

The 'Iyyun Circle

INTRODUCTION

Few texts of the 'Iyyun circle have been published, and what has been published is full of errors and not really useful. Adolph Jelinek published a version of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* in 1853, and another version was edited by Hassida in *Ha-Segullah*, volume 2 (1934) from the Musajoff collection in Jerusalem. It has since become apparent, thanks to the work of M. Verman, that there are a variety of different recensions of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun*. A version of the *Ma'ayan Hokhmah* was published twice in Warsaw (1863 and 1866) and once in *Ozar Midrashim* (ed. Y. Eisenstadt, New York, 1915: 307–311).

The three texts partially translated below are based on manuscript witnesses edited in the 1940s by Scholem and reedited by the translators. Our text of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* follows a recension found in ms. Munich 408, which largely agrees with ms. Musajoff 64. Our text of the *Sefer Ma'ayan Hokhmah* follows ms. Hebrew U. 8 330; and our *Perush Shem shel Arba' Otiyyot* follows ms. Florence 2:41. For further bibliographical details, see Scholem, *Re'shit ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1948): pp. 255–262; and Verman, *Sifrei ha-Iyyun* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1984).

The Book of Speculation (SEFER HA-'IYYUN)

This is the *Book of Speculation* of the great Rabbi Ḥamai,¹ foremost expositor of the Innermost.² In it he revealed the essence of the entire reality of the revealed Glory, whose source of existence and quintessence no living being can accurately fathom, for He is in a state of balanced unity. In His perfection the upper and lower worlds unite one to another, and He is the foundation of all, both hidden and revealed. From Him pours forth all that is emanated from the wondrousness of the Unity. Rabbi Ḥamai has explained all these matters by way of the Chariot and interpreted the prophecy of Ezekiel, peace be upon him.³ Here begins the book in the proper order.

Blessed and exalted is God, glorious in power. He is one, united in all His powers as the flame is united in its colors. The powers which emanate from His unicity are like the light of the eye which springs forth from the pupil.⁴ [These powers] are emanated one from the other, as a fragrance from a fragrance or a candle from a candle. One emanates from the other, and from that another. The power of each resides in that which is emanated from it, yet the emanator lacks for nothing. Thus, before creating any entity, the Holy One, blessed be He, was one and eternal, beyond examination and boundary, without compound or distinction, without change or movement, concealed through existence itself.

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When the thought arose in His mind to bring objects into being, His glory became visible. Then were His Glory and Splendor revealed together.

Knowledge of Him is made explicit through five means: restoration (*tiqqun*), utterance (*ma'amar*), combination (*serruf*), grouping (*mikblal*), and calculation (*hesbbon*).⁵ Knowledge of these five matters is unique in the branches of the root of change and it increases in the course of the thirteen sorts of transformation (*temurah*).

What is restoration? [One] removes a thing from utterance, and utterance from the thing; grouping from calculation, and calculation from grouping; so that [one] causes all things to resemble a flaming fount. The flame is unfathomably and immeasurably within the fount. Infinite light lies hidden within the mysterious darkness. To truly know oneness is to know this blackness.

The meaning of all this is clarified by what Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha,⁶ High Priest in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, explained. For it is taught: Rabbi Ishmael said, "On that very day, we—I and Rabbi Aqiba—were before Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Qanah, and Rabbi Hanina ben Tradiyon was also present. I requested from Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Qanah the following: 'Rabbi, show me the Glory of the Sovereign of the world so that His knowledge will be as clear to me as all His other effects.' He said to me, 'Prideful one, go and let us examine the great ring which is inscribed with the heavens and whose name is *aR'aRiTa'*,⁷ and [then] the ring of the earth, which is *'HW*,⁸ and I will show all to you.' I went into the inner chamber of the Outer Holy Palace and I removed from there a book of Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Qanah entitled *The Book of Palaces*, and thus did I find written in the beginning of the book: 'Mighty in chambers and grandeur is He who sits above His Chariot's wheels, sealed with "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14), and with the great ring on which is inscribed the heavens, whose name is *aR'aRiTa'*, which is His name.' It is an abbreviation for "One is His foremost Unity, His first Unicity; His permutation is One."⁹ He is One, Alone, Unique. The ring of the earth has the name *'HW*, an abbreviation for "He is and will be One."¹⁰ Mediating between these two rings is YHVH. This is a "word spoken on its revolutions" (Proverbs 25:11).'¹¹

Know that the Holy One, blessed be He, existed before the world's creation, exists in this world, and will exist in the World to Come. The indication of this is [provided by the verbal tenses applied to God in the Bible]: "He did . . . He does . . . He will do."

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Another indication are [the terms of kingship applied to God in the Bible]: "God is King" (Psalms 99:1)—that is, God is; "God ruled" (Psalms 10:16)—that is, God was; and "God will rule" (Exodus 15:18)—that is, God will be. He rules in this world, He ruled before this world, and he will rule in the World to Come.

