “A *T’li* on his throne is like a king on his throne.”<sup>36</sup> This letter combination influences the *T’li*, which holds the power to change the cosmos.

### ***Section C: Letters, Constellations, Messianism***

This section focuses on the twelve constellations, rooting their power in the seven planets. It names the actions associated with the twelve constellations. It describes how letters can be manipulated to change planetary effects on individuals as well as to calculate the time of the end of the exile and speed the coming of the messiah. The writer states:

According to what is here neither cure nor harm are possible on its own, nevertheless if they will gather together different letters, there is in them harm and cure.<sup>37</sup>

Here, then, the letters are necessary to effect change. The twelve letters are presented as the means for ending the exile, or the unredeemed state: “Twelve letters in different permutations against uncovering of the exile in Egypt, according to the twelve constellations that are from the

twelve.” It is probably aimed at calculating the time of the redemption. This is often described as a second Exodus.<sup>38</sup> Thus, this period is figured as “the exile in Egypt,” while uncovering the period may refer to calculating its end, but more likely, to bringing it about. This was not uncommon. In fact, in the early Middle Ages the desire to know the date of the redemption was the driving force behind the development of the Jewish calendar.<sup>39</sup> The permutation of letters to hasten it, however, was specific to this textual tradition and it shows the author’s commitment in integrating the ritual practices of the SY with Biblical narrative.

This diagram and its commentary together depict and exemplify the relation of the microcosm to the macrocosm, and together they assert the power of letter combination. In them letter combination serves to change the fate of individuals, but more importantly, that of Israel as a whole. Letter combination is effective, yet is it likened to prayer, which is a form of integral magic. In other words, this is an institutionally sanctioned mode of thaumaturgy. The letters possess the power to change the course of the heavens. This is justified in terms of astrological doctrines of free will. According to the doctrine of free will embraced by the writer of this text, the stars determine the fate of individuals, but they are set in motion by God, who can change their course if moved to do so. Traditionally this was done by prayer, but here letter combination and permutation can also alter the set course of the heavens. Thus, the effective practices of the SY are assimilated to those considered integral to Judaism and described within its canonical sources.

## II. b. Abraham Abulafia

Abraham Abulafia, born in Saragossa, Spain, and lived from 1240–1292. Between 1271 and 1291, he composed nearly 50 works. The best known are his commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, and his mystical handbooks, which include: *Hayyei Olam haBa* (Life in the World to Come), *Or Sekhel* (Light of Wisdom), *Otzar Eden HaGanuz* (Secrets of the Garden of Eden), and *Sefer HaHeshek* (Book of Desire). Abulafia described his own belief system as prophetic kabbalah and a kabbalah of names.

Prophetic kabbalah refers to the end goal of this mystical path—the attainment of prophecy, or union with the divine. A kabbalah of names was the avenue to this union. Letter combination was its key technology for achieving prophecy, as well as for creation as in the SY. According to Abulafian thought, prophecy is hewn out of letters just as letters are hewn out in the SY.<sup>40</sup> Letter combination played two roles in Abulafia’s messianism: first it altered the individual, making him capable of receiving prophecy.<sup>41</sup> According to this method, “the mystic variously chants, writes, and silently meditates on the letter combinations, reconstituting

Torah and uncovering its divine core. This radical linguistic transformation creates a parallel transformation of the adept's consciousness."<sup>42</sup> Second, it altered the physical world. In Abulafia's thought, the human soul and the cosmos were one entity, structurally identical and represented by the same image. "Abulafia's vision of a mandala-like sphere inscribed with a ladder was at once a cosmogrammaton (an image revealing the structure of the world) and a psychogrammaton, disclosing the essential self."<sup>43</sup> The golem-creation ritual was a part of the practice of attaining prophecy and altering the physical world.

Some Abulafian texts contain golem recipes. They describe a letter combination recitation ritual that is situated in the six steps outlined in the SY. One of these texts is *Tehilat ha-Yetsirah* (Beginning of Formation).<sup>44</sup> In this passage from it, the operator is instructed to

"become acquainted with the quality of the weight," the combination, and the variation. He should be acquainted with the construction of the alphabets, the 231 gates of the alphabets . . . and he has to be acquainted with all the combinations of the letters, until all the gates will be completed. And he shall take dust and flour, turn the wheel in the middle, and begin to combine until the two hundred and thirty-one gates are computed, and he will receive the influx of wisdom. When he receives the influx, let him then recite speedily the circle of velocity, which is the divine spirit.<sup>45</sup>

The instructions contain several steps for formation, using the terms outlined in the formula elaborated in SY17–18, with the exception of carving. Abulafia instructs the operator to know, weigh, combine, form, and recite. These steps echo the formulae elaborated in SY17–18, though in the Abulafian text the operator is not instructed to "carve" but instead to "recite." Elsewhere (cf. below), the operator is instructed to "recite with one breath" evoking the SY's instruction to "carve out with breath."<sup>46</sup> Once it has situated these instructions, it focuses on the process of recitation and its relation to formation, as shown in the 24-letter circle diagrams.

### ***Manuscript Sources***

The letter-wheel diagrams reflect the processes described above. They appear in the same MSS analyzed in [chapter 4](#), among others. These are the two thirteenth-century manuscripts, MS Parma 1390, made in Italy in 1286, and BN 763, also Italian, made in 1284. Another sixteenth-century manuscript containing these wheels is Vatican—Biblioteca

Apostolica ebr. MS 441/Milan ADX 52. In MS Parma 1390, the diagrams occur on folios 91b–92a, immediately following the golem recipe identified by Idel, in *Golem*. In BN 763, they appear in the same position on folios 27a–29a. The diagrams accompany a manuscript identified in three separate sources as a commentary on the SY by Joseph ben Uziel.<sup>47</sup> BN 763, folio 29b, has the text “copied by Yonatan, son of Aviezer, Cohen, 5044, (1284) village of Pararshah.” Scholars are generally unsure of the attribution, and in light of the textual evidence (or lack thereof), so am I. However, because of its thematic relationship to Abulafia’s *Hayyei Olam Ha’ba*, a treatise on the 72-letter divine name, Idel tentatively identifies this work as part of Abulafia’s treatise.<sup>48</sup> It is also worth noting that the images appearing in this manuscript are now commonly included in the printed editions of *Hayyei Olam ha Ba*,<sup>49</sup> with differences in the number of letter wheels depicted based on their interpretation of the SY.<sup>50</sup>

The manuscripts can shed some light on the meaning of the wheels and the incantation accompanying them. According to BN 763, there are three basic combinations of letters, whose recitation is related to the head (*rosh*), the body (*tokhah*), and finally the end (*sof*). The letters appear in groups of three, and these three terms each refer to one of the three letters in the combination. The first letter is the head, the second the middle, and the third the end. Idel has translated relevant passages from both MS Parma 1390 and BN 763. There is no need to duplicate his work, so I include them below.

In this passage, the writer describes the process of constructing a golem<sup>51</sup> from letter wheels:

[it] is built up in a solid manner as it is designed beforehand in the twenty-four circles, and in its proper vocalization, in order to receive the influx of wisdom, and the act of formation too. The end of the end aims to create a creature and to recite on each and every thing. And the essential thing is to be acquainted with the pronunciation of its recitation since every letter is to be recited loudly in one breath as the spirit of man goes out the person who recites. He shall recite in a remote and pure place, when there is no one there, and he will succeed.”<sup>52</sup>

In this part of the treatise he mentions the 24 circles, and in the diagram below they are provided. There are 24 of them in each manuscript considered here, numbered accordingly, and with incantations relating to each letter permutation inscribed in the periphery of each.<sup>53</sup>

These manuscripts contain charts of the letters constituting the 72-letter divine name. Each chart contains 24 letter wheels. Each wheel is called a house, and it contains different combinations of nine letters,

divided into triads. This is a total of 72 letter triads. Thus each of the combinations of the three letters constitutes one letter of the 72-letter divine name. "What the divine name is, the author does not indicate; however it is obvious that the three-times-eight houses are 24 houses, namely 24 combinations of letters."<sup>54</sup> Taken altogether they add up to two hundred and sixteen, namely the equivalent of the Divine Name of 72 combinations of three letters each."<sup>55</sup> The houses are significant, as they recall the houses of SY40, answering the question: "How did he combine them?" by explaining that "two stones build two houses, three build six houses, four build twenty-four houses . . ." The text then instructs the reader "from here go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and the eye cannot see, and what the ear cannot hear."<sup>56</sup> Thus the houses are created in response to the imperative in the SY, to "go out and ponder."

The 24 houses are divided into three groups, each of which is used to form a different part of the creature. Abulafia explains the process of reciting the letters in the 24 houses:

and when he begins to blow on his first spoonful, he should recite loudly a letter of the divine name with one breath, until his spirit will go out (i.e., it will be exhausted by his breathing) his face being turned to the earth. And he shall begin with the head of the head, until he will end the first eight houses, in order to preserve the head. And he shall recite the second eight houses, to preserve the body, according to the order. And he shall recite the eight houses of the third order [in order to] preserve the end and the spirit. And then an image will emerge.<sup>57</sup>

Thus each triad recited is understood as a letter of the divine name. There are three orders of letters, just as there are three distinct letters in the tetragrammaton (excluding the second *heh*). The recitation of these three orders, letter by letter, works to form first the head, then the body, and then the spirit of the golem. The combination has a telling effect upon the reciter. His face is "turned to earth." This is the raw material for the first creation, and for the creation of the golem. Here, the creator is himself transformed to resemble that raw material.

Each of these 24 circles has an incantation written in its outer ring, describing the creation of the parts of the golem: the head, middle, and end. The incantations are drawn from SY6, which reads: "Their end is fixed in their beginning and their beginning in their end as the flame is bound to the burning coal."<sup>58</sup> They develop the cyclical imagery of this verse as they speak of the purpose of letter combination. The incantations differ between houses, but they share a vocabulary and the repetitive, sonorous mode of expression associated with incantations.

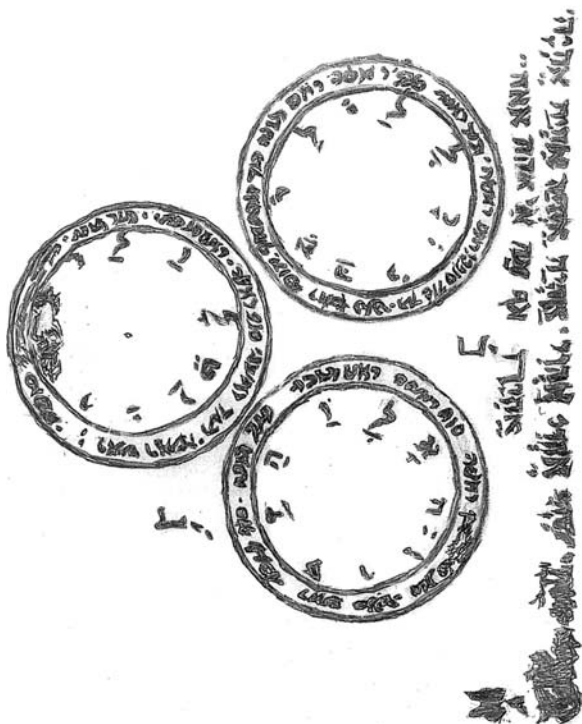


Figure 6.2 MS Parma 1390, Folio 91b.



Figure 6.3 BN763, Folio 28b

BN 763 reads as follows:

A head inside an end, inside an inside of a head, finally (the end of an end of) an end, inside an end is a head, finally (at the end of an end).

MS Parma 1390 *Heh*

A head at the end. The end of his head in the middle an end. Inside a head, he will make an end, inside, he will make a head.

The first inscription designates the creation of the head with the first group of eight houses. The second describes the creation of the middle, so that they refer to different stages in creation. They are written for recitation.

These diagrams are most useful in showing the practical application of the text. They show the letter combinations to be recited, in their correct order, as well as an incantation articulating the relationship of each of the three letters to its correspondent part of the golem in each combination. The text adds that it is forbidden to use it to create, but permissible only to use it to understand and teach.<sup>59</sup> While Abulafia warns the reader against actually performing these operations, the diagrams send quite a different message, providing clear instructions in a usable form. He believes that letter combination should be used for “rearranging the parts of nature in the hour of need.” And, he sees the process of combination transforming the user himself, so that he undergoes the creation as well. As such, these instructions are aimed at transforming both the user and the material world.

## II. c. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi: The Pseudo-Rabad

Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi was active in Spain during the late thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>60</sup> He was the author of a commentary on *Genesis Rabba* as well as this commentary on the SY. His commentary is one of the best-diagrammed of all,<sup>61</sup> with an unusually large number of extant manuscripts. His work is important for several reasons. First, he develops the role of the *sefirot* in the creation of the golem, assigning to different *sefirot* the roles of creation and destruction (*Hesed* and *Gevurah* respectively). This commentary was also key to the development of medieval ideas about metempsychosis, and it quickly “gained a widespread reputation”<sup>62</sup> in this regard. These ideas were based in conceptions of cosmic cycles and circular time, held in common with and probably taken from Nahmanides (1194–1270).<sup>63</sup> They were influenced by Neoplatonism, positing a cyclical movement of ascent and descent from form to form. For the present purposes this is an important text because of the way in which it links letter magic, astrology, and messianism. And because

it was so frequently copied, it is clear that this text was valued and its ideas accepted.

This section examines two diagrams, one illustrating the content of SY54, and the other, SY59. Both explicitly link the letters of the tetragrammaton to astrological elements, as the first is a wheel chart showing them with all the other 12-groups in the SY, while the second is a volvelle linking the tetragrammaton to constellations particularly important to astrological narratives of messianism. The first is anthropologically focused, and the second cosmologically focused. The first synthesizes earlier sections of the SY describing the 12 simple letters and their creations in the three different realms of the universe, the year, and the soul. Earlier verses associate the 12 simple letters with body parts, with actions, with the 12 diagonal (directional) lines, and with categories of human experience. Some of these categories appear in the SY, and others are added to it by the commentators. In this way it fulfills an integrative function, associating other groups of 12 with the ones listed in the SY, and more importantly, with the 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton.

The first and second diagrams both contain the 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton, so that they are companion pieces, with one focusing distinctly on the sublunar realm and the effects of astrology upon human destiny, and the second upon the creative power of the tetragrammaton, for golem making and for messianic action. These two diagrams together show the interconnectedness of the two functions of astrology in this work: the first is focused on the destiny of the individual, and it demonstrates “the theory of “opportunities,” or *katarxai*, which teaches the opportune moment to undertake an action.”<sup>64</sup> The second focuses on human use of the letters to change the physical and as a result the metaphysical world. Hence we have two models of astrology: top-down as the stars affect people, and bottom-up as people affect the stars.

### Manuscripts

Most manuscripts of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi’s commentaries contain diagrams, and of those that do, all include these two. Other manuscripts that have these diagrams include JTS 1884, folios 68 and 74 (Spanish, 14th c.; Italian, 15th c.), JTS 2159 folios 30 and 35 (Oriental, 15th c.), JTS 2203 *Or Zarua* (African, 15th c.), MS Vatican 291, *Biblio Apostolica* (Italian, early 14th c.), catalogued as “*Liber Jetzira ist creationi cum commentario*,” fourteenth century, and the SY Mantua *editio princeps*, 1562. There are others, but this list communicates the wide geographical range of manuscripts’ production, as well as their fourteenth–fifteenth-century dating. This list of sources is by no means comprehensive, but it



is enough to convey the idea that these diagrams were conventional. This is confirmed insofar as the diagram appears in the 1562 Mantua editio princeps of the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*. The diagrams are also included in subsequent printed copies including those produced presently. In fact, most copies of this commentary contain a full repertoire of diagrams, so that they are not separable from the text.

