

# THE ORIGIN OF *KESAV ASHURIS*

## Is Ashuris Derived from Assyrian Lettering?

*Zevachim* 62a cites a Baraisa teaching that prophets ascertained the location of the *mizbe'ach* for the building of the Second Beis HaMikdash. In addition, prophecy was also required to instruct that henceforth the Torah should be written in *Ashuri* (square Hebrew) script. Rashi explains that the change was necessary because the Torah was originally given in *Ivri* script, known as *kesav livonaah*, referring to one opinion in *Sanhedrin* 21b. We shall see the significance of Rashi's reference to *kesav livonaah*.

## THE ORIGIN OF ALL ALPHABETS

This sugya holds the key to solving the mystery of the origin of the alphabet. Probably one of the most consequential inventions in world history, its origin has been traced back about 3,500 years. Until then, a system of picture writing was in use, using thousands of symbols, as found in Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese. Another system in use was cuneiform, which was based on syllabic signs, and also entailed remembering a large number of characters, so only the elite could read and write. The introduction of an alphabetic system revolutionized writing, as it simplified the learning process and there were just 22 characters to memorize. Amazingly, all of today's major alphabetic scripts can be traced back to one source, the Semitic alphabet, with almost the same sequence; obviously they have a common origin. Greek history records that their letters were taken from the Phoenicians, and we know that Roman, Russian, Arabic and Indian letters were all derived from the ancient Greek letters. The ancient Greeks also wrote from right to left but later flipped the letters, writing in the opposite direction, as can be seen for example with the letter E which changes direction. Extra letters were subsequently added after the letter T (*taf*) to cater for sounds in their language for which they had no letter. The academic world is convinced that there must be a link between the earlier picture writing and the alphabet, and their best theory has it that some Phoenician woke up one morning with a brainwave to use just 22 letters, but in reality, it remains a mystery to them. Jewish tradition teaches that the alphabet predated creation of the world, and the world was created using the 22 letters in various permutations as its spiritual DNA. This sugya provides an insight into how the alphabet developed, with these 22 letters forming the basis of all other universal alphabets.

KESAV LIVONA AH

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 21b) asked - what is *kesav Ivri*? with the answer - *kesav livonaah*. Rashi identifies the name *livonaah* saying: לִיבָּאָה: אֲוֹתִיּוֹת גְּדוּלָות בְּשַׁׂרְבָּנָן בְּקָמְעוֹת וּמְזוֹזָהָן - large letters similar to those written in *kameyos* and *mezuzos*. This comment has baffled commentators because the size of a letter cannot define the style of script, which could be any size. What is Rashi telling us by comparing the letters to symbols written in *kameyos* and *mezuzos*? The Ran asks another question. Later, the Gemara wishes to prove that the *kesav* changed from *Ivry* to *Ashuri* and refers to Belshazzar's writing on the wall episode, where the people, including the Jews, could not read the *Ashuri* writing appearing and needed the *navi* to interpret it. If the difference between *Ivri* and *Ashuri* is just the size of the letter, why could the people not understand the writing on the wall has totally different letters which look like the large characters found in view, explaining that the symbols in the *mezuza* illustrated in *Sefer Razim* attempts a forced explanation of which letters these symbols represent? Rashi says they are **similar** to letters, not that they represent actual letters; we shall demonstrate shortly that they are seals which are kabbalistic!

## RECONSTRUCTED LETTERS

The Rishonim attempt to elucidate the meaning of the word *livonaah* by reference to its root letters and provide different translations. The *Rosh* in his recently published *Tosafos HaRosh* on *Sanhedrin* 21b provides a clue to understanding Rashi. He translates *livonaah* meaning *melaben libuna*, associating the word with *livonaah*, as in building bricks. This implies that he understands Rashi to mean that *kesav Ivri* was a development or reconstruction from the original script of *Ashuri*. Rashi's words "*osiyos gedolos*" should then be read as "*osiyos gedulos*", redeveloped letters, rather than large letters. In other words, they are the same set of letters with the same names, but they have been restructured to look different. The heads of the upright limbs of the letters have been stripped off, leaving just the skeleton of each letter. In this way, the letter was de-sanctified, but it still served as an alphabetic character for reading and writing. *Sanhedrin* 22a explains that the Torah script became *roetz*, shattered, when the people sinned. Maharsha explains that the Hebrew alphabet became converted into a splintered script, taking the thin and spidery form of *Ivri* script, as can be seen in the chart. Rabbeinu Chananel's version of this word is *doetz*, with a *daled*, which means to press firmly. This appears to allude to cuneiform letters which are formed by pressing a wedge-shaped stylus into damp clay. Cuneiform, a logosyllabic system (like Chinese) with hundreds of signs, was the standard Assyrian script before the time of Ezra.