In this order are all the forms of the divine Name in the Book of Creation to be explained. These are revealed counsels of the highest hidden mystery called "Artisan" (*oman*),¹¹ which means the source of faith (*emunab*), for faith emerges by His power. He, may He be blessed, is united in His powers, yet He remains completely beyond and transcendent to them, elevated endlessly. These are the thirteen powers with which He is united, and each has its own name, each one higher than the former. The first is called "primeval wisdom"; the second, "wonderful light"; the third, "electrum"; the fourth, "mist"; the fifth, "throne of light"; the sixth, "the wheel of greatness," also called *hazbazit*—meaning the place of vision for visionaries (*hezyon ba-bozim*). The seventh is called "cherub"; the eighth, "the wheels of the Chariot"; the ninth, "the surrounding ether"; the tenth, "the curtain"; the eleventh, "the Throne of Glory"; the twelfth, the dwelling of the souls called "the chambers of splendor"; and the thirteenth, the secret of the supernal structure, called "the outer palace of holiness."

These thirteen powers are revealed as one from the highest hidden mystery called "Artisan"—the source of faith—from which faith emerges. And before He, may He be blessed, created anything whatsoever, He was called *El*—strong—for His power was not known. When He began to bring His deeds into existence He created the two products of mystery and faith, while maintaining unicity and essence. For no one may grasp knowledge of the world's Creator.¹²

Notes

1. A pseudepigraphic attribution to a legendary rabbi.
2. The rather surprising appearance of the term *sefirot penimiyyot* (inner *sefirot*), which Scholem preferred, occurs only in the Munich manuscript, and may represent a later interpolation of Kabbalistic terminology. All other versions of the text have *penimiyyut* (innermost), with no reference to *sefirot*.
3. Much of the terminology used to designate the emanations is taken from the visions of Ezekiel.
4. An image earlier employed by Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021–1058), the

- great Hebrew poet of Spain, to describe the act of creation. See G. Scholem, "Iqvotav shel Gabirol be-Qabbalah" in *Me'assef Sofrey Eres Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv, 1940): pp. 160–178. Here the emergence of light from dark parallels the movement from hiding to revelation.
5. Kabbalistic operations by which mystics performed quasi-magical transformations of nature, also mentioned in the *Fountain of Wisdom*. Other recensions of the *Sefer ha-'Iyyun* make no mention of these operations.
 6. All figures mentioned in this episode are Talmudic Rabbis of second-century C.E. Palestine.
 7. An abbreviation.
 8. An entire text stemming from the 'Iyyun circle is devoted to this particular divine name. The name 'HW[Y] is regarded as the true, primeval tetragrammaton, divided into two different biblical names—YHVH and 'HYH—at the moment of the revelation of the Torah at Sinai.
 9. *Ehad R'osh Abduto R'esbit Yihudo Temurato Ehad*.
 10. *Ehad Hayah Ve-yihyeh*.
 11. See Isaiah 25:1. In other circles, this term designated the first and most concealed *sefirah*, *keter* or Crown.
 12. Mystical knowledge and insight penetrate deeper than "scientific" investigation.

The Fountain of Wisdom

... And now behold and direct your heart to the first attribute, long and true and straight like a scepter. Regarding these matters, each of the attributes is called a flame. Now these flames are scepters, and the scepters are eyes, and each of the eyes themselves divide into five matters. Now these matters divide into sources, the sources into a structure, and the structure congeals. This congealment becomes a glowing ember, and it is to the ember that the five matters cling. For this reason the flame is linked to the ember.¹ From the flame the ether springs forth, and the ether is the principle which informs structure, action, restoration, mechanics, calculation, utterance, and grouping: These together are the essentials of all being.

Now we must think and understand, contemplate and examine in the hidden depths of our heart and thoughts, in our logic and our vision, in our spiritual vicissitudes and in the whisper of our tongues and the utterances of our mouths until we achieve clarity and certainty and comprehension in all these subjects. We will begin with the first matter, since it is foremost among all firsts, the restoring of all restorations. It will lead us along the true path.

Know that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the First Existent. He is called "Existent" for no other reason than that He brought Himself into existence. And since He brought Himself into existence, it is incumbent for us to understand and contemplate an examination of His reality, and how He began creation, and in what

way did He step and stand. In which path did [He emanate]? Was it one path or many paths? Did they divide into parts or extended entities? Or should one say "road" or "path" or "channel"? For "channels" are narrow and short while "paths" are excessive and "roads" are wide. Also, channels are like children while paths are akin to mothers, and roads are engraved with the archetypes of male and female.