While most of the manuscripts feature diagrams conventional to the commentary, two of the manuscripts have remarkable features. The first is JTS 1884, which contains an inscription below the second diagram, presumably by the scribe, as it is written in the same hand. The second is SY Mantua 1562, the first printed edition of all three versions of the SY and its major commentaries. This book has a remarkable diagram, a working volvelle with moving parts that is useful in understanding some of the earlier materials. JTS 2203 also has a volvelle, but it is ripped. Vatican 291 (fol. 100b) contains a complete volvelle as well. Both of these show that JTS 1884 is a picture of a working volvelle, without the moving parts. Thus the analysis will focus on JTS 1884, supported by SY Mantua 1562.

### JTS 1884 Folio 68a

This diagram accompanies verses 52–54 of the SY. SY52 appears in the long and in the Saadyan versions, but not in the short version. Below is a selection from the SY:

52:1 He made *Heh* rule, and bound it to a crown and formed with it Aries in the universe, *Nisan* in the year, and the liver in mankind.

52:2 He made *Waw* rule, bound it to a crown, and formed with it Taurus in the universe, *Iyyar* in the year, and the gall in mankind.<sup>65</sup>

54:1: There was formed with *Heh* these: Aries, Nisan, the liver, sight, and blindness.

54:2: There was formed with *Waw* these: Taurus, *Iyyar*, the gall, hearing and deafness...

Verses 52–54 sum up the groupings of 12 and synthesize them.

### Diagram

#### Verse: SY52–54

The diagram consists of six concentric rings with the tetragrammaton and the word *shemesh*, meaning “sun,” in the center circle. The word *ydod*, or “spark,” is substituted for the tetragrammaton in the Mantua editio princeps and other sixteenth-century copies. The list below describes each of the six rings of the diagram in order from the center outwards.



**Figure 6.4** JTS 1884, Folio 68a

1. At the center of the diagram appear two words, the tetragrammaton, and *shemesh*, or “sun.” The word *shemesh* is not permuted and does not appear elsewhere in the diagram; it seems merely to label this realm. The tetragrammaton is shown in its 12 permutations at the outside of the diagram, as is the word *ydod*, or “spark,” in other diagrams in which it appears instead of *shemesh*. This means that the tetragrammaton connects the inner and outer rings. This in turn implies that all the objects and categories depicted inside the diagram are thought to be contained in the tetragrammaton.
2. The second ring contains the signs of the Zodiac, beginning with *Taleh*, or Aries, as is usual in the Hebrew tradition and in the text of the SY.
3. The third ring lists the twelve months in the year, beginning with *Nisan*, as on the calendar and in the text of the SY.
4. The fourth ring contains the names of the 12 tribes as follows: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, and Yosef. These do not appear in the text of the SY.
5. The fifth ring contains of a list of 12 categories of human experience: Life, Wealth, Family, Fathers, Sons, Sickness, Coupling (marital destiny), Death, Journey (travel), Royalty, Lover, and Enemy. Neither do these occur in the SY.
6. The outer ring consists of 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton. Some diagrams contain permutations of the word *Ydod*, or “spark,” as well.

### Analysis

The syntax of this diagram communicates as well as its substance. It is organized numerically, according to the category of the 12 in the SY. And it is also organized so that the outer ring manifests the “hidden” content of the inner one by showing the permutations of the inner term. As a result, all the content in-between is subordinated to and included within the central term. The diagram is integrative; it pulls groupings from the text of the SY such as the months of the year and the constellations of the zodiac, and it groups them with other sets of 12 used for anthropological purposes, such as the 12 brothers, the 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton, and 12 categories of human experience. It abstracts the category of the “twelve” from the SY, ignores the 12 letters upon which it is based, and fills it with other relevant sets of 12 for different purposes.

It appears to be a horoscope tool because the diagrammer includes terms and groupings that are common in horoscopes.<sup>66</sup> The names of the 12 brothers, associated with the constellations in the Zoharic tradition, act as “personality types,” while the categories of human experience—lover, enemy, travel, wealth, and so forth—seem to denote possible outcomes in the life of the person for whom the horoscope is drawn. These categories do not match the Yetsiratic categories called “the basis” of the 12 simple letters, life, sight, hearing, smelling, talking, eating, sexual intercourse, action, walking, anger, thought, and sleep. This, then, is a heuristic tool to show the influence of the heavens on individuals and to predict their fate. Rather than working to change the structure of the cosmos, it seems geared toward *katarxai*, which, once again, is aimed at learning the opportune moment to undertake an action.

### Folio 74

#### *Verse*

This diagram comments on SY59, as does the diagram from JTS 1895. As in the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary, Joseph’s commentary joins the astrological view with an explicitly magical one, and these texts and their diagrams include formulae and instructions for action.

#### *Diagram*

This diagram is a picture of a volvelle. As briefly defined above, a volvelle is a diagram with concentric and moveable parts, often used for calculation and action. Nonkabbalistic and nonmagical volvelles were often used to reckon the daylight hours, plot a calendar, calculate the phases of



**Figure 6.5** SY Mantua 1562, Page Yud Aleph

the moon, navigate the seas, or effect medical cures based on astral magic. They are working models. Each of these operates on the assumption that there is in fact a model for the workings of the universe. This is true whether it is a divine power, a series of divine powers channeled through the stars, or the laws of physics. They assume, too, that knowledge of that model, and the ability to adjust a course of action to conform to that model, will help to achieve a desired goal. Hence, they have moving parts for calculation and then action.

The volvelle above comes from the SY Mantua editio princeps, 1562, page Yud-Aleph. It clearly shows the construction of the volvelle and the moveability of its parts. It consists of two paper cutouts tied with a string to the printed base. The string is knotted in the front and the back, and anchored to a slightly larger paper disc on the reverse side of the page. With this sort of construction it was made to be used.

The volvelles accompanying Joseph's commentary on the SY also operate on these principles. However, the SY volvelles differ from many others in that the moving parts are not used for calculation, but to act on the cosmos via the combination of letters and names. This is due to the goals of the text, which describe creation through combination. By way of example, in the *Kuzari*, Yehuda Halevi compares the combinations of letters by means of the wheel, as indicated in the SY, to the emergence of "diversity in the universe by means of the sphere."<sup>67</sup> In his thought, the volvelle represents and embodies the processes of divine creation, and it shows the way for humans to emulate these divine actions and achieve similar effects. In the SY Mantua edition, this picture of a volvelle is turned into an operating one with moving pieces. The same is true of Vatican 291 (fol. 99b); however, in this case it is a different diagram of the divine names that appears as a volvelle.<sup>68</sup>

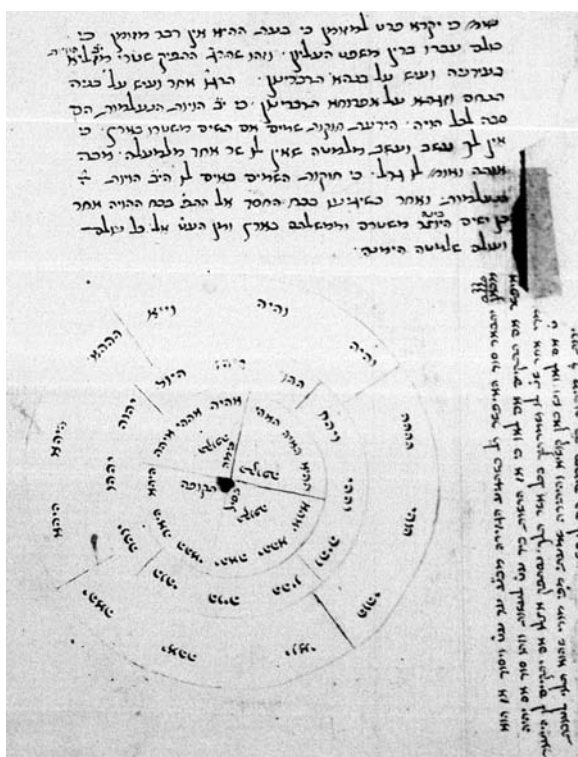


Figure 6.6 JTS 1884, Folio 74a.

This diagram consists of three concentric rings divided into four sections. Each of these contains three four-letter combinations, for a total of twelve combinations in each ring. These are permutations of the two traditional configurations of the four-letter divine name, the YHVV and YHAA. In its outer ring we find four sets of three combinations of YHAA. The second variation replaces the *Vav* of the tetragrammaton with the *Aleph* of the three mother letters of the SY.<sup>69</sup> In some traditions, the “true” primordial divine name consists entirely of vowels, and these are signified by the three mother letters. Therefore the *Aleph*, the first of the three mother letters, refers to that true and more powerful name.

The combinations follow:

1. YHAA, YHAA, VYHH; HVHV, HVHV, HHHH; VHVH, VHVH, VYAA; HHHH, HYHA, HYHA
2. VHYH, VHHY, VYHH; HHYV, HYHV, HYVH; YHVH, VHHV, VVHH; HVHY, HYVH, HHVY
3. YHAA, YHAA, YAAH; HHYA, HAYH, HAAH; AHYH, AHHY, AYHH; HYHA, HAAH, HAAH
4. Four quadrants of the inner ring: each quadrant contains astronomical terms as follows:
  - A. The upper-right quadrant of the inner ring reads *t'kufah* and *t'kufah*, meaning turn of the “cycle,” or of “time.”
  - B. The upper-left reads *Kesil*, here associated with the *T'li*.
  - C. The lower-left is the same as the upper right, reading *t'kufah* and *t'kufah*.
  - D. Finally, the lower-right reads *Kimah*.

In the first three rings, there is a pattern in the permutations of the divine names. The outer ring consists of the four sets of three permutations, and in each of the three four-letter combinations, two are duplicates and one appears only once in that set. In the next two rings, the permutations mirror one another with critical differences. The second ring permutes YHVH, while the third permutes AYHH. In every set but the second, the letter *Heh* appears in the same two positions in the permutations occurring in the second and third rings.

This diagram is a working model of the universe insofar as it has *Kimah* and *Kesil* turning the *t'kufah* (the celestial cycle, or time). It shows the cosmos as it is represented in SY59. The movement of the parts of the diagram represent the movement of those elements it depicts.

While the SY Mantua diagram has moving parts, the JTS 1884 diagram has an inscription explaining its function. The term “explaining”

is used loosely here; there are a great many abbreviations, and there are missing words, torn out of the text in key places so that it is difficult to fix a meaning for the inscription. It does provide some information just the same, referring to golem-making by directing the reader with terms like “making him exist” and “creating a spirit” through “speech, divided utterance, or the permutation of divine names.” The inscription follows:

### Diagram Inscription, Folio 74a

From here the secret possibility will be revealed: Whoever wants to learn, when you divide utterance,<sup>70</sup> the pillar of the earth,<sup>71</sup> and its foundation, is thus enabled if you will make him exist. If not, then the authority is in the hand, to act (literally, make or do) with the pillar of the earth. And this is the secret: if he will exist, [missing word]. It is more than enough, as it is said of him: (Genesis 28:15) “and I will keep you wherever you go.”<sup>72</sup> It is sufficient to him if he brings him into existence. The mission will [be fulfilled by the pillar of the earth] if not. Here is a difficulty and it is excessive: I heard this from the mouth of my teacher, that it depends on the yield [missing words] [of the] four dimensions of existence. With his great mercy you will create for them a soul.<sup>73</sup>

This inscription is cryptic at best, but there are a few biblical passages that can help make sense of it. The “pillar of the earth” plays an important role in Hebrew cosmology. In other cosmogonies besides the one narrated in Genesis, it was created before the earth, to support it. It is also an agent of change in the world; when God is angry it trembles, causing earthquakes. Proverbs tells that it precedes creation, [Yahweh] “drew a circle on the face of the deep . . . and marked out the foundations of the earth . . .”<sup>74</sup> In the book of Job, God challenges him with the famous question: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . Who determined its measurements . . . or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone . . .”<sup>75</sup> Here the pillars are conceived as the first step in creation, so that in terms of the SY, they are analogous to the creation of the letters. This commentary is integrative in its aim, and so this inscription maps the Yetsiratic creation with letters onto the narrative of the divine creation in Proverbs and Job.

The text also invokes the narrative of Genesis, but not in the way we might expect. It does not quote the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. Instead it cites 28:15, which occurs just after Jacob has successfully wrestled with the angel. The verse previous to the one briefly cited in the commentary adds context to this discussion. It is Genesis 28:14, and it restates the covenant:

And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in you and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

This is a revealing choice, as it refers to the materials later chosen for the creation of the golem, along with an injunction for reproduction. In other texts, golem creation is likened to Abraham's reproduction, described as "the souls that he [Abraham] made in Haran." This reference operates similarly as it positions the human creation of the golem as a prefiguration of the fulfillment of the covenant that guarantees the creation many souls.

The verse actually cited in the inscription is used to show divine approbation of the work of creation.

And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.<sup>76</sup>

In the context of the inscription, this promise refers to action with the pillars of the earth. The text reads: "It is sufficient to him if he brings him into existence. The mission will be fulfilled by the pillar of the earth." Thus, fulfilling the covenant depends on bringing "him" into existence with the aid of the pillars of the earth.

### **Commentary Translation: Beginning with Folio 74a**

Here follow selections from the commentary appearing before and after the diagram, relevant to the argument:

[It is] to make everything good, and [to sweeten] the bitterness of the fruit, and [of] exile, and to return (restore). And the phosphor of *Kesil*, it commands fertility to falter, purity to become unclean, until it is straightened in judgment, in truth, and in faith, and according to entreaty the phosphor continues to transform all his spirits, [abbrev.] binding the opened/cracked *Kesil*, despite the refuting theory. And the pleasure of *Kimah* is the strengthening of all the limbs that are broken, and torn off (taken to pieces) and banished, and he binds them together. And the phosphor of *Kesil*, with it he binds and commands. And here the trembling [star] is united to *Kimah* because it is illumined with the king's luxuries. And the phosphor of *Kesil* binds phosphor and he has nothing to give in judgment and in justice. And undertake close observation until, in the following manner, the wisdom of the seer arrives so that he will unify the *Kimah* with the remnants, and it will unify *Kesil* with Cancer.



And you already know the secret of the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton, and of the twelve constellations, and from where to observe the host in his strength . . . and [to conduct] close observation of his movement in the darkness . . .

To connect the trembling *Kimah*, say an invocation to connect the chain of *Kimah* or have eminent scholars of necromancy raise the gates. . . . This is according to the scholars of the chain, and turn to scholars. Necromancers lengthen (project) *Kesil*. Raise him and the anointed *mashiach* will descend. To connect the trembling *Kimah*, these are the six permutations of the tetragrammaton going up and out, increasing their turning on the path of the *T'li*, his chief . . .

And when you divide the world fix the boundaries of judgment and of *Kesil*; then the exiled *Kimah* will exchange [letters] from the exalted brilliance of the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton. In his time raise *Kimah* so that it is the *T'li*, already renewing the worlds. From the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton, these are the primeval cause of all that exists. The knowledge of the engravings of the heavens is the mother (source) of the arrangement of the course of the stars in the land.

### Analysis

The inscription describes the purpose of the diagram: "With his great mercy you will create for them a soul." The creation of the soul (or living being) is positioned as a mode of fulfilling the covenant with the aid of canonical Jewish narratives. In these texts, the pillars of the earth act when God is moved, and in this case the scribe asserts divine presence in the act of human creation. Letter combination activates the "pillars of the earth." This creation is assigned a messianic function in the adjacent commentary. This is how it works: letter combination is used to reunite the *Kimah* and to bind *Kesil*. It is the primeval cause of the cosmos and the source of knowledge about it. The reunification of these constellations is figured in the text as the resurrection of the body. Their reunification is said to bring the messiah. At the same time, letter combination is clearly used for the creation of the golem. This too is figured as the resurrection of the body, and, as we have seen above, the fulfillment of the covenant.

