

## Understanding Kabbalistic Texts with a translation of the Shla's Shma selections

### Abstract:

The text presented is a compilation of Kabbalistic material about the Shma from the prayer book *Shaar haShamayim* (Gate of Heaven), which was compiled by the Shla, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz.

There are several typical challenges to understanding the text:

1. Physical presentation - small type, minimal formatting. Cross-referencing is limited
2. Knowledge of key Jewish ideas, such as "mesirat nefesh" are assumed.
3. special kabbalistic terminology, varying in meaning between excerpts.  
[These are recognized issues, can be addressed by re-formatting the text as I have done, and providing a glossary of terms and concepts]
4. Textual analysis has generally been limited to the historical, literary, philosophical, or religious. There are three inter-twined approaches which would be fruitful in new ways:
  - a. *scientific* - Lurianic thought especially can be seen as a precursor to and influence on modern scientific thinking.
  - b. *depth psychology/comparative mysticism*- the kavvanot's dynamics can be illuminated by comparison with other explorations of the psyche
  - c. *visual thinking and creativity* - The facility to think visually is necessary to appreciate much of the Kabbalah, and is significant in relating to kavvanot as a creative process.

By addressing the first three challenges, it is possible to attempt the fourth, by making it possible for experts in those fields to approach the original texts, rather than only through interpretations and translations. [It is recommended to supplement this with access to one of a number of glossaries and the Encyclopedia Judaica.] One example of following these other approaches is to correlate kavvanot with processes of scientific creativity and inspiration.

### I. Introduction - challenges to textual analysis

Translating, or rather, decoding this material has two very different but related aspects: The simple physical reading of the sources, which are frequently available only in Rashi script, significantly different than the scripts generally used in modern Hebrew today (other than specifically religious works). Frequently the texts are printed in very small characters, with little or no indication of sentences and paragraphs, much less phrases. Modern conventions of use of bold, italics, and footnoting are of course also absent. The presence of variant manuscripts also complicates matters.

As with most Jewish texts from all periods, reference to biblical and talmudic stock phrases and key concepts mandates some reasonable familiarity with those as well. While it is possible to rely on translations for those phrases, that flattens the understanding by missing sometimes very important contexts.

Lurianic texts specifically have been relatively neglected in relation to other works of Kabbalah. They are much less poetic, and much more theosophical, but since they specifically also influence heavily Hasidism and Western scientific thought, they are perhaps the most important texts relevant to the study of the history of ideas.

There are several different reasons for this situation:

1. Almost all of what we know of Luria's thinking comes from others, notably Hayyim Vital, his student. Vital himself, while prolific, was not the most elegant of writers, further compounding the problem.
2. The limited nature of the audience makes the cost of distribution annotated and critical versions of these text prohibitive expensive
3. The tendency to attempt to focus on interpretation rather than annotation.
4. The amount of effort required to access the texts even on a most basic level requires extensive literary skills related to Jewish thought (Bible, rabbinics, Zohar) means that it is primarily those with those skills who also do the interpretation. If my assertions about the nature of Lurianic thinking are correct, this is a very significant limitation. Lurianic thinking has parallels in scientific thinking (cf. Dan), and thus also in visual thinking. This sort of facility is not necessarily found in those with the literary skills to explore the text.

In order to change this situation, I suggest the following:

1. providing an electronic repository of publications, especially the sections where texts are transcribed and translated. This requires using an inexpensive and simple means of sharing such texts. Right now there is no standard - interchange of Hebrew in electronic form. There are three defacto formats:
  - a. RTF along with Microsoft Word, and to some extent, Dagesh. But there sufficient differences in implementation of RTF (Rich Text Format) to cause problems.
  - b. Unicode logical for HTML: The tools to create these are somewhat undeveloped, and while this can make it possible to display materials on the web, it would require some better-documented tools to make this widely used. One major advantage with HTML is the ease with which hyperlinks may be placed to better connect the text with notes and references.
  - c. PDF - portable document format. This requires a special PDF reader, available for free online. It has the major advantages that the reader does not need to install Hebrew fonts and will see exactly what the writer/publisher intended. There is a free PDF creation tool, but to add hyperlinks such as in HTML requires either complicated tools, or an investment in commercial software.
2. Publicizing a standard by which to refer to the various parts of a text, such as I have done here, as well as standard spellings of the key terms. It is very hard to search for information if one does not know how the terms will be spelled, or even whether they are translated or transliterated.
3. Encouraging more multi-disciplinary explorations of the text in the directions mentioned below.