### **Transition from Ivri to Greek and Latin alphabets.**

**There is no intermediate stage from Ivri to Aramaic and Ashuri.**

## ARAMAIC SCRIPT

*Sanhedrin* 22a asks why was square Hebrew writing called *Ashuris*? One answer was that it came up with them from Assyria. The Gemara in *Zevachim* 62a also connects the change to *Ashuris* with the return from Bavel. Many understand this to mean that the Jews had grown accustomed to the Assyrian script while they were in exile in Bavel, and they brought it with them as a superior style of writing – thus creating square Hebrew. However, that cannot be true, because no such style existed in Assyria. The standard script in Bavel was cuneiform, which is not alphabetic. Aramaic was also used, as Aramaic had become the *lingua franca* (common language) for trade and daily communication across much of the Near East, but that was written in *Ivri* characters and not *Ashuri*. One only finds Aramaic in letters resembling square Hebrew characters after the death of Belshazzar in 539 BCE, soon after the writing on the wall episode. This can be seen in the Aramaic column in the chart and would have been imitating the new Jewish square Hebrew script. The dates shown on the chart follow secular chronology, which is about 168 years earlier than Jewish dating, where the change happened around 3389 = 370 BCE (see <https://tinyurl.com/DAFTOPIC41> to understand the discrepancy).

### CHOSAMOS

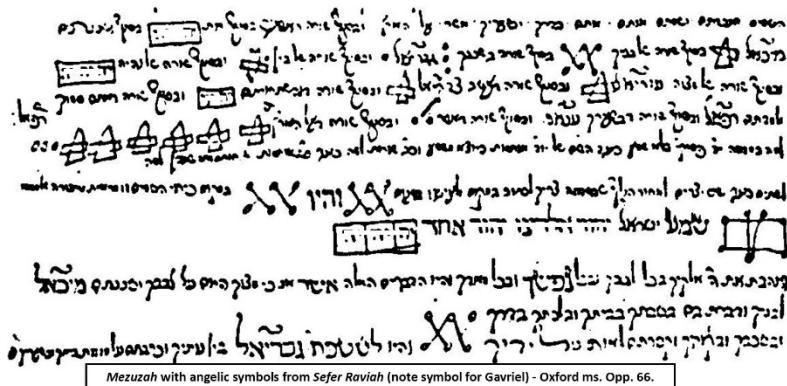
We have seen that these symbols correspond to names of angels. Rav Aryeh Kaplan explains that the *Zohar* states that there are two types of angels (English translation of *Sefer Yetzirah* p. 171). We know that every time we do a mitzvah, we create an angel – a positive spiritual force. However, there are also permanent angels which represent a set of spiritual forces designed to achieve a particular function. How these spiritual forces combine is the essence of kabbalistic teaching, which is beyond my understanding, but let us just focus on the concept. The different spiritual forces of say, *Gevurah*, *Chessed*, *Tiferes* etc combine to achieve different purposes, and each combination is given a name – the name of that *malach*, or set of spiritual forces. That interaction can be depicted graphically with a model structure. We find a parallel in the physical world, where different atoms combine to form molecules, and a geometric model of balls and sticks is used. The graphic depiction of each *malach* is also comprised of a group of circles and connecting rods, with each circle representing a specific force and the rods showing the relationship between them. The illustration here depicts the seven seals used in *kameyos*. One can see the similarity between the *Gavriel* seal in the *mezuzah* from *Sefer Raviah* to those in the diagram. This is Rashi's example of reconnecting broken letters.