The diagram inscription expresses the goal of the ritual act and situates it in canonical texts. The commentary illustrated by the diagram describes the messianic function of the ritual. Folio 74a begins with instructions for the reader "to make everything good, and [sweeten] the bitterness of the fruit, and exile, and to return (restore)."<sup>77</sup> In order to do so, the operator is instructed to permute letters in order to "transform all his spirits, [abbrev.] binding the cracked *Kesil*." In this, letter combination is used to reunite the stars of *Kimah* and to bind those of *Kesil*.

Here the restoration of *Kimah* also performs a restorative function for the cosmos: “*Kimah* is the strengthening of all the limbs that are broken, and torn off (taken to pieces) and banished, and he binds them together.” Here then the restoration of the missing stars to *Kesil*, and of the missing daughters of *Kimah* follows the narrative of the redemption, in which human beings are resurrected, torn limbs restored, and bodies bound back together.<sup>78</sup> This is accomplished with letter combination:

And you already know the secret of the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton, and of the twelve constellations. . . . To bind the trembling *Kimah* say an invocation to bind the chains of *Kimah* or have eminent scholars of magic raise the gates.

Here letter combination works as an invocation. It is further specified as follows: “To connect the trembling *Kimah*, these are the six permutations of the tetragrammaton going up and out, increasing their turning on the path of the *T’li*.” Thus the permutations of the divine name work on the *T’li* to restore the lost stars of *Kimah*, here figured as an analogy to the resurrection of the body.

Letter combination is also used for golem-making here, and its messianic function is explicit in the text: “Raise [him] and the anointed messiah will descend.” It is theorized as follows:

Here is a sign (letter) and from his sign (letter) he is raised, because the carvings of the heavens are in his mother (source), the twelve hidden permutations of the tetragrammaton.

All of these are connected, as the golem ritual is made analogous to the repair of the *Kimah* and *Kesil*.

“And when you divide the world, fix the boundaries of judgment and of *Kesil*; then the exiled stars of *Kimah* are exchanged from the exalted brilliance of the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton. In his time raise *Kimah* so that the *T’li* is already renewing the worlds.”

The words that follow show how letter combination affects the heavens:

From the twelve permutations of the tetragrammaton, these are the primeval cause of all that exists. The knowledge of the engravings of the heavens is the mother (source) of the arrangement of the course of the stars in the land.

In this text, the 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton create the universe, and it is possible to arrange the heavens by knowledge of their

engravings, referring both to the heavens themselves, and to the creation of the letters in the SY. Letter combination is also used to create a golem, which is messianic in its function. To sum up, letter combination reunites the Pleiades and binds Ursa/Orion, and this reunion is figured as the restoration that attends the coming of the messiah. So too does the creation of the golem. The text is clear about it: raise him, and the messiah will come. In this, letter combination affects the physical and metaphysical world simultaneously, and golem making is part and parcel of the restoration of the constellations, the fulfillment of the covenant, and human redemption.

### III. Conclusions: Golem as Totem, Revisited

Each of these four diagrams is intended for use. All show the role of the letters as bridge between human and divine, and as a source of power for acting on God and the universe. All attempt to situate the letter-combination ritual and as such the golem-making ritual within canonical Jewish discourse and within integrally Jewish notions of efficacy. Similarly in all of these commentaries astrological conceptions of power and the divine are also situated within Jewish canonical discourse. The most powerful of these is the messianic discourse. It supplies the meaning and purpose of ritual practice in some forms of Judaism. The ritual of golem making becomes meaningful because it is positioned within messianic discourse.

The golem-making ritual is meant to act for the betterment of the subject and the cosmos in which the subject lives. The components of the ritual performed to raise the golem act on the cosmos in these two ways: the letter combination acts on the constellations to stop their orbit and in so doing to stop time. The ritual circumambulatory dance of animating a golem preenacts the resurrection of the dead, described in the Hebrew Bible. This is a form of sympathetic magic, apparent in the recipes and their commentaries. Sympathetic magic is a form of magic based on imitation in which an operator completes an act in the earthly realm in order to bring a similar thing about in the celestial realm. Both of these together, the ritual dance and the letter combinations, aim to bring the messianic period. In this way the telos of the golem ritual is theological; it has social aspects, but its primary purpose is to alter the cosmos and end history and the social as we know them.

To return to our theoretical frame, it is worth noting that scholars of golem making are correct in considering the golem in terms of its social function. Idel's argument is valid insofar as the texts he examines clearly show power relations between the involved parties. But the act had a theological component as well; this was not just a power play, but it had a

serious mimetic component with a theological basis. It acted out Biblical scripts with the aim of changing the structure of the world.

On the other hand, Hayman's argument about golem creation as imitation of a magician God in order to address a social need for power essentially presents another variation on the argument for kabbalah and other Jewish esoteric practices as a response to exile. Jews experienced this exile in many ways concomitantly; to a medieval Jew this included experience of the covenantal theology of exile, the exile from Jerusalem and the Temple, and later, in kabbalistic thought it signified the separation of part of the godhead from the rest, and the separation of human beings from the divine.<sup>79</sup> All of these were simultaneously applied to interpreting any social upheaval recently suffered so that it exemplified these other topoi. As such there are problems with using the exile topos to account for particular forms of religious practice; this is true because it is so firmly entrenched in Jewish thought and practice across time and space. Jews did not merely experience exile directly, but also through the sacred literature that gave structure and meaning to their lives. So it is hard to tell whether cultural productions with this theme respond to historical events or other cultural productions. They clearly have some sociohistorical motivations, but it is not easy to distinguish them from theological ones that are not specific to time, place, or event.

Thus it is not so important that Jews produced writings and ritual practices in response to exile. More important is what kind. The golem recipes uniquely express this messianic yearning, elaborated in dialogue with the exile topos, by producing a creature that is neither subject nor object, and that acts within the order of the universe to change it. According to the SY, the universe itself, the stars and planets, time, and the human being, were all created by the letter combination and they behaved according to the mode of their creation. Medieval people also believed that the heavens influenced them and determined the course of their lives. The golem is social in that it is produced by manipulation of those elements by which medieval people imagined the social. It is literally animated by the social, but it does not become a totem. Social structures are not reified within it. Instead the golem symbolizes the potential of the social to act upon itself and undo the reification of its structure. Social structure, then, is not fixed, and it is not located in an object brought to life. With the dead raised and the heavens repaired, the creation of the golem was a means of changing those structures that governed the lives of its makers. Golem making was intended to animate dead bodies, repair constellations, stop time, and eliminate the social. But the golem is not itself fully alive. The golem, then, is the antitotem.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this project I set out six goals: first, I aimed to resituate the diagrams in the textual and ritual traditions to which they belong. Second, in so doing I wanted to better grasp the meaning of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (SY). Third, I wanted to better understand the worldview of its readers. Fourth, I looked at the diagrams to gain insight into the development of kabbalistic cosmology, and fifth, into the application of the text. Sixth, I combined these concerns to look at the larger problem of the relation between religion and magic, and of scholarly treatment of these categories. In this process I found that although the SY admits a wide range of interpretations, the diagrams emphasize a practical function. This is also true of the structure of the work. This contradicts much of the scholarship of the SY, and this is most apparent in scholarly treatments of the letterforms and of the golem. The diagrams also posit a use for this rather difficult text. In the course of this exploration it has become evident that it is this very difficulty that makes the SY so productive for thinking about key issues in religious studies.

The diagrams are part of the text, and they visually represent methods of interacting with it, thereby modeling them. This is evident insofar as letter charts appear in the SY itself in even the earliest manuscripts. It is clear too that they form a link between the writers of the text and its readers. They provide information for understanding the use and reception of the text, connecting it to current cosmological views and ritual practices. In this way the diagrams act as models of and models for the cosmos upon which the readers act. They also provide models for action; just as reading is active, so is the interpretation of a diagram. It is the constitution of a cosmology in space, and it is the imagination of a mode of acting on it. The viewer, then, imaginably constitutes space and acts on it as he or she interprets the diagram. It is, thus, an extension, a modification, and a reconfiguration of the text. It is part of the text, but it is also part of the experience

of the readers who interpret and act on the text in particular ways. We see this in cosmological diagrams, sefirotic trees, letter-combination diagrams, horoscopes, and golem-making diagrams. The diagram is the link between writer, reader, worldview, and action.

I began with the earliest tenth-century phases of the commentarial tradition, characterized by Raphael Jospe as “overwhelmingly philosophical.”<sup>1</sup> This is surely the case with the Babylonian commentaries, but it is not true of Shabbetai Donnolo’s Byzantine work. Similarly, we find that although Saadya’s commentary expresses a philosophical interpretation, he does so in opposition to previously articulated practical interpretations. In his writings it is clear that his intent is polemical, combating entrenched opinions about the practical function of the SY and the power of divine names. This enriches our understanding of the first generation of commentaries on the SY, so that it is not possible to argue as some do that the practical applications constitute a later, and therefore less authentic layer. Similarly, upon closer examination it seems that the very mode of characterizing the commentarial tradition is something of an imposition. The philosophical, theosophical, and practical categories need reconsideration because there are more characteristics shared by theosophical and practical works than previously thought.

The rubber meets the road in the commentators’ views of the letterform. Some believed it was powerful, with a direct relation to the divine, while others considered it a symbol with limited power and an indirect relation to the divine. Other aspects of worldview hinge on this one, including the nature of the divine and the relations between creator and created world, and human and divine. In general, philosophical commentaries posited an indirect relation between the letterform and the divine, limited power for the letterform and in this for those who used it, and a view of the divine that emphasized transcendence over immanence. Practical and theosophic views have more in common than not; they assert the direct relation between the letterform and the divine, the power of the letterform, and of human operators. In this they emphasize immanent views of the divine over the transcendent, without dispensing with either. As such the scholarly categories for the commentaries need rethinking. First, we need to reconsider the separation between theosophical and practical. And second, we need to reexamine the chronology of philosophical interpretations and better scrutinize those commentaries asserting their primacy. In light of the material examined in this project, it is possible that both the practical and the philosophical interpretations were present from the start, and if not, that the practical preceded the philosophical.

This is especially evident in the structural analysis of the SY. This analysis shows that although the work is semantically unstable, it

communicates a practical function. We tend to emphasize the semantic mode of communicating meaning over others. This mode is primary, but there are other factors, including syntax and reception. Chapter 2 showed that the SY generates meaning syntactically, while its diagrams attest to its use and reception. It is also significant that genre models outlook. It reflects modes of narrative construction that emulate the conception of the cosmos and its structure. Because narrative structure emulates cosmological structure, interpretation must emerge from an accurate understanding of genre. The ring-composition form privileges certain narrative elements by positioning them in high-visibility positions within the work. And the analysis shows that the text places practical instructions in these high-visibility positions. It also shows a web of relations between narrative elements, arranged to mime the worldview of the writer. Thus, the composition of the SY shows its practical use, and a conception of the cosmos that is both iconic and consubstantial with the divine.

The thirteenth-century Italian diagramming tradition shows genre in action; specifically it shows the application of modes of ordering integral to genre. These different modes, circular and linear compositional thinking, contribute to the development of the sefirotic *ilan*. It emerges from graphic cosmological models derived from the SY, and it is reinterpreted in light of commentaries conceptually developing the *sefirot*. They are characterized by the synthesis of emergent kabbalistic symbols with Yetsiratic cosmology. The diagrams reflect both the “circular” mode of ordering narrative associated with the ring composition and the linear thinking of later medieval commentary, characteristic of narrative forms more familiar to us. These two modes of thinking about the SY worked together to produce the sefirotic *ilan* and the vision of the cosmos that it expresses. The same thought processes are reflected in the sefirotic *ilanot* made and used today. In this way genre and its modes of organizing thought play an important role in the history of kabbalistic symbols.

The letterform is the lynchpin of the interpretive tradition of the SY and its system of meaning. In the letterform, the SY’s constituent powers and discourses converge. The letterform possesses substance as well as form, and it is metaphysically connected to both the creator and the universe. In this the SY presents an iconic view of the letterform, and in this iconicity, a consubstantial view that explains the source and the action of its power. The letters share in the substance of both material and divine. They have a special ontological status as a result; they are simultaneously physical and metaphysical. This is true because the physicality of the created world is not superseded by its metaphysical signification. As such, the term “metaphysical” does not mean nonphysical. Instead it refers to



a projection of the meaning of the physical into a transcendental realm, and vice versa, such that the metaphysical does not transcend the physical, but inhabits it and extends it.

The Hebrew letters are metaphysical in just this way. A regular workaday Hebrew letter can represent the primordial letters carved from the divine substance or by the divine hand. But it is an iconic view, in which the letters are not only structurally related but in which there is no separation between symbol and object. If anything, their rich, polysemous signification points to the opposite of this—multiple meanings do not yield a lack of fixable meaning and therefore no meaning at all. Instead they point to the relations between created world and their creator, so that one realm is both structurally and substantially related to the other. The Hebrew letter, then, even the one you could type right now, is both structurally and substantially related to the primordial divine letters, and hence it too has a corporeal dimension.

Because of their ontological status, the letters allow communication between human and divine. Similarly, they open an avenue for action, for God to create, and for human beings to influence the divine. Their powers are rooted both in the divine and in the astrological power structures of the cosmos, and when letterforms act, they do so by moving these forces. It is the iconicity of the letterform, and really of the entire created world, that makes it possible to conceive of the efficacy of the golem-making ritual. When the operator ritually moves letters, he moves the entire created world. It is precisely this consubstantial relation between divine, symbol, and created world that gives religious meaning to the corporeal ritual of golem making.

Because of the role of the letters in animating the golem, the concept of totemism has proven useful in analyzing the meaning of the golem-making ritual. The use of the letters to enliven it resembles Émile Durkheim's description of totemization by inscription. According to him, the totem gains its special status by ritual inscription (marking the object with an elaborate design) either by drawing, chanting, or both. In the golem-making ritual, the letters serve as the design either sealed in clay or chanted aloud. According to the SY, both God and people create them. As such they serve to inscribe both human and divine narratives in the golem, investing the creature with the identity of both human and divine. According to Durkheim's definition this results in a fetish, a reification of social values in an enlivened being that represents its makers and their values. This led us to reconsider the source of our notions about the social function of the golem, and this need for reconsideration can be generalized to all theurgic, practical ritual that has been traditionally distinguished from religious ritual.

### **Magic and Religion: Reconsidering Scholarship on the Golem**

Because the letterform and the golem diagrams situate theurgy within Jewish canonical discourse, they push us to consider the taxonomic categories we use to study them. Namely, these call attention to the limitations of the social framework which we have used to attribute meaning to the golem-making ritual. The totem concept is useful because it describes well the process of the animation of the golem. It is also useful because of what it fails to do. It does not account for the behavior of the creature once it is made, and it does not allow us to consider the meaning of the ritual outside the social. This calls for a closer look at the scholarship on the golem and at the meaning of the ritual to those who performed it.

### **Mysticism versus Magic: The Scholarly Debate**

The scholarship on the golem is instructive because it exposes some key assumptions that are barely visible under normal circumstances. Three different scholars, expressing different points of view about the SY, argue that letter combination does not have mystical significance. They make these claims in four ways: first, they downplay the ritual instructions contained in the SY. Second, they reconceptualize the manner in which the text addresses its readers in the imperative. Third, they argue that magical interpretations succeed the original text. Fourth, they do not grant ritual magic theological significance, either by claiming that the action was imaginal or by acknowledging its practice, but assigning it exclusively social significance. These conclusions are derived from scholarly definitions of religion generally and from rationalist interpretive trends within Judaism since the *Haskalah*.

Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel, and A. Peter Hayman all believe that the practical, magical interpretation is not indicated by the SY. Scholem argues that the SY was never really used effectively at all. Hayman argues that the effective use of the SY was a later addition of the interpreters,<sup>2</sup> and Idel does as well. Scholem argues that all effective uses of the SY were imaginal, occurring in the mind and not in the material world. According to Scholem, letter-combination is used for divine creation in the SY, and some of its commentaries describe ritualized human representation of that process. Scholem defines the creation of the golem as “a description of a precise ritual calculated to induce a very definite *vision*, namely a vision of the creative animation of the golem.”<sup>3</sup> He writes:

In the twelfth century at the latest a set procedure for golem-making developed... This procedure, if I am not mistaken, is a ritual *representing*

an act of creation by the adept and culminating in ecstasy. Here the legend was transformed into a mystical experience, and there is nothing in the sources that have come down to us to suggest that it was ever anything more than a mystical experience.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, according to Scholem, those who used the SY never did so for practical purposes, and the mystical experience of the practitioner precluded any effective application.

Idel quotes and analyzes several medieval sources that disprove Scholem's thesis.<sup>5</sup> The most important is the Pseudo-Saadya commentary on the SY, which contains several stories of golem making. It tells a legend about Solomon ibn Gabirol who creates a female golem for the purpose of serving him. "When he was denounced to the authorities he showed them that she was not a full or complete creature. And he restored her to the pieces of wood out of which she was created."<sup>6</sup> The commentary also recounts several others tales of golem making by such personages as Rabbeinu Tam (Rabbi Jacob Tam, 1100–1171) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167). Ibn Ezra is reported to have said, "See what God has given by means of the Holy letters?" Then he said to the golem, "Go back!" and it became what it had been before."<sup>7</sup> Idel cites other sources contemporaneous with this one, containing recipes recommending the manipulation of dust and earth. And so it seems that the commentaries narrate the creation of an actual rather than an imaginal golem, unless they specify otherwise as the Abulafian commentaries do. Thus, Idel shows that the medieval sources recount many tales of golem creation using the methods their authors believed to be extracted from the SY. At the same time, he devotes a great deal of attention to the Abulafian commentaries instructing in the creation of the imaginal golem favored by Scholem.

The method of narration is the most important clue to the application of the ritual in these commentaries. They provide examples, instructions, and interpretations of ritual action. We cannot know whether anyone performed these rituals and succeeded. However it is possible to correctly characterize the mode of description, which is clearly one of modeling. They contain models for golem making coupled with instructions to the reader to actualize those models. And they also assign meaning to these actions.

Idel has made an amazing contribution to the study of these materials. He extensively documents the practical, ritual instructions in the commentaries. But both Hayman and Idel believe that the effective use of the SY was a later addition of the interpreters. In this I believe they follow the thinking of Saadya Gaon, one of the first-generation interpreters. Hayman writes that, "'Thinking God's thoughts after him' is what

inspired the author of SY; ‘doing God’s deeds after him’ is the use others found for his text.”<sup>8</sup> In this he argues that the *writers* of the SY aimed to understand creation and to think God’s thoughts, but its users acted on these thoughts in a way that is not supported by the text. Thus the practical interpretation is not integral to the text. Idel, too, argues that the effective interpretations of the text were added later, specifically in the form of golem recipes. He believes they are twelfth-century additions, at the earliest.

However, Saadya disputes the practical application in the tenth century. As discussed in [chapter 1](#), he pointedly intervenes in an understanding of the Hebrew letterform as part of the divine substance. He does the same thing with the idea that human operators could create with the letterforms:

If you say *Aleph* one hundred times, it only results in a single form in the air, namely a straight line. And if you speak *Bet* a hundred times, you will only trace a single circular form repeatedly. This explains the creation of the letterforms in the air. However, we can only establish this form in our spirit. We will not be able to realize this form because it belongs to the Master of the worlds—may He be praised and exalted! The wise, therefore, first teach their students mathematics and geometry, for these are the origin of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

This commentary contains a contradiction; in it Saadya argues first that the repetition of the letters results in the creation of geometrical forms in the air. He follows by insisting that it cannot be done, and in its place, we should teach mathematics. The contradiction gives us some useful information about his approach to the problem. He acknowledges that the text contains instructions to follow the divine example. He asserts that this will bring results, and then he backpedals, arguing that the results are impossible because of the laws of the universe. In this contradiction he both acknowledges and disputes preexisting effective interpretations, simultaneously showing they are integral to the text and denying them veracity as he substitutes for their practice the teaching of a scientific discipline. Thus while it is not clear that Saadya believes that the reader will create a golem, it is clear that he objects to a preexisting, practical interpretation of the SY. For him, then, the desired goal is knowledge, and the best manner to achieve it is by means existing outside the text such as the study of science.<sup>10</sup>

Both Scholem and Hayman follow Saadya’s line in different ways. Scholem accepts Saadya’s approach to the ritual as purely imaginal. Hayman does too, as he argues that the original goal of the work was the understanding of the divine mind. The practical application is secondary

and extraneous for him.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion, the ritual is *part* of understanding the divine mind, by emulating its actions. Both Idel and Hayman view its practical applications through a sociological lens, without granting them theological significance. Idel sees physical golem making as a public test of virtue and an assertion of social status; Hayman sees it as a bid for power, in response to exile and its accompanying political disempowerment. Idel believes that the practical uses of the text have no mystical significance, stating: "Medieval sources help us to consider the Ashkenazi practices as magical ones, without the need to project a mystical interpretation."<sup>12</sup> Contradicting Scholem then, Idel argues that the construction of the Golem was purely practical,<sup>13</sup> asserting that "one need not search for any mystical meaning in the action."<sup>14</sup>

To sum up, Scholem argues that the practical use of the text is not supported by the sources themselves, and that the letter combination practices in general, and the construction of the golem in particular, are purely imaginal and therefore mystical. Idel argues on the other hand that the sources do show an effective use of the text, which lacks mystical significance. Both Idel and Hayman see letter magic as a sociologically rather than a theologically meaningful act.

Each of these scholars contributes a valuable piece to understanding the function of letter manipulation in the text and in its commentaries. While Idel has proven incontrovertibly that the texts were used for practical purposes, Scholem assigns a mystical function to those practices, even if he did not accept their practical application. Also very valuable is Hayman's ascription of a theosophical function to the ritual of letter combination; it is a form of understanding by doing. But even beyond that it is a form of transformation through action.

Separating magic from meaning, especially seeing it as a response to social trauma reflects the reductionist views of religion of the earlier part of the twentieth century, the grand theories (sociological and psychological both) that saw religion and its practices as a flawed means of meeting individual and corporate need. They saw it as an illusion and as individual and corporate neurosis. As such, they could and should be discarded once individuals and societies attain self-awareness and the ability to meet their material needs. Whether or not such reductive theories of religion are valid (and I believe they are not), the performers of letter-combination rituals believed they acted meaningfully upon the cosmos. And while we may not think it possible or desirable to enact them, it is not helpful to impose our view of religion on the reception of these medieval texts. The golem rituals may or may not mean anything to *us*, but they surely did to their medieval practitioners.

This sort of social-cognitive focused scholarship is produced by the habits of thinking and taxonomizing that have driven the field of religious studies since the turn of the last century. The particular problem of the golem highlights an ongoing debate in religious studies: the relation between religion and magic. Scholars generally express one prevailing attitude toward magic, taken from the work of Durkheim, which is that religion is communal, and magic individual. Along these lines they also believe that religion has theologically meaningful content (which is by definition significant to the whole group), while magic lacks theologically meaningful content and signifies only in the social context of power relations or individual desire. As a result, the most important scholars of Jewish magic see its practices as bereft of religious meaning. At the same time, some practitioners of Jewish magic use religious symbols and cosmological models to act. And in so doing they explicitly discuss the theological telos of their actions. Surely, then, scholarship of magic has fallen prey to the force of habit, applying theories and models that sometimes contradict the content of the materials they analyze. These manuscripts, with their diagrams, contain recipes for action based on a cosmology that became integrated into Jewish mystical thought. Jewish mysticism is an intensified form of Jewish religious practice. As such, the diagrams ask us to challenge our modern conceptual habits. And as materials that are new to scholars of religion, they demand new conceptual models for their analysis.

### **New Directions for Scholarship**

This study and the others produced in recent years have only just begun to explore the vast terrain of the kabbalistic diagrams. Several different sorts of scholarly endeavors would better allow us to productively study them and to formulate the new conceptual models required to do so. The first is the most obvious: the diagrams need to be cataloged. Second, while I have tried to articulate a methodology for the study of the diagrams, this is obviously only a small beginning. Third, as a group we need to think about the genre of the diagrams and what this means for reader reception, and for thinking through their relation to their source texts. Fourth, as a subset of the third project, we need to consider the diagrams comparatively, by visual form and semantic content. Fifth, by considering changes in generic convention, we may undertake another sort of study of the development of the symbolic tradition within kabbalah. Sixth, we should consider the impact on the diagrammatic corpus of technological changes such as the development of manuscript, book,

and then digital technology. Finally, and most importantly, it is worth thinking more about the role of diagrams in ritual life.

### **Cataloging**

I begin with the most obvious. Kabbalistic manuscripts and their diagrams have yet to be thoroughly cataloged. In the past few years scholars (most recently Benjamin Richler in his catalog of the Vatican manuscripts) have put a great deal of work into cataloging manuscript collections. However, many kabbalistic works appear in varia, which take time and effort to navigate, and so catalogs often do not accurately reflect their content. Because of this, older catalogs should be updated to accurately describe the content of the manuscripts and to include diagrams and illustrations. Separately, we also need to create a catalog of diagrams and illustrations, organized by manuscript tradition, in chronological order.

### **Methodology**

As a group, we need to give more thought to individual diagrams, how they work, and what they can teach us. Even more importantly, we need to think well about how we can learn the most from them. What sorts of theoretical models are most useful? I have begun to discuss this in the introduction to this book, and it is clear that I have favored an approach that treats them both as cognitive maps and religious symbols, in relation but not subordinate to the texts. I have chosen to focus on semiotics in context as a methodology. But there are other valid approaches that need development and application. Others have begun to consider this. Notably, Daniel Abrams and Marc Michael Epstein have presented papers on this topic at a recent conference: “Text & Image in Religious Cosmography: Reading *Ilanot* and Parallel Artifacts.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Genre Study**

Genre encodes expectations for form and content. We have yet to identify the conventions of visual representation in kabbalistic manuscripts, and yet to fully conceptualize their relation to the semantic content of the texts and the diagrams. I have initiated this process with the manuscripts of the Yetsiratic tradition. And Menachem Kallus and Yossi Chajes have begun this work with the manuscripts of the Lurianic corpus, but the vast array of practical kabbalah, *heikhalot* materials, Zoharic materials, and other pre-Lurianic materials remains untouched.

### Symbolic History

Generic consideration lays the foundation for a study of the history of kabbalistic symbols. An art-historical view tracing the conventions of representation in the diagrams would be helpful for better understanding the diagrams' role in the development of the symbolic tradition of kabbalah generally, and within individual textual traditions specifically. As discussed above, it is possible to use diagrams to write a history of the conceptualization of the cosmos by readers of *heikhalot* literature, of Zoharic literature, and of the Lurianic corpus.<sup>16</sup>

### Comparative Study: Spatiotemporal; Intercultural and Cross-Cultural

Understanding the conventions of visual representation also lays the groundwork for comparison across time, space, and culture. This makes it possible to ask and answer historical questions such as: How did eighteenth-century Hasidim use Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*? The commentaries explain part of it, but what sorts of changes occurred in their visual imagination of the cosmos he described? What sorts of changes occurred in the performance of rituals described in the texts? Or, for another example, how did Lurianic kabbalists reimagine or repurpose the cosmological symbols of the SY? Spatial comparison allows us to understand regional and therefore cultural differences in use and reception of texts. And intercultural comparison allows heightened attention to the ways in which visual forms are situated in and invested with meaning by culturally specific discourses. They also highlight discourses and world-views shared between cultures.

### Ritual Life

In my view, diagrams play an important role in ritual life that has yet to be fully explored. Brian Lancaster makes important strides in considering them as cognitive maps meant to be navigated, as discussed in the introduction to this book and in [chapter 3](#). In my opinion this is an excellent start. Cross-cultural comparison would go a long way toward articulating a model for considering this relationship. Also important is the consideration of the process of reading itself as religious ritual. The same applies to religious viewing. Among others, David Morgan has done important work on this in his book *Visual Pieties*. His insights can be fruitfully applied to the study of kabbalistic diagrams. Even more important, I think, is the development of a conception of a diagram as a



visual ritual script. Hand in hand with this view is the idea that the diagrams themselves situate these rituals in relation to canonical discourses that are both linguistic and visual. This necessitates a reexamination of effective ritual practices such as theurgy in relation to what is conventionally called “religion.”

### **Diagrams, the Rise of the Book, and Digital Technology**

Finally, there is a great deal of work to be done to understand changes in diagrammatic conventions in relation to the development of manuscript, print, and digital technology. While print technology is an important milestone, manuscript design changed significantly, especially in terms in conceptualizing and organizing the space of the folio or the page, and in terms of organizing information itself. These did affect the production of diagrams, and the changes in manuscript production are apparent in the earlier books.

At the same time, manuscript production did not cease with the rise of the book. The seventeenth-century Lurianic illustrations were created after the innovation of print technology, and in some ways they were positioned as an alternative to it. They are synthetic works that are large, generically diverse, intricately designed, painstakingly detailed, and extremely sophisticated in their organization, combining divergent canonical sources in one cosmographic vision. As a continuation of this tradition, there are now even a number of kabbalistic painters who produce Jewish mystical images without text, which has resulted in the creation of a new genre of kabbalistic art. This is partly a result of the separation of kabbalistic images from books, stemming from the technology of mechanical reproduction. The separation of images from any particular text allows the primacy of the image in representing systems of thought.

The development of digital technology has drastically changed the use and reception of the kabbalistic image. It is easy to find kabbalistic diagrams on the web. Some of them accompany texts, and some do not. Of the ones that do accompany texts, in many cases they appear with texts that are not historically related to them. Some are used by Jewish organizations, but most are not. The illustrations, then, represent the kabbalistic tradition as a whole, sometimes attached to and sometimes separate from its canonical texts and Judaism. The diagrams act as icons, literally and figuratively, for kabbalah as a tradition, as interpreted by Christian, Jewish, Western Esotericist, or other groups. The changes in the meanings of the diagrams remain to be well understood, and this is a promising field for new research. At the same time, digital technology

makes kabbalistic texts and images widely available to anyone who wants them. This also means that the diagrams act as emissaries for an esoteric tradition rendered exoteric.

I write, then, from the opening of a field. I have tried to show what can be learned from one corpus of diagrams, using a variety of methodologies, including generic comparison, semiotics, and a consideration of the relation between text and image. I believe that I have shown most strongly the ritual importance of diagrams, and that as a result of this consideration it is necessary to rethink somewhat the relation between mysticism (religion) and magic. I have also shown the dynamic nature of a text over time and space, and how the diagrams can bring that dynamism to light. Finally, I hope that others will take up where this project leaves off.



