

Nehemiah Polen

HEBREW LETTERS and Their Mystical Qualities

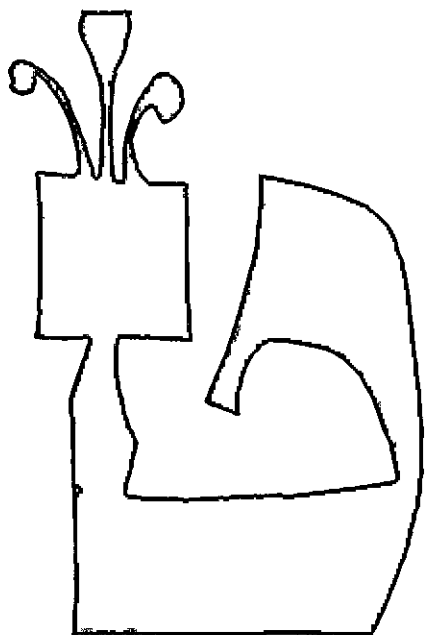
The Book of Letters by Lawrence Kushner. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's *Sefer Otiyot: The Book of Letters* exists on many levels, as befitting a book subtitled "A Mystical Alef-Bait." Some may take it as simply a book of Hebrew calligraphy, suitable as a coffee table decoration. It could be used as a primer of the Hebrew alphabet and language. The neatly handwritten cataloging information at the front of the book tells us that it is "juvenile literature." Its suitability for children, however, should not prevent us from seeing it as a work of authentic Jewish spirituality, a profound and fresh affirmation of our tradition in a new cultural context.

From a rationalistic perspective, letters are unimportant. After all, they are only useful when they form words. They have no utilitarian value until they interrelate in a more complex web of meanings and significations, in other words, until they (like children) mature. They may be tolerated or even prized for their decorative value when appropriately dressed up for formal occasions, just as children may be. But to be taken seriously — never.

The Jewish tradition, at least at times, took both children and letters seriously. The Rabbinical statement (B. T. Shabbat 119b) that the world is dependent on the breath of little school children is not unrelated to the viewpoint which sees the letters of the Alef-Bait as the basic building blocks of the universe.

The educated person of today knows that letters and words are arbitrary — that there is no intrinsic connection between a letter and its sound, between a word and its meaning. "Do not mistake the map for the territory," the semanticists warn us. The Rabbis of old,



The letter Tet ט has two heads. The left head and leg have the appearance of the letter Zayin ז and are adorned with three crowns or zayin-

You cannot pronounce the letter Tet ט until you go out early in the spring morning and see the dew טל TAL.

Only when you secretly confess to yourself that you really do not understand how the tiny droplets of water have come to be, are you permitted to be cleansed in them. And wrap yourself in your prayer shawl טלית TALIT.

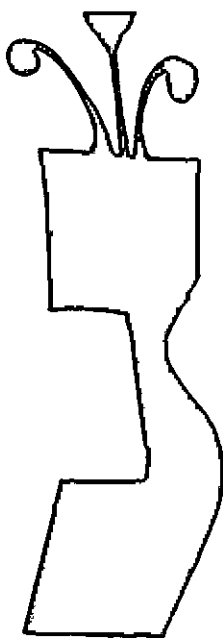
however, took the "arbitrary" very seriously. The Talmud (B. T. Menahot 29b) tells us that Moshe was puzzled when he saw the little artistic flourishes, the "crowns" with which God was embellishing the letters of the Torah. "Who deters your hand," Moshe wanted to know, "from adhering to a simple script?" "What place have arbitrary flourishes and embellishments in a serious book of wisdom and instruction," he must have wondered. Moshe was assured that someday every extra line would be shown to have a deep significance. And indeed, from the days of Rabbi Akiva on, "heaps and heaps" of meaning were discerned in the shape of a letter, in the seemingly chance juxtaposition of words in the Torah, in an extra jot or tittle, a Yud or Tet, must bear some deep significance.

It is in that tradition of taking the "arbitrary" seriously — call it mystical if you will, although the legalistic sections of the Talmud assume it in their own way as much as the Zohar — that the *Book of Letters* must be seen.

Rabbi Kushner builds a structure of interrelated meanings — a personality — for each letter, using as his tools words that "just happen to" begin with the same letter. In his hands the letters grow before our eyes, radiating multifaceted aspects of meaning from a central core of being. It is a measure of the book's success that it avoids the feel of artificial, contrived associations. Instead, it persuades us with the organic wholeness of its connections. In earlier times, it would have been called a Midrash.

A word must be said about the Hebrew calligraphy: Kushner's letters indeed have personalities of their own. They give us the impression that they are proud and strong, expressive and confident, without being blustery or flashy. They not only have personalities, but appealing ones at that.