### INITIAL HOLINESS OF KESAV ASHURIS

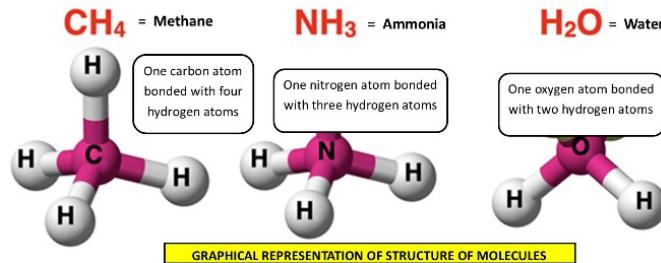
We now need to understand how the letters developed according to the Jewish tradition. The Chasam Sofer in a *derush* (omitted in modern editions) suggests that the *Ashuri* letters of the Torah contained secrets of the entire *Torah she'Bal Peh* only known to *Nevi'im*, and general people utilized a degraded form of the letters which did not have such intense *kedushah* (*Toras Moshe* – *Parshas Shemos*). This *kesav livonaah* was created by rebuilding each letter, breaking down its constituent elements, and removing the heads of the letters, resulting in a primitive looking form of the letters. Although some of the letters remained somewhat similar and they retained their names and sequence within the alphabet, the new characters were de-sanctified and no longer had the spiritual power of *kesav Ashuri*. They could therefore also be used for mundane purposes. *Sefer Yetzirah* is ascribed to *Avraham Avinu*, and it contains permutations of the 22 letters with which the world was created, in the same way as DNA contains chains of instructions. It is interesting that the universal public appearance of alphabetical writing coincides roughly with the time of *Avraham Avinu*. This would be typical of his achievement to benefit all of mankind by disseminating the concept of alphabetic writing. However, the original *Ashuri* alphabet was only passed down to his descendants through their spiritual leaders.

### DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LUCHOS

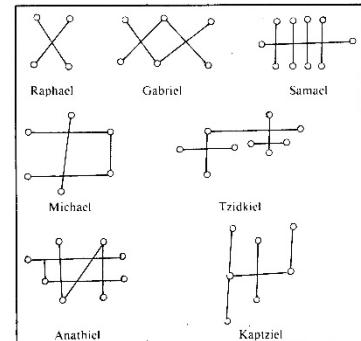
Many Rishonim wish to prove that the Torah must have been given in *Ashuri*, because the center parts of the letters *mem* and *samech* were miraculously suspended in the *luchos* (*Megillah* 2b, *Shabbos* 104a), but in *Ivri* these two letters are not circular. There is further proof from the account of Moshe witnessing HaShem attaching crowns to the heads of letters of the Torah (*Menachos* 29b). Only *Ashuri* letters have such heads. The Radvaz (*Teshuvos Radvaz* s. 883) succeeds in reconciling the conflicting sources on the basis of the Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 1:9) which states that according to the view that the Torah was given in *Ivri* script, it was the *ayin* that was miraculously suspended, rather than the *mem* and *samech*. (See the chart showing that the *ayin* is a circle in *kesav Ivri*). Radvaz therefore asserts that the first *Luchos* were engraved in *Ashuris* script and contained all the teachings hinted in the letter shapes and *tagin*. When the people sinned with the Golden Calf, they no longer deserved this script and the Torah script was degraded to *kesav Ivri*, the commonly used script, in the second *Luchos*. However, in Ezra's time, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah prayed to have the strong passion for *Avodah Zarah* neutralized (*Sanhedrin* 46a). Consequently, the Jewish people were now worthy of the holy *Ashuri* script. Ezra took the Belshazzar vision as a signal that it should be reintroduced. It was reintroduced in Bavel, and when they returned to Yerushalayim, they brought this script with – hence it was called *Ashuri*, as it had been reintroduced in Ashur (Bavel).



Mezuzah with angelic symbols from *Sefer Raviah* (note symbol for Gavriel) - Oxford ms. Opp. 66.



GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF STRUCTURE OF MOLECULES



Graphical depiction of relationship of spiritual forces of seven angels