## NOTES

### **1 Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah: Interpreting Diagrams from the *Sefer Yetsirah* and Its Commentaries**

1. The most notorious example of these practices is the popularizing work of Aryeh Kaplan. His critical editions of the SY and the *Sefer ha Bahir* are some of the most widely read in the field because they provide the texts in Hebrew and English with comprehensive and useful appendices. However, these works are deeply problematic because they dehistoricize the tradition by adding later diagrams to earlier works. For example, in his edition of the SY he appends eighteenth-century diagrams to later versions of this tenth-century text. Popularizers of kabbalah such as Michael Berg of the *Kabbalah Centre* treat the Zohar as a second-century rabbinic tract without acknowledging textual evidence to the contrary. See his introduction to the Centre's translation of the *Zohar*: P. S. Berg, *The Essential Zohar*. New York: Random House, 2002.
2. For a variety of reasons, kabbalistic works were transmitted in manuscript form long after other works, such as the *Hebrew Bible*, the *Talmud*, and their commentaries were widely available in print. This is true in large part because kabbalistic treatises were "private" works, transmitted from teacher to student. Kabbalistic manuscripts were also traditionally transmitted in manuscript form because of their provenance. The Maghreb and other parts of North Africa were important centers of later mystical activity, and print technology came quite late to these regions, with manuscript culture persisting well into the nineteenth, and even into the mid-twentieth century in some regions. Because of these trends, many kabbalistic works are only very recently available in print, and only recently accessible to larger numbers of readers.
3. See the work of Giulio Busi, especially *Qabala Visiva* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005).
4. Daniel Abrams, "New Study Tools from the Kabbalists of Today: Toward an Appreciation of the History and Role of Collectanea, Paraphrases and Graphic Representations in Kabbalistic Literature." *Journal des Etudes de Cabale* 1 (1997): 1–7.
5. Nicholas Sed, "Une cosmologie juive du haut moyen age: la Berayta di Ma'aseh Bereshit," *Revue de Etudes Juives* 123 (1964): 259–305; Nicholas Sed, "Le texte, les manuscrits et les diagrammes," *Revue de Etudes Juives* 124 (1965): 23–123.

6. Nicolas Sed, *La mystique cosmologique Juive* (Paris: Editions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales; Berlin; New York: Mouton: 1981).
7. Giulio Busi, *Libri e Scrittori nella Roma Ebraica del Medioevo* (Rimini: Luise Editoro, 1990).
8. Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991).
9. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991). See also Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Visions and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Wolfson speaks eloquently about noetic imaging of kabbalistic symbols, but does not discuss the graphic representations that accompany the manuscripts he studies.
10. These articles include: Nicolas Sed, "Une cosmologie juive du haut moyen age la Berayta di Ma'aseh Bereshit," *Revue de Etudes Juives* 123 (1964): 259–305; Nicolas Sed, "Le texte, les manuscrits et les diagrammes," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 124 (1965): 23–123; Klaus Herrmann and Massakhet Hekhalot, *Traktat von de Himmlischen Palaesten* (Tübingen: Übersetzung und Kommentar, 1994)
11. Colette Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84–85.
12. Malachi Beit Arie, *The Makings of the Hebrew Book*, Gefen Books, Jerusalem: 1993. Malachi Beit Arie, *Hebrew Manuscripts East and West*, British Library, London: 1993. Joseph Gutman, *Hebrew Manuscript Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).
13. Exodus 20:4–6. See Joseph Gutmann, *The Image and the Word* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977) and Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
14. See Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah, fols. 43 and 44.
15. See Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). [Chapter 1](#) treats this issue at length.
16. Cosgrove writes that, "Maps are graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts conditions, processes or events in the human world." Rather than emphasizing the content of maps, or the technical processes by which they are produced, this definition emphasizes the cognitive and conceptual aspects of mapping. Seen in this way, "mapping has affinities to planning, formulating idealized representations of the world which gesture toward action." Denis Cosgrove, "Mapping New Worlds: Culture and Cartography in Sixteenth-Century Venice," *Imago mundi* 44 (1992): 65–89.
17. See Kalman Bland, *Artless Jew*, ch. 1, "Modern Denials and Affirmations of Jewish Art," 13–36.
18. *Avodah Zarah* 43:a: "We have learnt elsewhere: R. Gamaliel had a picture of lunar diagrams in his upper chamber in the form of a chart hanging on the wall, which he used to show to the unlearned and ask then, 'Did you see [the moon] thus or thus?'"

19. Genesis 1–2; 4; Job 26–8; Psalms, Isaiah 40:22, among others.
20. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 44.  
According to Scholem, the earliest *Hekhalot* text dates to about the second century. However, the dating of these texts is hotly disputed.
21. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 44.
22. It is important to note here that this formulation does not apply to texts that are commonly classified as magical. These spells, incantations, amulets, and even magical bowls depend on their illustrations in combination with text for their power. As this study will show, however, the division between magic and mysticism is at times porous at best.
23. Titles were appended by later copyists and thus speak for their understanding of the nature of the works.
24. There are a number of divergent opinions on the authorship of the *Zohar*, but the majority of scholars believe that it was created by Moshe de Leon's circle.
25. Illuminated Hebrew Bibles such as the tenth-century Leningrad Codex existed much earlier than this, and they would seem to disprove this theory. But there is a major difference between illustrations and diagrams: the first are aesthetic objects, while the second are technology for conveying information.
26. See Moshe Idel, "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197–226.
27. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lurianic illustrations are an important exception to this.
28. Brian Lancaster, "On the Relationship between Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11–12 (2000): 231 [231–50].
29. Lancaster, "On the Relationship," 238.
30. Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation* (New York: Schocken, 1985). See especially [chapters 5–8](#).
31. See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Rebecca Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, Harvard Theological Studies, 1998). See also Filip Vukosavovic, ed. *Angels and Demons: Jewish Magic through the Ages* (Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 2010), 12–33.
32. At the same time, others believed that the true path to uncovering the "original" text lay in excision, and they saw their work as corrective. For example, one commentator, Dunash ibn Tamim (10th c. Kairouan) observes, "But we have already established that there could be in this book other passages that Abraham the patriarch [never said] coming from the comments in Hebrew, to which ignorant people have added to the end, and the verity was lost meanwhile." George Vajda's French translation reads: "Mais nous avons déjà qu'il pouvait y avoir dans ce livre es

passages alteres que le patriarche Abraham [n'a jamais enonces] provenant des commentaires en hebreu, auxquels des gens ignorants ont ajoute posterieurement un autre commentaire et la verite se perdait entretemps." *Le Commentaire sur la livre de creation de Dunas ben Tamim de Kairouan* (X<sup>e</sup> Siecle). Nouvelle edition revue et augmentee par Paul Fenton, 2002, 129, Hebrew text, 242, and M. Grossberg, *Sefer Yetzirah* ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham with commentary by Dunash Ben Tamim, 1902, 65. See also Kaplan, who quotes Rabbi Yaakov ben Nissim, who also wrote in the tenth century: "People write Hebrew comments on the book, and other foolish people come later and comment on the commentary. Between them, the truth is lost." Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), xxiii.

33. Colette Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*. ed. and tr. Nicholas de Lange. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
34. Cosgrove defines maps as follows: "Maps are graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes or events in the human world." Rather than emphasizing the content of maps, or the technical processes by which they are produced, this definition emphasizes the cognitive and conceptual aspects of mapping. "Seen in this way, mapping has affinities to planning, formulating idealized representations of the world which gesture toward action." Denis Cosgrove, "Mapping New Worlds," *Imago Mundi* 44 (1992): 65–89.
35. Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 68.
36. The best definition of the *sefirot* is probably one of the earliest. Scholem sees kabbalah beginning with the hypostasization of the *sefirot*, so that they act not only as part of God but in relation to God, to humans, and to one another. (Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68).
37. Ronald Kiener and Lawrence Fine, *Early Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken, 1985).
38. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 68–80.
39. Moshe Idel, "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197–226.
40. See Elliot Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of Sefirot in *Sefer Hakhmoni*," *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 281–316.
41. This does not apply to early modern Lurianic diagrams, whose size and complexity demand a different treatment.
42. James Elkins, *Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52.
43. In 1922, the Vienna Circle decided on the threefold division, which was then described in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Charles W. Morris defined semiotics as grouping the triad of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. See also Charles Peirce, "On the Nature of Signs," in *Peirce on Signs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 141–142.

44. For example, Ruth Kempson writes in her book *Semantic Theory*, “Our semantic theory must be able to assign to each word and sentence the meaning or meanings associated with it in that language.” Ruth Kempson, *Semantic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2.
45. Daniel Abrams, “Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism,” *Sources and Studies in Jewish Literature* 26 (2010): 203, 259.
46. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
47. Dan dates the text to the twelfth century, while Hillel Kieval places it in the thirteenth (see Joseph Dan, *The Special Cherub Circle* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999), and Hillel Kieval, “Pursuing the Golem of Prague,” *Modern Judaism* 17 (1997): 1–23.

## 2 Situating the Text

1. For more information on the late-antique context of letter magic, see Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002).
2. R. Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570) was a key figure in the Safed School in sixteenth-century Ottoman Palestine.
3. Pardes Rimmonim, Gate 1: [Chapter 1](#). Fabrizio Lanza, trans. (Colombo, Italy: Providence University, 2007).
4. These are sometimes described as cosmic numbers, but it is possible to translate this term in any number of different ways, most commonly as “books.” It is especially worth noting that the *sefirot* presented in the SY did not signify the same way as those appearing six to eight centuries later in the *Zohar*. Their cosmological function changed significantly over time.
5. A. Peter Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004. SY61, 183.
6. Heb: *b’li mah*, meaning “without what.”
7. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17a, MS A, 93.
8. MS Harley 5510 provides a good example of the letter chart included within the text of the SY. The version of the SY (fols. 110a–112a) appearing in this text becomes Hayman’s MS E. So too does Bibliothèque Nationale Hebreu 802 entres 5.375 (5375). This manuscript contains a letter chart and no other diagrams, and the same applies to Biblioteca Casanatense Roma Ms 3087.
9. Versions K and A only, but this appears in all the later versions, including the GRA. Clearly, it was added in the Middle Ages as a summary. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira* MSS A and K.
10. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 116. Versions K and A add “from whom are born the fathers,” but also appear in the GRA. This has the effect of mediating the power of the mother letters.



11. Both Saadya's and Shabbetai's commentaries do this.
12. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 128, all versions.
13. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 131. This model is associated with the heavenly realm, as the text adds that the "Holy Temple [is] set in the middle." These lines appear in all versions.
14. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 134.
15. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, Verse 41, 137.
16. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 146. All versions.
17. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 176. Interestingly Hayman translates this as "hook," but in the diagrams the figure is depicted as a snake.
18. This appears only in the GRA version. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, Verse 64, 193.
19. Mancuso writes that the dating is "one of the most vexed questions in the history of Hebrew literature." Piergabriele Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 41n3.
20. Shlomo Pines, "Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the Sefer Yetzira and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Implications of This Resemblance," *Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 7 (1989).
21. Pines, "Points of Similarity," 69.
22. Elliot Wolfson, *The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo*. *Jewish History* 6, no. 1/2 (1992): 281–316, 287.
23. In this case "thaumaturgy" refers to magical practices accepted by religious institutions.
24. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 24.
25. Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1997), xv.
26. Joseph Dan, *The Early Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1993), 39–40.
27. The dating of the poetry of Elazar ben Kallir is far from resolved. Some place him as early as the fifth century, while others say he lived as late as the ninth. Saadyah Gaon mentions Kallir in his first work, a Hebrew dictionary which he called *Agron*, composed in 902 (Saadya Gaon, *Agron*, ed. N. Allony [Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1969], 23, 154). He mentions ben Kallir again as an "ancient" poet in his commentary to the SY (written in 931) entitled *Kitab al-Mabadd* (Kafab, ed. [Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1972], 49), (ibid., 86). See also Ronald Kiener, "The Saadian Paraphrase," 12, n43. Most accept a seventh century date, while those advocating a sixth-century date include Joseph Dan and J. L. Fleischer. For the periodization of the *piyyu* literature, see Ezra Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 10–13. See also L. J. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History* (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998), 7–9. See also Michael Rand's article, "Clouds, Rain, and the Upper Waters: From Bereshit Rabbah to the Piyyutim of Eleazar be-rabbi Kallir," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, 9, no. 1 (2009): 13–39.

28. Aryeh Kaplan argues the same thing in the introduction to his translation and commentary, *Sefer Yetzirah: Theory and Practice*, xxiii.
29. Joseph Dan argues that the clue provided by Kallir's poem is the most significant. He doubts the utility of the Talmudic passage describing Rava's creation of the man because it uses the title "Hilkot Yetsira" rather than the *Sefer Yetsira*, arguing that "the possibility that the Talmud refers to it in *Sanhedrin* 65b is remote. He asks, How can it be that neither the treatise itself, which received a prominent Talmudic sanction, and was approved by the rabbis there, nor the process of creation described in that passage, are not mentioned in subsequent Talmudic and midrashic literature? Instead, he argues that though Kallir's dates are uncertain, his reference may indicate that the book was known to some people as early as the sixth century, *Unique Cherub Circle*, 39nn14–15.
30. It is worth noting that the late-antique *yotzer* drew freely on different cosmogonies, often combining them in the same poem or cycle of poems. Often they were grouped by theme, so that one poem might contain several different narratives on the creation of a particular element, such as water.
31. J. L. Fleischer, "On the Antiquity of Sefer Yezirah: The *Qilirian* Testimony Revisited," *Tarbiz* 71 (2001–2002): 405–432 (in Hebrew).
32. Hayman comments on the textual witness of a Saadyan recension of the SY found in the 931 Geniza copy of Saadya's Commentary. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 18.
33. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 7.
34. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 2.
35. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 2.
36. Israel Weinstock argues that the other two versions are based on the short version, which came first, and that glosses and marginalia were added over time, though other scholars disagree with him. Israel Weinstock, "LeBihur HaNusach shel Sefer Yetzirah," *Temrin* 1, no. 20 (1972), ("Towards Clarifying the Text of Sepher Yezira"). Hayman discusses Weinstock's opinions in *Sefer Yesira*, 5.
37. Why this insistence on Saadya's part to show that both the SY and his commentary are philosophical works? The answer may be sought in the area of polemics, namely, that this insistence is a response to some challenge, in the form of some other commentary or commentaries. (Ruth Link-Sallinger, ed. *A Straight Path* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988], 6.)
38. Link-Salinger, *A Straight Path*, 9.
39. George Vajda's French reads: "mais nous avons déjà qu'il pouvait y avoir dans ce livre es passages alteres que le patriarche Abraham [n'a jamais enonces] provenant des commentaires en hebreu, auxquels des gens ignorants ont ajoute posterieurement un autre commentaire et la verite se perdait entretemps." *Le Commentaire sur La Livre de Creation de Dusnas ben Tamim de Kairouan (X<sup>e</sup> Siecle)*. Nouvelle edition revue et

augmentee par Paul Fenton, 2002, *Collection de la Revue des Études Juives* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 129. Hebrew text, 242, and Manasseh Grossberg, *Sefer Yetzirah ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham with commentary by Dunash Ben Tamim*, published from MS Oxford 2250 London: 1902, 65. See also Kaplan, who quotes Rabbi Yaakov ben Nissim, who also wrote in the tenth century: "People write Hebrew comments on the book, and other foolish people come later and comment on the commentary. Between them, the truth is lost." Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Weiser Books, New York: 1997 xxiii.