Regarding this issue, wonders abound and are clarified. The wonders become more wonderful, and from them [come] the flames, and from the flames the thread extends outwards, and the threads thicken, and in this thickened state they grow stronger until they become scepters. This, then, is the point: Everything is again and again dissolved and then returns to the ether as it once was, and the ether is the essential element.

For before the celestial world—known as the 377 compartments of the Holy One, blessed be He²—was revealed; and before mist, electrum, curtain, throne, angel, seraph, wheel, animal, star, constellation, and firmament—the rectangle from which water springs—were made; and before the water, springs, lakes, rivers, and streams were created; and before the creation of animals, beasts, fowl, fish, creeping things, insects, reptiles, man, demons, specters, night demons, spirits, and all kinds of ethers—before all these things there was an ether, an essence from which sprang a primordial light refined from myriads of luminaries; a light, which, since it is the essence, is also called the Holy Spirit.

Know and comprehend that before all the above-mentioned entities there was nothing but this ether. And this ether darkened because of two things, each having different sources. The first issued an infinite, inexhaustible and immeasurable light. The gushing forth was sudden, not unlike the sparks which fly and burst forth when the craftsman forges with a hammer.³

After [the first light] another fountain was drawn out from which flows darkness. Now this darkness is itself a combination of three hues. The first is a darkness like that of dawn, a kind of green. The second was combined from green and light blue, and the third is a white darkness, composed of green, light blue, and red. And this is the primeval darkness which springs out of the ether. Do not try to perceive or examine it or investigate it scientifically for even Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, was unable to ask about it. If he was

unable to inquire, then how much more so would be our investigation!

Everything that Moses stated⁴ was said so that his knowledge of the image of the Holy One, blessed be He, would be unchanged in his heart, and that the knowledge regarding Him would be true and unified. That is to say, at the moment when the matter became clear to [Moses], knowing the true knowledge, he intended in his mind—even though there was no need—to examine and gaze and inquire into the higher levels. When he apprehended His secret thoroughly and the image of his understanding of the Holy One, Blessed be He, remained unchanging within his heart, he rejoiced and asked his intended question.

At this point [Moses] requested, "Show me now your ways" (Exodus 33:13). The Holy One, blessed be He, responded to this request, saying, "You cannot see My face" (Exodus 33:20). That is to say: This darkness, about which you have requested knowledge, is all from Me alone and is My own source, and you cannot comprehend it with any studious clarity. Therefore God said, "You shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." This means that that which preceded the existence of the universe you cannot apprehend, so you will not be unable to say that I [i.e., God] am like all other entities, having a particular origin or place. Therefore you cannot apprehend knowledge of this darkness which was parallel to My existence. But from that point on you may know all: everything from and below the darkness, even My essence, the power of My Name, and My Glory.

At that moment Moses began to observe the primeval light, the root of all. And he found it to be a darkness composed of two entities stemming from two sources, one flowing with light, the second with darkness. Now this flow extends and gushes forth by way of channels, and the flow again becomes weak like a stream, and the stream again becomes minute, turning into a thread. And in this exiguity it extends and is directed until it becomes small, tiny droplets. These droplets grow and become fragmented entities, and the fragments continue to grow until they burst forth in great strength, mingling and interacting one with another, expanding and conjoining until a sap pours forth from them. Now this sap flows and extends and is congealed; and through this coagulation they are polished, purified, and clarified such that the original fragments that we mentioned are

utterly disintegrated. From them come forth a kind of foam which floats on the water, and it transforms everything into a juice, and from this juice comes forth a wind, that is, the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is written hintingly, "And the Spirit of God hovered upon the water" (Genesis 1:2). This means that the Spirit grew stronger in holiness and transformed into many blades, each blade transforming into a branch, and each branch transforming into a root from which came forth a myriad of powers, entities, and objects.

And now you have a clear image so that you will know and understand that the Holy Spirit is a wind which emerges from the sap which comes forth from the fluxes, one flowing with light, the second with darkness. The remaining foam is white resembling red, for red is set in white and white in red. They confound the eyes, uniting one to the other imperceptibly. Then they once again become fine and minute like the sources from which the streams flow. This is the one matter which stems from the primeval light and points towards form, creation and change of form. Creation is separate and distinct from the image of the others, for it is like the example of a pillar which is bent. It is central, surrounding and occupying the head, absorbing the powers of all the others, reckoned with all the others, and they all emerge and extend forth from it—there is neither image nor differentiation except for the vision of whiteness and redness. Therefore it turns into sections. From the sections evolve the sources, and from one source flows light, which in turn is divided into the two hues that we have mentioned—whiteness and redness. From the second source flows the darkness composed of three colors—green, blue, and white—to the changing sources, and as they go forth their colors change. For when they are subject to the power of the primeval darkness they are not other than two colors like other darkness. But as they are drawn out, their colors change into many hues included in the five colors that we have already mentioned. These five colors are akin to a flame extending from ether, refracting as they change. For we have already said that the two flows are really one matter coming from the primeval darkness, aluding form. When this form is altered, it paints itself through its courses and the hues of its colors into ten, and each separate hue contains the number ten, arriving at a total of one hundred. The hundred returns again and again into utterance, calculation, and the grouping of entities; calculation in calculation, utterance in utterance, until they return to the sum of one, and one is the essence.