At one time, Jewish religious books were sometimes prefaced by a "hitnazlut hamehaber" — an apologia in which the author would acknowledge the inadequacies of the word, and attempt to explain why he felt justified in assuming that his ideas would be of some value, given that the Jewish classical sources had already spoken on the subject at hand. The hitnazlut — literally "self-defense" — attempted to secure a small area of legitimacy for a new work, while deferring ultimate authority to the body of Jewish tradition as a whole.



The Nun has the head of a Zayin ז; its neck descends from the middle of the bottom of the head getting gradually thicker and leaning back slightly to the right. Care must be taken not to make the Nun too long, otherwise it might easily be confused with the Bet ב.

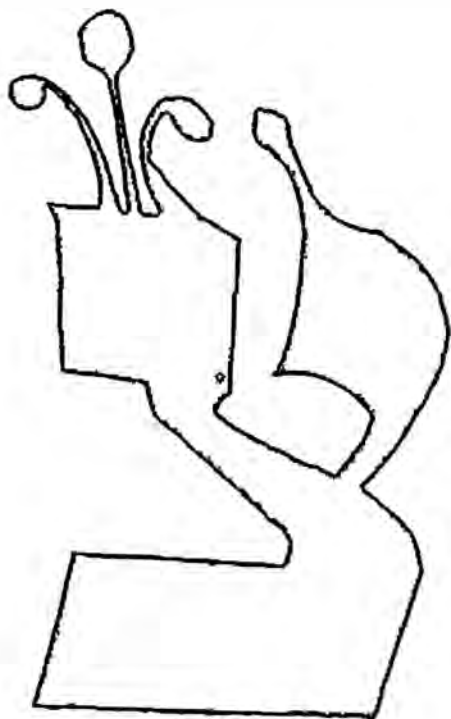
Nun נ is a soulbird נ'שמה N'SHAMA.
She is easily frightened and falls away
silent. Just like a person נפש NEFESH.
In each person and in each soulbird there
is something feminine נקבה N'KAYVA.

Ecstatic with a melody נגון NIGGUN.
Melody on top of melody on top of melody.
Going higher and lower at the same time.
Dizzy and frightened yet unable to return.

Nowadays, this type of hitnazlut has gone out of fashion, but its place has been taken by a new sort of "implicit" hitnazlut, directed, however, at another source of authority. Instead of justifying a work in the context of the Jewish tradition itself, authors must now show how the insights of Judaism can be accommodated to our secularized cultural and intellectual milieu. Thus, even serious Jewish religious thought has adopted an idiom conforming to scientific scholarship and rationalistic modes of thought. While these certainly have their place, it is unlikely that new works of religious genius and inspiration, such as the Jewish people have been producing for millennia, can be produced in conformity with their dictates and constraints.

This is why the *Sefer Otiyot* is so exciting and different. It makes no accommodation to secular culture; it contains no "implicit hitnazlut." Yet instead of sounding obscure, cultic, or anachronistic, it gives us a glimpse of the poetic beauty of authentic spirituality. While the author is an American Reform Rabbi, the book's style and content give us no hint of his affiliation, lending support to the hope that a mature American Judaism may yet transcend the narrow labels that have served merely to demonstrate the poverty of our spiritual choices.

The book is significant for what it omits: it contains no scholarly discussion of the history of Hebrew calligraphy, no sermon on the significance of the letters for our times, no trendy theological window-dressing, no "relevance." Rather, it *assumes*, without apology or self-consciousness, that we take the world of Jewish tradition seriously, treating its modes of reasoning and expression with sanctity. In short, it is a *sefer* — a traditional Jewish sacred text. Like any *sefer*, it deserves to be studied, not just read. We do not simply study it: it studies us. It confronts us with the ancient truths of a tradition and uses them as a beacon of light to explore the hidden places of our souls. To take but one example, one reads the words on the letter Chet, feeling the profound cleavages, the deep ambivalences of the human psyche which are exposed with such decisive effectiveness. Juvenile literature indeed! And to recall that the author did not spend his youth in an Eastern-European Yeshiva, but was nurtured in the ways of analytic philosophy and form criticism, makes one suspect that his belief in the mystical power of the tradition to bring forth new life is not without justification.



The letter Tsadi is composed of a Nun whose head leans forward and whose neck, as a consequence, is stretched out and whose foot is extended so as to provide balance like this: *3*. A Yod is then attached by its

tail to the middle of the back of the Nun's neck.

Tsadi is the first letter in time. While other letters are first in the Alef-Bait or in grace or even in importance, the first letter the Holy One formed was Tsadi. For Tsadi is righteousness and "Deeds of Giving are the very

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