40. Kaplan argues that the early commentaries attributed the SY to Abraham. He cites Saadya's Commentary as follows: "Saadya Gaon writes that 'The ancients say Abraham wrote it.'" (*Commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah*, tr. into Hebrew by Joseph Kapach, 34, in Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, xii). Kaplan argues that, "This opinion is supported by almost all the early commentators," and he includes a lengthy footnote citing those who hold this view (Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, 342n15).
41. He also attributes the work to Abraham in his "Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah," MS Jerusalem, National and University Library, 8, 2646, fol. 42a. Idel, "Golem," 198, 202. In Adolphe Franck's edition, Saadia Gaon begins his Arabic preface with the following words: "This book is called: Book of the Beginnings; it is attributed to our father Abraham (peace be with him)." (Salomon Munk, *Notice sur R. Saadia Gaon*, Paris, 1858, 20–29).
42. According to Scholem, the SY is attributed to Rabbi Akiva from the thirteenth century onward. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* Plume Publishers, New York: 1995, 28. Phineas Mordell argues that some thirteenth-century commentators (Bodleian Codex 1947) attributed the SY itself to Joseph ben Uziel, grandson of Ben Sirach. Mordell also argues that Ben Uziel was himself the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. This is based on a misunderstanding by the thirteenth-century Italian scribe and kabbalist, Menachem Recanati. (Phineas Mordell, "The Origins of Letters and Numbers," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 2 [April 1912]: 517–544). The article is continued in the next volume, 3 (April 1913): 479–88.
43. See Raphael Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yetzirah*: Some Comments," *Revue des études juives* 149 (1990): 369–415, and Elliot Wolfson, *The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo*. *Jewish History* 6, no. 1/2, (1992): 281–316.
44. See Eitan Fishbane, "Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbalah: Isaac of Acre's Illumination of the Eyes," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2004): 59–95.
45. See Colette Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002).
46. Also included is a lost work by Isaac Israeli. Fragments of this work appear in ibn Ezra's commentary. See R. Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yetzirah*: Some Comments," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 149 (1990): 369–415.

47. Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries," 370.
48. Dunash ibn Tamim's comment on the development of the manuscript tradition illustrates this point nicely when he claims "that there could be in this book other passages that Abraham the patriarch [never said] coming from the comments in Hebrew, to which ignorant people have added to the end . . ." Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries, note 46," 370.
49. Talmud, Sanhedrin 67a, cited in J. Neusner, *There We Sat Down* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 80.
50. B.T. Berakhot 55a. Soncino Babylonian Talmud. Rabbi Dr. I Epstein, trans.
51. B.T. Sanhedrin 65b.
52. See Idel, *Golem*, 60.
53. See Moshe Idel's foreword to the 2004 ed. of Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On page xiv, Idel writes that "the performative nature of the vast majority of the forms of Judaism facilitated the acceptance of magic as another form of performance, as an interpretation of the efficacy of rabbinic rituals." In it he defines as intrinsic magic those forms of effective action that are recognized by institutions, and as alien magic those that are not.
54. For more information on this, see Harry Austyn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
55. According to Shabbetai, the SY likens the *sefirot* to "a flash of lightning." The association is not prohibited by the text, but neither is it explicit. Shabbetai likens this "flash of lightning" to the ones described in the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Mancuso writes that, "The interest of Donnolo in this apocryphal text might have arisen from a verse wherein the knowledge and understanding of natural processes are said to be part of the divine wisdom that man was given by God." (Piergabriele Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni* [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 287n31).
56. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 290.
57. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 290.
58. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 291.
59. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 304.
60. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 305.
61. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 316.
62. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 296.
63. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 296.
64. The most important of these commentaries are those of Eleazar of Worms (12th c.), the Pseudo-Saadya (12th–13th c.), and Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi (13th to early 14th c.).
65. See Elliot Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of Sefirot in *Sefer Hakhmoni*," *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 281–316.

66. See Gershom Scholem's and Moshe Idel's distinction between ecstatic, theosophic, and magical streams of the kabbalah. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 4, still uses these distinctions, but because theosophical and practical texts share similar worldviews, it seems necessary to reconsider these categories. Scholem proposes them in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 124. Moshe Idel examines these attitudes in his essay, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in Joseph Dan and Peter Schaefer, eds., *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years After*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993, 127.
67. See Rachel Elior, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom* (London: Littman, 2007), 115.

### 3 Genre as Argument in the *Sefer Yetsirah*: A New Look at Its Literary Structure

1. This chapter is an adaptation of the article of the same name appearing the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (December 2011): 961–990.
2. It is also attributable to cultural differences among its readers over time and space.
3. A. Peter Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004, MS K, 59.
4. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MS K, 59. This shows the instability of the manuscript tradition.
5. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 59.
6. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 69.
7. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 69, 74 and 110–111.
8. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 69, 74, and 110–111. Hayman inserts the bracketed phrase "a mental image" after the word form, which is clearly indicated as an interpretation of the word "form." But in this case I do not think it is a correct one, since the instructions for the reader, to "know, ponder and form," progress from the abstract to the concrete.
9. Fritz Stahl, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 (1979): 2–22.
10. David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1988): 132–162.
11. Hans H. Penner, "Language, Ritual and Meaning," *Numen* 32, no. 1 (1985): 4 [1–16].
12. Penner, "Language, Ritual and Meaning," 4.
13. In 1922, the Vienna Circle decided on the threefold division. In *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, Charles W. Morris defined semiotics as "the triad of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 366.
14. For example, Ruth Kempson writes in her book, *Semantic Theory*, "our semantic theory must be able to assign to each word and sentence the meaning or meanings associated with it in that language." Ruth Kempson, *Semantics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2.

15. Lévi-Strauss explores this in "The Story of Asdiwal," in *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1976): 165.
16. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1995).
17. Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," 155.
18. On the relationship between compositional structure and memory, see Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22. Carruthers speaks of memoria as a locational memory that "cultivates the making of mental images for the mind to work with, as a fundamental procedure of human thinking because crafting memories also involved crafting the images in which those memories were carried and conducted, the artifice of memory was also, necessarily, an art of making various sorts of pictures; pictures in the mind, to be sure, but with close, symbiotic relationships to actual images and actual words that someone had read or heard or smelled or tasted or touched, for all the senses, as we will observe, were cultivated in the monastic craft of remembering" (*Craft of Thought*, 10). Carruthers's work can be used here to point out that the sort of visual thought demanded of the reader or the audience of the ring composition was a creative mnemonics—it was a way of visually recalling and recollecting fact and experience to innovate a new structure of thought and to act. On the relationship between memory and invention, see Mary Carruthers, "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology" *Connotations* 2, no. 2 (1992): 103–114. She writes that "Memory, not imagination, is the inventional faculty, both for antiquity and for the Middle Ages. That is how invention was taught in school and practiced in life. The imagination makes images, but memory both puts them away and hauls them out again, not as random 'objects' but as parts of a construction, a network, a web, a texture of associations." Elsewhere she writes that, "Memory is a machine for performing the tasks of invention." [Emphasis in original.]
19. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–7.
20. Benedek Lang, "Outdated Cipher-Systems in Magic Texts," an unpublished conference paper delivered at the 45th International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, MI, on May 16, 2010.
21. The field of syntactics is often focused on word order within sentences, but here we are focused on the instructions conveyed by genre, which includes in its definition the structure of the work as a whole. Many of the sentences of the SY are chiasmic in structure, and so they do emulate the generic structure of the whole, but this project awaits development.
22. Genre can also shed light on text-historical questions, since in some versions the form is better articulated than in others, which shows different stages of textual development.
23. Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 31–42.

24. For a good survey of the uses of this approach, see *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap division of Harvard University Press, 1987).
25. Gary Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). In this book he argues that the editor(s) of *Genesis* used chiasmic and parallel structures to organize their material. Throughout the analysis, Rendsburg defines symmetrical units through shared vocabulary and theme. He notes that catchwords often effect a smooth transition between consecutive units. This is also true of the SY.
26. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 43–58.
27. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 70.
28. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 70–71.
29. Glenn W. Most, *The Measures of Praise: Structure and Function in Pindar's Second Pythian and Seventh Nemean Odes* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1985 [series: Hypomnemata 83]), 235. Most argues that, "Much of the trouble is that scholars of poetry have manufactured problems through their traditional habits and concerns (and limitations, it may be added). Difficulties and methodology go hand in hand, and methodology has been generally the same since the time of the scholiasts: texts are fragmented for inspection into units of a phrase or a word rather than seen as wholes, single definitive explanations are sought for each unit, and particular elements of a fragmented text are seen to hold the key to understanding of the entirety." Thus Most argues that we have focused on the semantic mode of generating meaning to the exclusion of the syntactic.
30. Steve Reece, "The Three Circuits of the Suitors: A Ring Composition in *Odyssey* 17–22," *Oral Traditions* 10, no. 1 (1995): 207–229.
31. Douglas writes that, "This book turns out to be another example of what Glenn Most has called 'the Pindar Problem' for Western Greek Classicists: the misinterpretation of the text due to a misunderstanding of its structure. Numbers' problem is the same: a poet highly esteemed in his time is found to be quite impenetrable in modern times." *Thinking in Circles*, 43.
32. Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery, and John Fiske, *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 28.
33. Robert Allen, "Bursting Bubbles: 'Soap Opera's Audiences and the Limits of Genre," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (London: Routledge, 1989), 44–55. See also Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds. *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994). Allen writes: "A reader must encounter sufficient examples of a genre in order to recognize the shared features that characterize it" (52).
34. Alastair Fowler, "Genre," in *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, vol. 2, ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: Oxford University Press: 1989), 215 [215–217].

35. Early medieval commentators simply proceeded chapter by chapter with their analysis. They did not draw attention to the difficulty of the text.
36. Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*. trans. Fabrizio Lanza (Columbo, Italy: Providence University, 2007).
37. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 36.
38. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 43.
39. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 36.
40. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 36.
41. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 7.
42. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 37.
43. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 37.
44. Vatican (Cat. Assemani) 299(8), fols. 66a–71b.
45. The Geniza Scroll, Cambridge University Library, Taylor/Schechter K21/56 + Glass 12/813.
46. MS Parma 2784, DeRossi 1390, fols. 36b–38b.
47. Most recently Ronit Meroz has characterized the introduction as an editor's preface of sorts. She writes: "It is my view that *Sefer Yezirah* presents several different answers to the question of the meaning of these claims [about the nature of the *sefirot*]: alternative solutions whose conceptual worlds are close to one another, yet nevertheless differ in several significant aspects. The opening of the book may therefore be read as presenting a shared, common claim or, alternatively, as posing the question presented for discussion. By the nature of things, such a presentation is done by one who knows and is familiar with the possible solutions—namely, the editor of the text." Ronit Meroz, "Between *Sefer Yezirah* and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in *Sefer Yezirah*," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 6, no. 18 (2007): 106.
48. Hayman, ed. *Sefer Yesira*, 137. Hayman notes that neither SY41 nor SY52 occurs in the short version, and that these two verses are structurally similar. Just the same, SY42 and 43a do appear in the short-version manuscripts, and they supply concrete information about material elements created with the letters. SY42 reads: "[A]nd with them were carved out seven firmaments, seven earths . . ." 43a reads: "These are the seven planets in the Universe, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars . . ." Although the Long and Saadyan Versions present a fully articulated catalogue, the short-version manuscripts also provide information about created elements.
49. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY61, MSS A, K, and C, 181–182.
50. Verse 56 is not present in MS A.
51. See JTS 1895, a fourteenth-century pseudo-Saadyan commentary on the SY, fol. 17b.
52. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, Verse 40, 136.
53. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 36–37.
54. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 176.



55. This passage in particular also incorporates the *hekhalot* imagery, the imagery of the divine palace, appearing elsewhere in the text. Where previously the reader was instructed to restore God to his place, here that place is described.
56. MS K, MS A, 182, also includes a covenant between Abraham's ten toes. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS K and A, 182.
57. Many argue that the final verses are a late addition, but they appear in every early version included in Hayman's book and in the manuscripts that I have seen. Therefore, practically speaking, this is part of the book from the beginning of its recorded history, and it should be treated as such.
58. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira* SY61 MSS A and K, 182.
59. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY61 MSS A and K, 182.
60. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY61 MSS A and K, 182.
61. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS A and K, 182.

#### 4 Thinking in Lines and Circles

1. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
2. The manuscripts do not specify a first name. Daniel Abrams identifies this writer as Yaakov ben Yaakov haKohen. See Abrams, "R. Eleazar ha Darshan's Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*," *Alei Sefer* 19 (2001): 69–87 (Hebrew).
3. For more information on the contents of these manuscripts, see: Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010). See also: Moshe Idel: *Kabbalah in Italy: A Survey* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
4. Moshe Idel says that a passage on the dangers of golem creation precedes it from 92b–93a, and that a golem recipe follows on 94b–95a. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280–1510: A Survey*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) 92.
5. Giulio Busi, *Qabbala Visiva* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 129.
6. Denis Cosgrove, "Mapping New Worlds: Culture and Cartography in Sixteenth-Century Venice," *Imago Mundi* 44 (1992): 65–89.
7. Denis Cosgrove, *Mappings* (London: Reaction Books, 1999), 2.
8. Cosgrove, *Mappings*, 2. Cosgrove argues that, "The measure of mapping is not restricted to the mathematical; it may equally be spiritual, political, or moral. By the same token, the mapping's record is not confined to the archival; it includes the remembered, the imagined, the contemplated. The world figured by mapping may this be actual or desired, whole or part, in various ways experienced, remembered, or projected."
9. Cosgrove, *Mappings*, 2.
10. Cosgrove, *Mappings*, 2.

11. Brian Lancaster, "On the Relationship between Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11–12 (2000): 231 [231–250].
12. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 219.
13. Moshe Idel, "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43.
14. Lancaster, "On the Relationship," 231.
15. The same goes for the *sefirot* as described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. They are richly significant as instruments of creation and aspects of the divine, and they have their own grammar, but linguistically they are not significant. It is not possible to spell words with them, and so they lack the most general sort of meaning.
16. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 136.
17. Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991). He claimed that while its terms were introduced in the SY, the cosmology articulated in the *Bahir* is distinct from earlier ones because it features *sefirot* that figure as hypostasized elements of the divine capable of interacting with one another.
18. In *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Moshe Idel writes: "The earliest theosophical conceptions of the *sefirot* occur concomitantly in Provençal Kabbalah, in *Sefer haBahir*, and in the esoteric materials preserved in Eleazar of Worms' *Sefer HaHokhmah*. Conspicuous in their elaboration of the nature of the *sefirot* are certain passages in the *Sefer haBahir* (although the term itself is rarely mentioned) and the *Commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah* of R. Isaac the Blind. Although the names of the *sefirot* are similar, these two seem to originate from different theosophical traditions. *Sefer HaBahir* presents a mythically oriented picture of the sefirotic pleroma whereas R. Isaac the Blind gives a much more complex theory of the emergence of the *sefirot* from the depths of divinity, betraying a deep speculative tendency probably influenced by Neoplatonic thought." Moshe Idel. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 136.
19. The *Commentary of Isaac the Blind* lists them in two groups progressing from bottom to top, with *Hokhmah* appearing at the top of both lists. The text follows: Five are *Netzach, Hod, Tiferet, Hesed, Hokhmah*; the other five are: *Atarah, Tzadik, Pahad, Binah and Hokhmah* again. Mark Brian Sendor, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*," 2 vols. (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994). They are discussed from pp. 32–52, but especially on 52.
20. The others did not disappear, but the *ilan* became the favored mode of representation. JTS 1555 and JTS 1574 have beautiful letter diagrams, particularly of the *Aleph*, with the *sefirot* mapped onto the letter. Other

- diagrams show the *sefirot* on a menorah, or on the form of a spinning wheel (JTS 1837 *Emek ha Melekh*, 18<sup>th</sup> century, fol. Mem Het)).
21. There is a large body of literature on the *sefirot* and their significance, and so it is not necessary to fully describe them here. See especially Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*. vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
  22. This “modern” *ilan* is usually based on one appearing in the print edition of Moshe Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimonim*, published in Cracow in 1591.
  23. These occur in Lurianic and later manuscripts. See JTS 1834: *Menorat Natan*, attributed to Nathan Spira. Italy, Seventeenth century. Fols. 71a, 197a–b, and 198a–b, and JTS 1744: Isaac Luria’s *Sefer HaCavvanot*. Yemen, 17<sup>th</sup> Century.
  24. Elliot Wolfson, “The Tree That Is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993): 31–76. Wolfson treats the *sefirot* and the world-tree separately. He argues that the world-tree symbols developed in the midrashic traditions, and in a separate article he argues that theosophic attitude characterizing sefirotic kabbalah, as it appears in the Zohar, was developed in Shabbetai Donnolo’s *Sefer Yetsirah*.
  25. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 141–143.
  26. These models are not mutually exclusive.
  27. A. Peter Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004), SY12–13, 84–85.
  28. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY15, 91.
  29. See JTS 1609.
  30. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY3, 67.
  31. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY3, 67.
  32. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY10, 81.
  33. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY14, 87.
  34. See Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
  35. This refers to the brilliance of the *Shekhinah* protecting Moses. This interpretation is expressed in the third-century sermons of Joshua ben Levi (Southern Palestine, first half of the third century). Barbara Holdrege writes: “The details changed from time to time, but the essential point stayed the same. Moses braves the terror of the angels in order to take the Torah from Heaven with his own hands. The angel, violently hostile at first, became supporters and benefactors of Moses and the whole Israelite people. This was a popular motif among the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.” Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 520n171.
  36. This is presented as a quote, but its source is unclear.
  37. In this case, they are angry angels.
  38. This passage refers to two descriptions of angels that occur in Exodus and are connected with the giving of the Torah. The first describes their benevolent nature, while the second describes their roles in carrying out divine

justice. Exodus 23:20, "Behold, I send an angel before you, to keep you by the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared." Here is the benevolent angel guiding the Israelites in the desert. The angels have two aspects though, because in Exodus 32:34 the same angel punishes. "Now, go and lead the people whither I have told you. My angel will go before you. When it is time for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin." This commentary, then, describes the transformation of the punishing angel to the one that guides the Israelites on the path of the tree of life.