## **II. The Nature of the Text**

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, known as the Shlah from the name of his chief work (Shnei Luchot HaBrit - The Two Tablets of the Covenant), was a rabbi in Central and Eastern Europe and later Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Jerusalem. This text is an excerpt from his kabbalistic prayer book, *Sidur Shaar haShamayim* (Gate of Heaven), which deals with the Shma prayer.

According to Wolfson, the Shlah went to Israel to study the work of the chariot, which was not pursued as strongly in Eastern and Central Europe. That he was very much influenced by Luria is shown not only by his writings, but by his specific visit to Hayyim Vital's son in Damascus where he was shown some uncirculated manuscripts.

The majority of the material is a compilation of direct quotes from well-known kabbalistic writings (See the section in the bibliography under "Kabbalistic Sources.") These texts mostly span the period from the 12th to 17th centuries and are written in Hebrew and a sort of Medieval aramaic, thus serving as a microcosm of the Kabbalistic genre. Much work has been done over the last 70 years to translate and explain, and much remains to be done. By far the largest section however consists of Lurianic kavvanot. - roughly 40% (25% paraphrasing by the Shla, the remainder Cordovero, ibn Gabbai, Yaavetz and Zohar).

It is possible that the Shla did not do extensive editing on the texts - there are several cases, even in this short section, of whole sentences repeating themselves.(shown by underline with the words adjacent 'repeated above' or 'repeated below'). Within a specific quote, the various sentences appear in somewhat different sequence than in the most common version of the *Pri Etz Hayim*. It is possible that they are instead from *Shaar haKaavanot* (at least one excerpt definitely is), but I have not managed to locate any version which has the excerpts in the same order. The other quotes do seem to match almost exactly.

The rest of the material consists of paraphrases of various ideas by the author. Because all the discussion relates in one way or another to the Shema (either directly or through a closely related prayer), this text provides an interesting cross-section and comparison in the development and differentiation of kabbalistic understandings and practises.

## **Formatting**

The original edition (p. 167-172 or 84a-86b) was five pages of very small Rashi script, divided into five paragraphs. The recent edition (p. 329-338) has nine pages of somewhat larger Rashi script, with mostly correct references to text sources and multiple paragraphs. The original text has been retyped from the Rashi script to modern Hebrew script, with appropriate paragraphing, indent, bold, italics and underline to better show the flow of the material. The seven original glosses (hagahot) are notated by a number enclosed in parentheses e.g. (1), and placed at the end of the text. Notes and references use {} and follow the original references. I have added interlineal comments in square brackets []. The notes are simple and serve only as an aid to explain specific limited matters, such as the calculations for various gematria, or point to a related discussion. The more content related discussion has its own section (III).

Bible quotes are indicated by bold with quotation marks, Rabbinic quotes by italics with quotation marks. All references to authors are in italics, texts are in bold. Bold is also used for letters and words of the Shma, and for infrequently used Hebrew transliterations. Abbreviations are also in bold. Phrases that indicate a reference to another work or part of the same work, or significantly duplicate a phrase are underlined (unless already marked in bold or with a footnote). There are several times italics is used for emphasis, and bold is not used for the more common kabbalistic terms, i.e. the sephirot and partzufim, but they are capitalized.

## **II. Key Issues and Background**

### **Prayers**

The Shema is the central prayer in the morning and evening prayers. While the text primarily deals with this, it also explains the relationship to other prayers, notably The Prayer - the Amidah, and refers also to the Ahava Rabah which precedes the Shma. (a somewhat different prayer, Ahavat Olam, replaces Ahava Rabah in some services). The Hasidim also did not continue to practise the Kavvanot of the Ari after the first generation, they instead followed Cordovero.

The silent sentence following the Shma is also treated extensively, though as with the other prayers, it is also discussed in *Shaar haShamayim* on its own.