Notes

1. See *Sefer Yesirab* 1:7.
2. The numerical value of "heavens" (*SHaMaYiM*) is 390, minus the thirteen attributes.
3. A similar motif of emanations as a result of hammer blows can be found in the *Zohar* I:15a.
4. Exodus 33:12-23.

Explanation of the Four-Lettered Name

We have found in the *Book of Reliance* composed by Rabbi Judah ben Beteirah that the prophet Jeremiah—peace be upon him—was studying the *Sefer Yesirah* on his own. A heavenly voice came forth and declared: “Find yourself a companion!”

He went to Sira his son and they together submerged themselves in the *Sefer Yesirah* for three years, to uphold that which is written: “Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another . . .” (Malachi 3:16).

At the end of three years, when they set about combining the alphabets by means of combination, grouping, and word formation, a man was created for them on whose forehead was written: *YHVH elohim emet*.¹ But there was a knife in the hand of this created being, and he erased the *alef* of *emet*, leaving only *met*.² Jeremiah rent his garments and said, “Why have you erased the *alef* from *emet*?”

He replied, “I shall tell you a parable. To what may this be compared? An architect built many houses, cities, and courts, and no one could copy his style and no one understood his knowledge nor possessed his skill. Then two men forced themselves upon him. He taught them the secret of his trade, and they knew every aspect of the craft. When they had learned his trade and his secret and his skills, they began to argue with him until they broke away from him and became independent architects, charging a lower price for the same services. When people noticed this, they ceased to honor the

craftsman and instead came to the newcomers and honored them and gave the commissions when they required to have something built.

“So too has God made you in His image, shape, and form. But now that you have created a man like Him, people will say: ‘There is no God in the world other than these two!’ ”

Then Jeremiah said, “What solution is there?”

He answered, “Write the alphabets with intense concentration backwards on the earth you have strewn. Only do not meditate with the intention of honor and restoration, but rather the complete opposite.”

So they did, and the being turned to dust and ashes before them. Then Jeremiah—peace be upon him—said, “Truly, one should study these matters only to know the power and omnipotence of the Creator of the universe, but not to practice them, for it is written: ‘You shall not learn to do’ (Deuteronomy 18:9).”

Sira said to him, “My lord, know and understand that I have examined these esoteric subjects; and that God, may He be blessed, is united in the branches of the principle of sound which emerge from the lips of man and extend and strengthen into thirteen sorts of transformations, especially restoration. And so we find in *The Book of the Fountain of Wisdom*:³ ‘What is this restoration? [One] removes a word from an utterance, and an utterance from a word until all things are established like a fountain of unlimited and infinite size to the light hidden by the addition of mysterious darkness included in the 42 letters between the *bet* of *bere’shit* [the first letter of Genesis 1:1] to the *bet* of *u-bobu* [“and void” of Genesis 1:2].’ Contained therein is a great matter of the unity of God, in their totality, their letters and their vowels—as the Sages, may their memories be blessed, said: ‘The forty-two-lettered Name, holy and sanctified, is entrusted only to one who is middle-aged, pious, free from ill temper, a teetotaler and he who shuns the taking of revenge. And one who knows [the Name] and guards it and is heedful thereof and makes use of it in holiness and purity is beloved above and dear below. His teachings endure, his fear lies upon all, he inherits two worlds—this world and the world to come.’ ”⁴

And the Sage said: “I say that these letters—which are forty-two in all—are not one separate word nor one separate name; rather they are gathered letters which indicate the divinity of God, that He is One.”⁵

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Notes

1. Literally: "The Lord God is Truth."
2. Literally: "death." Now the statement on the forehead reads "The Lord God is dead."
3. This passage partly appears in the *Sefer ha-Iyyun*.
4. BT Qiddushin 71a. The order of this quote varies slightly with the printed edition of the Talmud.
5. The exact source for this statement is unknown. However, it seems most probable that the unidentified "Sage" is none other than Rabbi Hai Gaon (939–1038), whose responsa contain discussions of the forty-two lettered name of God. Eventually, a variety of pseudo-Hai texts concerning the divine Names were produced that were spread among the German Pietists and early Kabbalists, particularly within the 'Iyyun circle. See Scholem, "Le-Heqer Qabbalat R. Yisḥaq ben Ya'aqov ha-Kohen," *Tarbiz* 4 (1932/33): 54–61 and 5 (1933/34): 51–58.