39. The last phrase and its gender are the same in each manuscript.
40. The phrase "bundle of life" is unusual. But it occurs in the Bible in the book of Samuel, and the commentaries on that book usually define it as eternal life. In 1 Samuel: 25:29, the phrase appears in the following context: "Even if a man comes to pursue you and seek your soul, may the soul of my lord be bound up in the bundle of life with the Lord, and the souls of your enemies shall he sling out from the hollow of a sling." The Tanna, Yonatan ben Uziel, translates "bundle of life" as "eternal life." Nahmanides wrote in [his commentary at] the end of the Torah portion *V'hoyo ekev*, "It befits people of this stature that their souls be 'bound up in the bundle of life' even while in their mortal state." Nahmanides identifies this as a level of the celestial realms, He writes, "There are actually three levels: the earthly Garden of Eden, the heavenly Garden of Eden in the seventh heaven, 'Aravot, and the upper Eden in the divine realm, the Shekhinah, also referred to as the 'bundle of life.'" See *Kitvei Ramban*, 1:160–161, 2:297–298. Wolfson points out that Nahmanides' structure is repeated in the *Zohar*. Elliot Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic." *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 144n32 [103–178].
41. Elliot Wolfson's 1994 book bears this title. But the speculum is not defined in this book in terms of something one could *become*. Instead it is an instrument, something seen through, and seen in. It refers to an object like a mirror.
42. Later (Exodus 33:20 and 23), the vision is restricted to the divine back according to the notion that, "You cannot see my face, for none shall see Me and live . . . (33:20). Then I will take my hand away and you will see my back, but my face must not be seen." (33:23).
43. Prophets able to apprehend the divine form see through the speculum that does not shine, while Moses alone is prevented from seeing the divine form, and in this, he sees through the speculum that shines.
44. See *Zohar* III: 152a.
45. Translation by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 75.
46. This sentiment is echoed in the commentary preceding the diagram above. It is unclear whether the *Bahir* precedes this reading of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, or whether it draws upon this reading of the *Sefer Yetsirah* in its conceptions of the cosmos. But it is clear that there is a connection, that the "tree that is all" is part of the cosmological views of the commentators

on the *Sefer Yetsirah* by the thirteenth century. It is also apparent that the *Bahir* draws upon Yetsiratic cosmology.

47. The ultimate paradigm for the *Hekhalot* is the ascension of Moses. At least as far back as the third century, we have reason to believe, Palestinian synagogue preachers entranced their audiences with exciting tales of how Moses had climbed to heaven over the angels' objections and captured Torah for Israel (David J. Halperin, "Origen, Ezekiel's Merkabah, and the Ascension of Moses," *Church History* 50, no. 3 (September 1981): 261–275.
48. This common image indicates a closer relationship between Italian and German Jewish traditions than is usually thought. Robert Bonfil writes that "the world of the Hasidei Ashkenaz appears to be much more closely related to the reality of Southern Italy than is usually assumed. . . not only were the Hasidei Ashkenaz genealogically related to Italian Jewry; their cultural tradition, up to now considered as unique and essentially rooted in German soil, included also elements from the heritage of Italian Jews." Bonfil, Robert. "Can Medieval Storytelling Help Understanding Midrash?" in *Midrashic Imagination*, Michael Fishbane, ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 234.
49. Klaus Herrmann, "An Unknown Commentary on the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yezirah*)," in *Creation and Re-creation in Jewish thought: Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Rachel Elior and Peter Schaefer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 103–112.
50. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY4, MS K, 70.
51. Another variety of the circular diagram appears in Parma 1390, and it will be examined later in the chapter.
52. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY6, MS K, 74.
53. This idea is commonly expressed in the *Zohar*.
54. Verses 25 and 33 illuminate this inscription. They come from Hayman's MS K, the text of MS Parma 1390: SY25: "Three: fire, water, and air: fire above, water below, and air is between them. And this is a sign for the matter: that fire evaporates water" (Hayman, ed. *Sefer Yesira*, 113). Here the text does not mention water, but it describes the process of evaporation as a sign or a proof. SY33 describes the creation of earth from water: "He made mem rule over water, and bound it to a crown, and combined them with each other, and formed with it earth in the universe, cold in the year, and the belly in mankind, male and female" (Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 122).
55. According to some of the commentaries, the process of creating earth from fire and water is described by analogy to the minerals found at the bottom of a water pot, once it has been well used.
56. The later sefirotic *ilanot* also lack the earth-creation narrative depicted on the perimeter.
57. The texts appear in a similar order in the portion of the manuscript leading up to the *Ilan HaHokhmah*.
58. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira* 127; MS Parma 1390, fol. 43b.

59. Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 135–136.
60. Arthur Green describes this association in his introduction to the Pritzker edition of the *Zohar* (introduction, xlvii). These seven *sefirot*, taken collectively, are represented in the spatial domain by the six directions around a center (in the tradition of the *Sefer Yetsirah*). MS K supports this reading. SY10 in MS K equates the *sefirot* with the three elements, the six directions, and the Holy Temple, cited above in note x: “Ten *sefirot*, that is to say (*k’lomar*), one: the spirit of the living God. Twice blessed is the name of the Life of the Worlds, Voice and air (*ruach*) and word—this is the Holy Spirit.” SY11 (in MS A, missing in other MSS) follows through on the association: “Ten Sefirot are the basis: One—the Spirit of the Living God: two—air form the Holy Spirit; three—water from air; four—fire from water; and above and below, east and west, north and south” (Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 81–82). SY38 associates the seven double letters with the six directions plus the Holy Temple: Seven double letters: BGD CPRT. Seven edges: a place of edges and a holy place: a place set within a place . . . seven, the eternal edge and the Holy Temple Set in the middle” (Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira* 131). Together these passages equate the *sefirot* with the six directions plus the Temple, and these with the seven double letters.
61. Fol. 43b.
62. See Hayyim Soloveitchik, “Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: *Sefer Hasidim* and the Influence of Hasidei Ashkenaz,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, no. 3–4 (2002): 468 [455–493].
63. Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 135–136. Busi writes: “Perhaps because it represents a transitional phase, the tree of the wisdom of this Roman manuscript does not seem to have had a later tradition and remained a lone episode...” (133). The tree does appear in one single later manuscript, but its significance is in its pairing with the round model of the *sefirot*, as well as in the way the tree itself it models two cosmographic modes side by side.
64. See Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). He discusses this in the *sefirot* section beginning p. 269.
65. These include:
  - 1) JTS 1609 (a collection of kabbalistic varia, from fourteenth-century Provence)
  - 2) JNL Microfilm 47650. Moscow Russian State Library MS Guenzburg 290 (fourteenth century) containing a beautiful copy of the *Sefir*, as well as the *Sefer Ma’arekhet Elohut*. There is a round, asymmetrical diagram of the SY.
  - 3) JTS 1562, Mordechai Dato’s abbreviated version of Moshe Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimmonim*, (Ferrara, before 1598).
  - 4) JTS 1837 (*Emek Ha Melekh*), 1745 Yemen. Naftali Bacharach’s neo-Lurianic work was published in Amsterdam in 1648.

66. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1994). "The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home" (xx). "Thus, in every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being" (xxi).

## 5 The Letterforms: How did He Combine Them?

1. See A. Peter Hayman "Was God a Magician? *Sefer Yesira* and Jewish Magic," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): 225–237.  
He argues that in the SY, there are two principal images of God, as an artist and as a magician. He argues that at the end of the text, "Abraham functions like a magician who by his knowledge of the correct formulas can compel the gods to appear and do his bidding." Hayman, "Was God a Magician?," 234. Thus human magicians emulate the divine and actually become capable of exercising influence over God.
2. It is unclear whether they participate afterward in the divine being, after having been imprinted by the divine and in the process becoming substantially related, or whether they have done so from the start because they derive from the divine substance.
3. Job 38 uses many architectural metaphors to describe the creation of the world. In 38:4, God asks Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" In 38:6 it is asked: "Who laid its cornerstone?" (JPS translation). For a history of the narrative of the *even shetiyah*, the foundation stone, see D. Sperber, "On Sealing the Abysses," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 11 (1966): 168 f.
4. Job 38 is very important to the SY and its commentators. The text uses its architectural metaphors as described here (38:4–6 as well as its conceptions of creation by the creation of boundaries, in 38:8–11, and its conception of sealing in 38:14.) Second the commentaries use its cosmological model, viewing time as the progression of the constellations as it is described in 38:31–32.
5. "The Torah was to God, when he created the world, what the plan is to an architect when he erects a building." Samuel Rappaport, trans., *Tales and Maxims from the Midrash* (London: G. Routledge; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), 43.
6. A. Peter Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004), SY13, 85; SY40, 135.
7. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY13, 85.
8. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY13, 85.

9. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY11, 13, 14, 19, 30, 39, 48a, 49, and 62, pp. 83, 85, 87, 100, 119, 133, 151, 155, and 182 respectively.
10. The letters are described as building blocks, the basis of all creation. "He formed with them the life of all creation and the life of all that would be formed." Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY19, MSS K, A, and C, 100–101.
11. Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 24.
12. Hayman translates this as "sealed with them," but one literal reading of the text is "sealed in them." Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY15, 89.
13. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY15, 89.
14. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17, 92–93.
15. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 69–70.
16. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS A and C, 74.
17. Hayman inserts the bracketed phrase "a mental image" after the word form, which is clearly indicated as an interpretation of the word "form." But in this case I do not think it is a correct one, since the instructions for the reader, to "know, ponder and form," progress from the abstract to the concrete. (Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 74).
18. The text reads: "When Abraham our father observed and looked and saw and investigated, and understood, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed . . ." (Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY61, 182).
19. Bruce Lincoln. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6.
20. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 6.
21. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17, MS K, 93.
22. Both Hayman and Wasserstrom see the text employing an eighth-century Arabic linguistic model, and they cite this as evidence for dating the manuscript after that point and tying it to a philosophical milieu. This makes excellent sense. It is important to add, though, that this model would not have been used if it did not say something meaningful about the letters themselves, showing what they did and how they worked. See Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 95, and Stephen Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14.
23. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY18, 93
24. The letters become powerful when people pronounce them because it is a speech act. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
25. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY19, MSS K and A, 100. All of Hayman's manuscripts contain these six steps.
26. Some of the diagrams do, however.
27. Other versions have 231 gates instead of 221.
28. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 98.
29. Haymen, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY19, 100.
30. Some texts (MSS K and A) have the letters fixed on a wheel with "two hundred and twenty-one gates." What exactly were the "gates" and how



did they work? Saadya seems to have understood each pair of letters in the basic sequence to be a “gate.” Later versions of the text, Ari and GRA, read “fixed in a wheel, as in a wall.” This probably comments on the diagramming tradition of representing the letter combinations in both wheel and table forms, which accompany the following verse. Eleazar of Worms thought the “gates” were a series of letters, paired (or grouped) according to one of his magical alphabets. In the diagrams these gates are sometimes represented in the form of a letter wheel.

31. Most of these appear in later sources from the fifteenth century onward, including JTS 2203, *Or Zarua*, fifteenth-century North African, fol. 10, and Cordoverian commentaries such as JTS 1574 SY, fols. 21 and 25. Earlier commentaries use the letter-wheel concept differently. These create wheels for smaller groups of letters with their own series of combinations. The most prominent of these are Abulafian commentaries appearing in the thirteenth-century manuscripts examined in [chapters 4 and 6](#).
32. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 101.
33. It is worth noting that this is missing in MS C, the Saadyan recension. I believe that this is an ideological choice reflecting his disapproval of the practical application of the SY.
34. There are a number of different charts interpreting the verbal description. Some combine *aleph* with each letter of the alphabet in order, and some pair *Aleph* with the last letter, *Bet* with the second last, *Gimmel* with the third last, and so on. This method is called ATBaSH. Others provide different combinations. MS A combines *Aleph* with *Lamed*, the middle letter, then *Aleph* with all the rest in alphabetical order beginning with *Bet*. Others provide different combinations, so it is clear that although the letter chart is commonly included in the text, right after the word “sign,” its meaning is still a matter of interpretation.
35. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17, MS K, 93.
36. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17, MS K, 101.
37. See Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 106–109. MS A, which contains the tables, is a tenth-century manuscript of the Long Version.
38. Hayman translates the *T’li* as the Hook, but most saw it as an astrological entity.
39. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS K, A, and C, 177.
40. Saadya Gaon, *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah*, section 4, “On the Creation’s Witnesses.” (From Saadya ben Joseph [al-Fayyumi], *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira ou Livre de la Création par Le Gaon Saadya de Fayyoun*, trans. and ed. M. Lambert [Paris: Emile Bouillon, Editeur, 1891]; trans. into English from the French and Hebrew by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson, San Francisco, 1985.) This is an unpublished translation posted on a website at the following address: [www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html](http://www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html).
41. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS A and K, 182.
42. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, SY17, MSS A, K, and C, 121.

43. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 195.
44. Book of Job, 38: 31–33.
45. Tractate *Brakhot* (*Seder Zera'im*), ch. 9, fol. 59a, ed. I. Epstein, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1948).
46. Piergabriele Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 72.
47. For manuscript sources, see Sacha Stern and Piergabriele Mancuso, trs., “An Astronomical Table by Shabbetai Donnolo and the Jewish Calendar in Tenth-Century Italy,” *Aleph* 7 (2007): 13–41.
48. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 72.
49. Mancuso, *Shabbetai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni*, 73.
50. JTS 1895, fol. 17b. See also MS Harley 5510 (fol. 233b), in Hebrew University Manuscript 7, 1343–1344 Private collection, Ashkenazi (fol. 39b), and the 1562 Mantua *editio princeps* of the *Sefer Yetsirah HaShalem*.
51. The Commentary of Joseph ben Shalom Asheknazi, JTS 1884 fol. 74a.
52. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 70.
53. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 6.