## **Karnot haMizbeah (horns/corners of the altar)**

This and *Sefer Yetzira* are cited for the most explicitly dimensional imagery. The terms edges, corners, winds, and depths are used somewhat interchangeably to denote the assignment of the Sephirot to a four-sided two-dimensional, or six-sided three-dimensional figure. This figure could either be a cube, which has six sides, eight corners and twelve edges, or a octahedron, which has eight-sides, six corners, and twelve edges

## **Martyrdom**

Yaavetz blamed the students of Rambam and other philosophers for the conversions that took place in Spain and Portugal. That is noted in this text in his comments on the stumbling of philosophers. The implication is that this weakened their resolve to suffer martyrdom instead. The Shla supposedly also felt that this was an important reason to reveal Kabbalistic secrets, i.e. if it helped maintain a Jew's resolve. Thus martyrdom is a key concept here - but transformed into a kaavanah, not necessarily to be physically enacted. The Shma is well known to be a prayer of martyrdom, something to be said in one's last moments. The relevant terms are noted in the section on Martyrdom in the glossary. (see Fishbane)

However, it is an error to attribute the motivation for revealing Lurianic kavvanot primarily to training for martyrdom. The Shla's use of the words "longed" and "desired" here is either a masterful piece of marketing martyrdom, or more likely a real motivation to share this knowledge, despite the dangers. Wolfson speculates that the Shla actually only revealed theosophical issues in support of kaavanot, and only in the siddur, which was written partially in Israel, as opposed to the *Shnei Luchot haBrit*, which was written in Europe. However, it is not clear whether Wolfson's differentiation of exoteric and esoteric (i.e. kavvanot-theurgy vs. theosophy) actually reflects the attitudes of the Shla or of the Lurianic circles. Rather, it may be that there is an academic tendency to value theosophical matters over kavvanot, since they fit more within the literary/historical/philosophical backgrounds of most researchers. The kavvanot require much more knowledge of deep psychological processes and are thus likely to be overlooked.

## **The System**

Various parts of the Shma are correlated with:

Meaning of the unity of God; past, present, future

Preparing a place for the Shekhinah

The Names of God, including the gematriatic expansions

The manner of recitation - elongating the Dalet, the silent Baruch Shem Kavod.

(the quiet longing for the Tziki K'deira and the need to bypass Sanigor [accuser] are two of the reasons given for the silence).

The Lurianic system is very complicated, and is only being completely described (Kallus). The basic components consist of the Tree of Life with its sephirot, restructured as Partzufim. These are corresponded with the words of the Shma. The practitioner then initiates a set of intentions, generally through both thought and emotion to combine these partzufim in a manner referred to as Zivvug or Yihud. This combinatorial process has much in common with what is known as heiros gamos or mysterium conjunctio, as the references to kissing and copulation allude to.

## **III. Suggestions for other approaches**

The underlying thread between all these approaches is their concern with the visual and imagic aspects of Kabbalah. While depth psychology and quantum dynamics (as seen below) seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, in fact they both require a particular facility with understanding and manipulating images, either of

dreams or of equations.

### **Influence on western thought**

Much of the Kabbalah's influence on the West came via Rosenroth's translation, *Kabbalah Denudata*, as part of the larger trend of "Renaissance Magic", i.e. hermetic and neoplatonic influences (Coudert, Yates). The prior interweaving of kabbalistic, neoplatonic and Aristotelian perspectives also demonstrates that there was also indirect influence. A second point of contact was between early scientists and their knowledgeable Jewish assistants, i.e. del Medigo (Galileo), David Tzemach, who was a student of the Maharal (Brahe, Kepler) (Ruderman). In more recent times, both Freud and Jung are purported to have been influenced by Kabbalistic thought (Berke).

While it can be debated as to the extent of Kabbalah's influence on specific scientific concepts, it is certain that a good number of pioneers of both physics and psychoanalysis were very familiar with some Kabbalistic literature. There are certainly interesting phenomenological parallels between the importance of inspiration and heavenly harmony on early modern science, its counter-intuitive nature, and Kabbalistic theurgy. Such parallels do not necessarily imply a direct relation, but if there was such an influence, would have been of much greater significance than just the influence of ideas. It is the very creative process itself which may have been transmitted, a mind-set acquired or enhanced through contemplative practises (theurgy). [According to Stephane Toussaint, the XVth century Florentines did use creative processes strongly influenced by Kabbalistic Theurgy.]

