

THE HEBREW LETTERS – ENGINE OF THE UNIVERSE

The Hebrew language is called “*lashon hakodesh*”, the holy tongue. Why? Because it is the language the Creator used to bring both the spiritual and physical world into being as it is written, “And G-d said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light’” (Genesis 1:3). Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a particular form and that form channels down a particular kind of energy into the universe. In addition, each letter has a name and a number equivalent. These three dimensions make each letter a powerful source of creation and blessing. This is the reason it is so important to pray in Hebrew, even if you do not understand the meaning of the words. That is because by speaking the words using the Hebrew letters, you bring down divine energy into the world. We can also use the letters as the focus of our mindfulness practice, thereby engraving the letters in our consciousness.

Let’s take the example of the letter aleph א - the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The shape of the aleph is made up of three letters: a *yud* above, a *yud* below, and a *vav* in between, joining them together. The Zohar states that the aleph represents the image of G-d in which man was created, as it is written: “Let us make man in our image as our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Man is the paradox of being literally a “part of G-d” and at the same time a finite being. The upper *yud* represents the soul, the higher divine self. The lower *yud* represents the finite body with all the thoughts, feelings, and sense of a separate self that one has in our limited consciousness. The *vav* that joins them is the Torah and mitzvot that we, as the Jewish people are commanded to fulfil. Through the deep, conscious study of Torah and the performance of the commandments with intention, we connect the divine part of us with the limited, earthly self.

This is only one dimension of the letter aleph. There is the meaning of the form of the aleph as it manifests in the world, separating the higher waters in the clouds from the lower waters on the earth, with the atmosphere (*rakia*) separating them and joining them. And there is the meaning of the form of the aleph in divinity itself, expressing G-d’s transcendent light (the higher *yud*), His immanent light (the lower *yud*), and the contraction (*tzimtzum*) that joins them (the *vav*). These three dimensions of worlds, souls, and divinity are expressed in the name of the letter and the number of the letter as well. All this is explained in

Rav Yitzchak Ginsburgh's book, "The Hebrew Letters – Channels of Creative Consciousness".

For the purpose of this article and the practice of mindfulness, we will focus on the meaning of the letter aleph as it relates to us as souls in bodies.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, a pioneer in the teaching of Jewish meditation writes, "In the Talmud and Kabbalah, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are seen as having tremendous spiritual power. Speaking of Bezalel, the architect of the Tabernacle that the Israelites built right after the Exodus, the Talmud says, 'Bezalel knew how to combine the letters through which heaven and earth were created' (Brachot 55a). Since the world was created with Ten Sayings, and the sayings consist of letters, the letters are seen as the primary ingredients of creation. Thus, when one contemplates them, the letters serve as the means through which a person connects himself to G"-d and the creative process." (Jewish Meditation, p. 75)

Rabbi Kaplan suggests to begin using the letter aleph as a visual symbol for mindfulness practice. First look at the letter aleph below for five minutes.



Next, close your eyes and see if you can bring up the image in your mind's eye. This may be challenging for you if you are a beginner. In fact, you may not see anything at first, but keep at it. You may see the image for a few seconds and then it will disappear. Do this for fifteen minutes. Make this your daily practice for thirty days and I guarantee

you will see progress. The important thing is to keep up the practice and not be too concerned with the results, just with your consistent effort.

Rabbi Kaplan goes on to quote *Sefer Yitzirah*, one of the earliest books of Kabbalah, that refers to two processes in depicting the letters, engraving (*chakikah*), and hewing (*chatzivah*). The term “engraving” denotes fixing an image in the mind’s eye so that it doesn’t waver or move. No matter what other images may arise in the field of vision, the engraved image remains there, as if the image were actually engraved in the mind. Once one has accomplished this, it becomes easy to bring up the image at will.

After you have engraved the image in your mind, it is still usually surrounded by other images. The next step is to isolate the image, to remove all the other images surrounding it. This is called *chatzivah* (hewing). If you are visualizing the letter aleph, see the black letter against a white background and cut away the other images that you see on the screen of your mind. This may take some effort so be patient and persistent in your practice.

This is an authentic Jewish Meditation practice but it is important to mention that it is built on the foundation of basic mindfulness practice, paying attention in the present moment to what is happening inside you and outside you.