## 6 Golem Diagrams: Golem Making, Astrology, and Messianism

1. Neubauer, Cat. Bodl. Hebr. MSS No. 1566.
2. This was written in sixteenth-century Palestine, and it shows the messianic interpretation of the ritual.
3. This manuscript is written in 1280 by Rabbi Abraham Abulafia. It is a work about the power of the 72 divine names and the tetragrammaton.
4. Dan dates the text to the twelfth century, while Hillel Kieval places it in the thirteenth (see Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle* [Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999] and Hillel Kieval, “Pursuing the Golem of Prague” *Modern Judaism* 17 (1997): 1–23.
5. Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 122. See also Moshe Idel and Emily Bilski, *Golem! Danger, Deliverance, and Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1989), 20.
6. In the twelfth century, the kabbalists of the Special Cherub Circle thought of the letters HWY as the souls of the other letters. This is why diagrams of the tetragrammaton (which repeats the H to get four letters) appear commonly in commentaries they wrote.
7. This is especially true of R. Elhanan ben Yakar. According to this author (37), God blew the spirit of life into man using these letters. The two stages of golem creation (one, by combination of the regular letters of the alphabet, and two, by the combination of the letters of the divine names) may reflect one, the formation of their limbs and their animation, and two, the infusing of the soul into the golem. Such a reading, which is understood as speculative, is reinforced by the occurrence of the terms

- hiyyut* and *neshamah*, which may refer to the different stages. (Idel and Bilski, *Golem!*, 122).
8. See Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 20, no. 79 (September 1972): 59–80.
  9. Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1915), 141–148.
  10. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 141–148. The engraving renders otherwise common objects "sacred," and their inscription upon the bodies of clan members indicates the approach of the most important religious ceremonies. Here it is the body of the golem that is inscribed.
  11. The golem really receives its best treatment in fiction, in which its function is more social than theological. In contemporary fiction it functions as a metaphor for probing our faith in science and technology, or it is a mirror for our social structure. Sometimes, too, it symbolizes the corporate past.
  12. Idel, *Golem*, 31: "Let me summarize my proposal of the meaning of Rava's creation passage: a tradition dealing with the magical practices attributed to Rava was understood as a test case for someone's righteousness."
  13. Idel, *Golem*, 27–28.
  14. Idel, *Golem*, 272: "The mystical interpretation of the golem can be explained as the superimposition of one set of concepts upon another . . ."
  15. Idel, *Golem*, 273.
  16. A. Peter Hayman, "Was God a Magician?," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): 234 [225–237].
  17. This reproduces a dichotomy common to western scholarship of religion in general, and of kabbalah in particular. In general, cognitive processes are named integral religious practices and assigned theological meaning, while corporeal rituals are divested of meaning and located outside normative religion. This is a mere reproduction of the magic-religion taxonomic structure. Abulafia insists that these processes were entirely cognitive, and so his rituals are deemed religiously significant.
  18. Idel, *Golem*, 60.
  19. Idel writes that "the meaning of this section is far from being clear; I assume that he refers to the extraordinary power of the righteous to create." Idel, *Golem*, 60.
  20. Pseudo-Saadya, Idel, *Golem*, 82.
  21. Idel, *Golem*, 85.
  22. Idel, *Golem*, 99.
  23. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 41.
  24. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 47.
  25. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 131.
  26. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 128.
  27. From the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary: (fol. 42), translation from Idel and Bilski, *Golem!*, 21.
  28. Such a reading, which is understood as speculative, is reinforced by the occurrence of the terms *hiyyut* and *neshamah*, which may refer to the different stages. (Idel and Bilski, *Golem!*, 122 n20).

29. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 140.
30. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 140.
31. There is a diagram of the *T'li* on 39b, with many differences from JTS 1895.
32. A. Peter Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004), SY59, 177.
33. As discussed previously, the *T'li* is not well defined in the SY, but the commentators express some strong opinions about it. This is true because its role is pivotal. If the *T'li* holds the kind of power this verse suggests, then it shows that the SY expresses an astrological view of the cosmos in which the movements of the heavens can be used to predict the future and to understand the workings of God. If the *T'li* does not hold this sort of power, then it allows for a philosophical view that treats its cosmological elements as symbolic or representative of creative principles at work. This philosophical view does not hold that humans can manipulate these elements to achieve an effect, while the astrological view posits that humans can observe the workings of the cosmos to determine the most propitious time for action. In several commentaries, such as Shabbetai Donnolo's, the Pseudo-Saadya's, and Joseph ben Shalom's, the astrological view is joined with an explicitly magical one, and these texts and their diagrams often include formulae and instructions for action.
34. Linguistic information is important in this diagram in organizing the relationships between the elements even though they relate to one another spatially. However, it plays a lesser role than in other sorts of Yetsiratic diagrams because the significant work of the diagram is done by images and shapes—the circular snake is the center of the diagram, and the circles surrounding it imitate its shape and reinforce the relationship of each of its elements to the center. But language acts as an index and a key. The orientation of the text points the reader in the right direction to read spatial relationships. The graphic elements posit the relations among them. The terms are labels, and the numeric divisions and graphic elements of the diagram do the majority of its communicative work.
35. Fol. 17b.
36. Fol. 17b.
37. Fol. 18a.
38. See Bernard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. B. Anderson and W. Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 177–195.
39. Medieval Jews believed in both the creation of the world and its imminent redemption. The year 1240 was 5000 in the Jewish cycle, and for many it portended the beginning of the messianic era. They used various methods to calculate the time of its redemption, including Biblical exegesis, astrology, numerology, and *gematria*. This may explain the messianic bent of the SY commentaries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It does not explain the continuation of these aspirations in the commentaries written and reproduced after this date. Even so,

messianic calculation motivated efforts toward systematizing the Jewish calendar.

40. Abulafia was convinced that his mystical (ecstatic) kabbalah was a continuation and an elevation of Maimonides's philosophical kabbalah: he thought that he had discovered the mystical core within Maimonides's philosophy. (Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle*, 122).
41. "At the heart of Abulafia's method is *hokhmat ha-seruf*, an astonishingly complex means of meditating on, and associatively recombining, the letters of the sacred Hebrew alphabet. In so doing the soul is liberated from ordinary perceptions, so that at length one may simultaneously confront his true self and behold the divine. Unio mystica is thereby attained, 'he and He becoming one entity' (*hu' we-hu' davar 'ehad bilti nifrad*)." E. K. Ginsburg, "Moshe Idel and the Field of Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Review Essay," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82, no. 1–2 (1991): 208 [207–214].
42. Ginsburg, "Moshe Idel," 208.
43. Ginsburg, "Moshe Idel," 208.
44. BN 763, fols. 31a–b; MS Parma 1390, fols. 94b–95a, and a few others as well.
45. MS Parma 1390 fols. 94b–95a. Translation by Moshe Idel, *Golem*, 97.
46. Idel, *Golem*, 97–98.
47. Dan identifies the attribution of this commentary to Joseph ben Uziel as a hallmark of the Unique Cherub school. He was a legendary figure, grandson of Ben Sira, son of Jeremiah. He argues that they produced this commentary and attributed it Joseph. He makes this argument in *Early Kabbalah* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986), 24. Phineas Mordell argues that some thirteenth-century commentators (Bodleian Codex 1947) attributed the SY itself to Joseph ben Uziel, based on a misunderstanding by Menachem Recanati. Mordell also argues that Ben Uziel was himself the author of the SY. (Phineas Mordell, "The Origins of Letters and Numbers" [*Jewish Quarterly Review*, 2 and 3 (1912 and 1913): 557–83 and 517–44]).
48. Idel, *Golem*, 98. He does it on two bases: first, on the affinity of this fragment to Abulafia's work, and second, on their attribution to Abraham.
49. See Abraham Abulafia, *Hayyei Olam HaBa* (Jerusalem: Nehora Press, 1999).
50. See below, n. 52. Shahr Arzy, Moshe Idel, Theodor Landis, and Olaf Blanke, "Speaking with One's Self: Autoscopic Phenomena in Writings from the Ecstatic Kabbalah," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12, no. 11 (2005): 9 [4–30].
51. It is worth noting the identity between the creature and creator. In Abulafia's *Sefer HaHeshek* he envisions the creature as a doppelgänger, or a spiritual self that mediates the prophetic experience. See Arzy, Idel, Landis, and Blanke, "Speaking with One's Self," 9.
52. Idel, *Golem*, 97, from BN 763, called by Idel MS Paris 763.

53. There are 120 in the printed edition, Jerusalem 1999. The medieval texts examined here however contain 24.
54. Idel and Bilski, *Golem!*, 24.
55. Idel and Bilski, *Golem!*, 24.
56. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, MSS A, K, and C, 135. This explains the inclusion of 120 houses in the printed edition of the text; it merely illustrates the next phrase after 24, and the next phase in combination.
57. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 97–98.
58. Hayman, ed., *Sefer Yesira*, 76.
59. MS Parma, 1390. This theme appears in several commentaries, including those of Eleazar of Worms, and in an anonymous commentary, *The Secret Name of the 42 Letters*. In this commentary Jeremiah creates a golem, but concludes “indeed it is worthwhile to study the matters for the sake of knowing the power and dynamis of the creator of the world, but not in order to do them. You shall study them in order to comprehend and to teach.” (Idel, *Golem*, 56). This warning also appears in the manuscripts studied here. But it seems to me that these admonitions communicate an ambivalence rather than simple prohibition. After all, they contain direct instructions to complete the ritual, they demonstrate the success of the operators, and in the case of Abulafia, they show its messianic function. These ambivalent cases demonstrate the shared worldview of theosophs and practitioners. They also show a belief that practice was necessary to attain knowledge, and they served to direct the operator away from an enduring creation and toward an instrumental one that should be dismantled once it has served its purpose. Its purpose was inseparable from the performance of the ritual resulting in creation. And so the division between ideal and material does not hold.
60. Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 367.
61. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 367. Idel notes that his tables replicate precisely those of Eleazar. The same tables appearing in this commentary also appear in *Or Zarua*.
62. Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth: Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2009), 18–19.
63. Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, 18–19.
64. Francis Schmidt. “Ancient Jewish Astrology: An Attempt to Interpret 4QCryptic (4Q186),” 1, online source accessed at <http://orion.mssc.huji.ac.il/symposiums/1st/papers/Schmidt96.html#fnref2>.
65. SY52 is long, with 12 separate parts, so only the first two are included to show the pattern common to each.
66. See Shlomo Sela, “Sefer ha-Tequfah: An Unknown Treatise on Anniversary Horoscopy by Abraham Ibn Ezra,” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, 9, no. 2 (2009): 240–254. He provides a good description of some of the astrological terms appearing in these two diagrams. See also Peter Schafer and Mark R. Cohen, eds., *Toward the*

*Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 185–187.

67. Idel, *Golem*, 87.
68. This volvelle consists of two wheels, one stationary outer wheel and one moveable inner wheel. The inner consists of 12 permutations of the tetragrammaton, while the outer stationary wheel consists of 28 six-letter permutations of the tetragrammaton plus two other letters.
69. See (Ernst E. Ettish) Eliyahu Rosh-Pinnah, “The Sefer Yetzirah and the Original Tetragrammaton,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 57, no. 3 (1967): 226 [212–226]. Ettish writes that some thought that YHAH was the “true” tetragrammaton, and that the vowels, which are represented by the three mother letters, actually stood for the tetragrammaton (Ettish, 222). Advocates of this view include Moshe Cordovero and Abraham ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra discussed it in his *Sepher Hashem* (Book of the Name). Ettish believes that “the concept works as follows: (1) Behind the “mothers” (AMS) of the SY is hidden the “great, wonderful secret” of the Original Tetragrammaton. This consists of the four original vowels u – a – i, – e. (2) The SY and its “mothers” confirm the statement of ibn Ezra that the tetragrammaton contains an *Aleph* in the guise of a *Heh*. (3) (4) The Jews of antiquity considered the vowels u – a – i – e as sacrosanct.” (226).
70. This repeats the language of the Pseudo-Saadyan commentary, which says that letter combination is “a reed for writing in this world, but only for those who divide language” (JTS 1895, fol. 17b).
71. In Proverbs, God “drew a circle on the face of the deep . . . and marked out the foundations of the earth . . .” (8:27–29). God challenges Job with the famous question: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . Who determined its measurements . . . or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone . . .” (38:4) Here the pillars are conceived as the first step in creation, so that they are analogous to the creation of the letters. The pillars are an important feature in biblical cosmology: the Earth and the heavens are supported by pillars that shake when God gets angry as attested in the following: Job 9:6, Job 26:11, Psalms 75:3, and 1 Samuel 2:8.
72. The whole reads “And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.”
73. The Hebrew for soul is *nefesh*, which is the lower, bodily soul, as opposed to the *ruach* (spirit) or the *neshama* (divine soul). This often simply means “person.”
74. Proverbs 8:27–29.
75. Job 38:4, JPS.
76. Genesis 28:15.
77. JTS 1884 fol. 74a.
78. See Ezekiel: 37:1–4. “The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley;

it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'" See also Isaiah 26:19: "But your dead will live, LORD; their bodies will rise— let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy— your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead."

79. See Esperanza Alfonso, "The Uses of Exile in Poetic Discourse: Some Examples from Medieval Hebrew Literature," in *Renewing the Past, Reconfiguring Jewish Culture: From al-Andalus to the Haskalah* (Jewish Culture and Contexts), ed. Ross Brann and Adam Sutcliffe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), ch. 2.

## 7 Conclusions

1. Raphael Jospe, "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yezirah*: Some Comments," *Revue Etudes Juives* 149, no. 4 (1990): 369–415.
2. See A. Peter Hayman, "Was God a Magician?" *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 40, no. 2 (1989): 225–237. He argues that at the end of the text, "Abraham functions like a magician who by his knowledge of the correct formulas can compel the gods to appear and do his bidding" (234). For Hayman, this desire to emulate the divine and actually become capable of exercising influence over God stems from a lack of political power (237).
3. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New Jersey: Schocken Press, 1996), 137.
4. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 184.
5. E. D. Bilski, and M. Idel. *Golem! Danger, Deliverance and Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1988), 32.
6. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 280.
7. (Perush R. Saadia Gaon le Sefer Yetsirah, Ma'aseh Tatu'im 118). This is the Pseudo-Saadya, or Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi.
8. Hayman, "Was God a Magician?," 237.
9. Saadya Commentary, section 9, "On the 231 Gates of Permutation." [From Saadia ben Joseph (al-Fayyumi), *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira ou Livre de la Création* par Le Gaon Saadya de Fayyoun, trans. and ed. M. Lambert (Paris: Emile Bouillon, Editeur, 1891); translated into English from the French and Hebrew by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson, San Francisco, 1985.] This is an online publication. Excerpts posted at Walter Benjamin Research Institute website, <http://www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html#commentary>.
10. This stance is not much different from academic approaches to the work in which mostly Jewish scholars of the work claim it as their own but dismiss its effective uses. Interestingly, non-Jewish scholars of the work tend to treat the SY as a magical work.



11. Hayman, "Was God a Magician?" 237.
12. Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany, SUNY Press: 1990), 273.
13. This is true except in the case of Abulafia and his school.
14. Idel, *Golem*, 273.
15. "Text & Image in Religious Cosmography: Reading Ilanot and Parallel Artifacts," July 25–27, 2011, Haifa, Israel.
16. Yossi Chajes and Menachem Kallus have received an Israeli Science Foundation grant for a project serving this purpose called "Cosmological Forests: Kabbalistic Divinity Maps." They recently organized a conference on this topic in Haifa, Israel, from July 25–27, 2011, "Text & Image in Religious Cosmography: Reading Ilanot and Parallel Artifacts."

## INDEX

*Note:* Endnotes are indicated by the page number, followed by “n,” followed by the note number, and pages of figures and diagrams appear in italics, i.e., “56.” Ancient and medieval source texts may be found in the index following the one below.

- Abraham, 27, 135, 157–8n32,  
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