The study of the relationship between theurgy and scientific creativity has been limited by the above mentioned inferior status of study of theurgy vs. theosophy. There is also a misconception about the nature of scientific endeavor - that it is a task of observation, experiment and analysis and not one of creativity and inspiration. For example, as Patai says about Hayyim Vital and his alchemical practises:

"But when he worked, thought, and wrote about alchemy he was *nothing but a natural scientist* who observed keenly what went on in the course of his experiments, and described them with an eye to the smallest detail – *at such times* the world of the *spirit simply did not exist* for him." [emphasis mine]

Following are several representative quotes pointing to the similarities between kabbalah, scientific creativity, depth psychology and visual thinking. A more extensive analysis of this relationship must wait for a future paper.

#### **A. Pre-scientific and scientific thought**

"The words or the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be 'voluntarily' reproduced and combined .... this combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought before there is any connection with logical construction in words or other kinds of signs which can be communicated to others."

Albert Einstein in a letter to Jacques Hadamard.

During the past twenty years there has been increasing willingness to recognize the important ways in which mystical and occult thinking contributed to the development of science and the emergence of toleration. However, the Kabbalah, particularly the Lurianic Kabbalah with its monistic vitalism and optimistic philosophy of perfectionism and universal salvation, has not yet been interated into the new historiography, although it richly deserves to be.

*Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Coudert, Allison P.

The wave/particle duality is mathematically identical to the YHVH/Elohim duality. The functions describing

this also generate the alphabet, as well being the source of the negentropy that feeds self-awareness.  
*personal communication* Stan Tenen, director Mem Foundation ([meru.org](http://meru.org))

## **B. Depth psychology and comparative mysticism**

"Indeed it is a desideratum of the phenomenological study of religions to compare the multiform classification symbolism of the Tetragrammaton found here with other forms of mystical symbolic clusters as applied in the contemplative transformative practices of other religious and cultural systems such as in Sufism, Hinduism, and Buddhism etc."

*Pneumatic Mystical Possession and the Eschatology of the Soul in the Lurianic Qabbalah (dissertation-in-progress)*,  
Menachem Kallus

"... psychoanalysis may be seen as a secular branch of Kabbalah..."

"I intend to show that their [Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein] personal origins, concerns, and methods are intimately rooted in Jewish religious and mystical traditions

"Together with Klein's views, I want to consider the creation of the world, from the standpoint of Lurianic Kabbalah."

*Psychoanalysis and Kabbalah* - Joseph H. Berke

## **C. Creative and visual thinking**

".. overwhelmingly visual nature of religious experience in Jewish spirituality from antiquity through the late Middle Ages

review of *Through a Speculum that Shines*, Wolfson

"Visual models of the creative process, both human and Divine, are described by the down-to-earth mystical tradition called 'kabbalah.'"

"I empirically studied the creative process in both science and art by interviewing highly creative scientists (Nobel laureates and members of the National Academy of Sciences in the USA) and artists of equal prominence. Using models from psychology, sociology, and set theory, the content analysis of these interviews was described in my 1981 book, *Aesthetic Experience in Creative Process*. Since I wrote that book while an art professor at Columbia University, I have come to realize that the kabbalistic model of Isaac Luria (known as the Ari) - as described by his student Hayyim Vital in 16<sup>th</sup> century Israel - is a more elegant model of creative process."  
*e-Art & Kabbalah - Concerning the Spiritual in Art of the Electronic Age*, M. Alexenberg

Steinsaltz Kook, HaNazir Schatz, Moshe

## **IV. Bibliography, personalities**

### **Translations used** (chronologically):

Translations were modified to conform to the transliteration conventions of this paper.

*Torah* and *Samuel*: Everett Fox

*Bible* (other than above): Jerusalem Bible (Koren)

*Taanit & Sanhedrin*: Steinsaltz

*Talmud* (other than above): Soncino

*Sifre* (of Deuteronomy) - Hammer

*Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer* - Friedlander

*Sefer Yetzirah* - Aryeh Kaplan

*Zohar*: - Soncino, Danny Matt

*Generations of Adam* (from Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot haBrit*) selection: Miles Krassen

Prof. Mark Verman, Dr. Yitzhak Hayutman and Menachem Kallus have provided significant assistance in understanding the text.

**Rabbinic Sources referred to in the text:**

Talmud

Sifre

Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer

Hidushei Aggada

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Cordovero, Moses 1522-1570, *Pardes Rimmonim* Hayat, Yehuda 14-1500's, *haHayat*

Horowitz, Rabbi Isaiah ben Avraham haLevi (Shla). 15657-1630, *Siddur Shaar haShamayim* ibn Gabbai, Meir. early 1500's?,

*'Avodat haQodesh*, Jerusalem 1963 (Venice 1566)

*Tolaat Yaakov*, Jerusalem 1967 (5727) (Warsaw 1876)

Luria, Yitzhak (ARI) 1534-1572 Maharal *Hidushei Aggadot*

Recanati, Menachem. 12-1300's *Livushei Or Yikarot*, Jerusalem 1961 Vital, Hayyim. *Pri Etz Hayim, Shaar haKaavanot* Yaavetz (Jabez), Yosef d. 1507 *Maamar haAhdut*

*Sefer Yetzirah*

*Zohar* historically attributed to Rashbi - Rav Shimon bar Yochai. Assumed to have been written by Moshe de Leon, now considered to be written by a circle of kabbalists.

*Zohar Hadash* - Midrash Ruth - ed. Margoliot *Tikkunei haZohar*

**Modern Sources:**

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Goldish, Matt. *Judaism in the Theology of Sir Isaac Newton*. Dordrecht: Kluwer-- International Archives of the History of Ideas, 1998.

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Ruderman, David B. *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*. New Haven: Yale U. Press 1995 pp 404

Vital, Hayyim, *The Tree of Life:the Palace of Adam Kadmon*. trans., intro, glossary: Donald Wilder Menzi, Zve Padeh.

Vital, Hayyim ben Joseph, *Sha'ar ha-kelalim* (Gate of Principles), published as *Kabbalah of Creation w/trans.*, intro, glossary: Eliahu Klein. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson 2000 320pp.

Wolfson, Elliot R. *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish gMysticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1994. pp. 462v

Wolfson, Elliot R. "The Influence of Luria on the Shelah" *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought X*, Hebrew U. 1992 p. 423-449.

## V. Outline of basic terms and concepts

[incomplete. Material to be excerpted from Menzi&Padeh]

### Misc. terms:

Kriyat Shma (reading of the Shma)

Mayin Nukvin (feminine waters)

Abba and Imma (Father and Mother)

Ze'er & Nukva (Ze'er Anpin - The Young Face and his Consort]

Kavvanah - intention, aim

Mohin - sacred intelligence [literally 'brains']

Yihud - unification

Zivvug - coupling, union, heiros gamos

Shefa - plenitude

tzadik - righteous one

tziki k'deira - the remains of the cauldron

Karnot haMizbeah - horns (corners) of the altar

Nefilat Apayim

Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven

Mesirat nefesh - give up one's soul

Qidush haShem - sanctification of the Name

### Shma:

YHVH - Tetragrammaton

Eloheinu - our God

Ehad – one

**Aleph-bet (Hebrew alphabet):**

Gematria 1-10:

*Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey, Vav, Zayin, Het,*

*Tet, Yud*

20-100:

*Kaf, Lamed, Mem, Nun, Samekh, Ayin, Peh Tzadi, Kof,*

200-400:

*Resh, Shin, Tav*

(italics denotes those appearing in text)

**Sephirot:**

Ein-Sof - without end Keter - crown Hokhmah - wisdom Binah- understanding Hesed

(Gdulah) - grace Gevurah - strength Din - judgement Tiferet - beauty

Rahamim - compassion Netzah victory Hod - glory Malkhut - kingdom Yesod -  
foundation

**Partzufim** - configurations:

Ilaah - supernal Tevunah Shekhinah Yisrael Sabba Yisrael Zuta Abba, Imma

Arikh Anpin Ze'er Anpin Nukva

Atika Kadisha (unknowable head?)

Mayin Nukvin

**The four worlds:**

Atzilut

Briah

(Yetzirah and Assiyah are not mentioned)

**From the prayers:**

Ahava Rabah - the prayer before the Shma

Barukh Shem Kavod Malkhuto L'Olam Vaed - line following the Shma. "Blessed be the Name of His Kingdom's  
Glory forever."

Amidah

Sim Shalom - at the end of the Amidah eizehu mikoman

Nefilat Apayim - after the Amidah