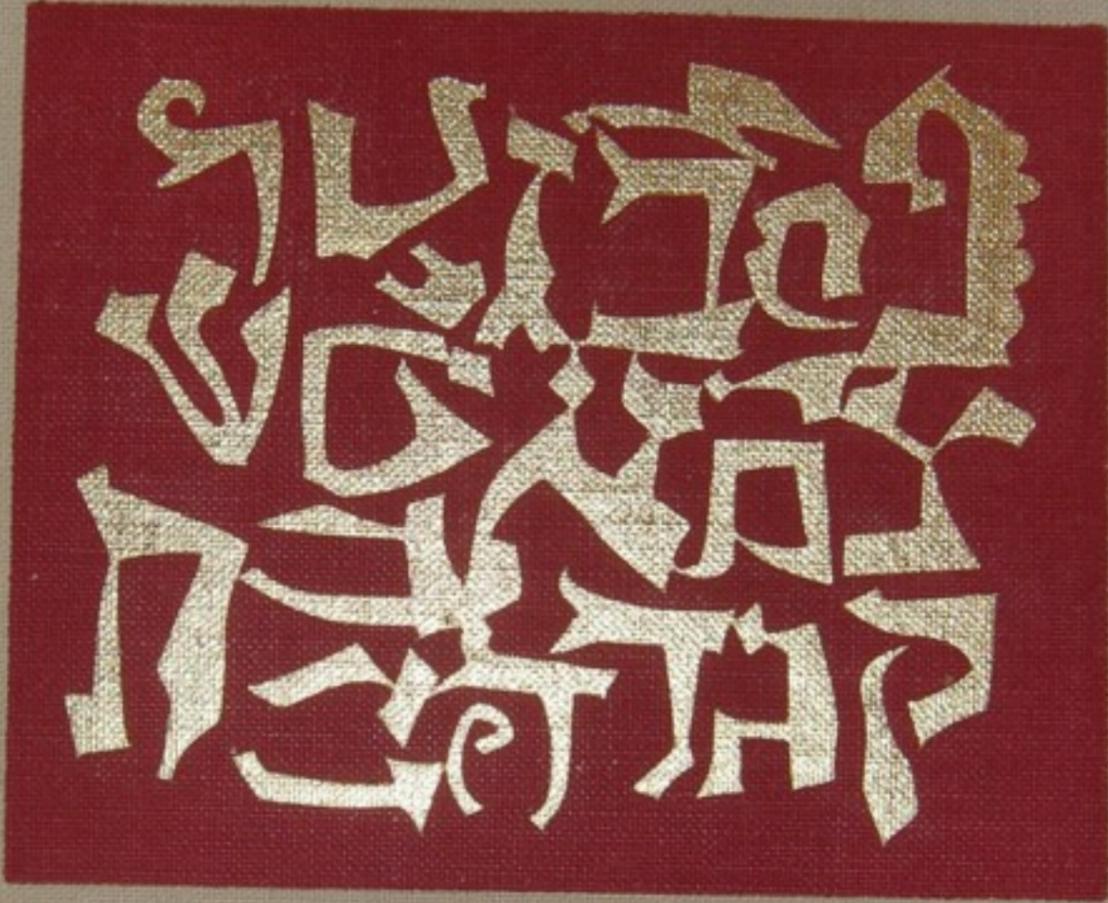


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THE ALPHABET OF CREATION

Zohar. English. Selections



An ancient legend from the Zohar
with drawings by BEN SHAHN

Pantheon Books

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Twenty-six generations before
the creation of the world, the
twenty-two letters of the alphabet
descended from the crown of
God whereon they were engraved

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with a pen of flaming fire. They
gathered around about God

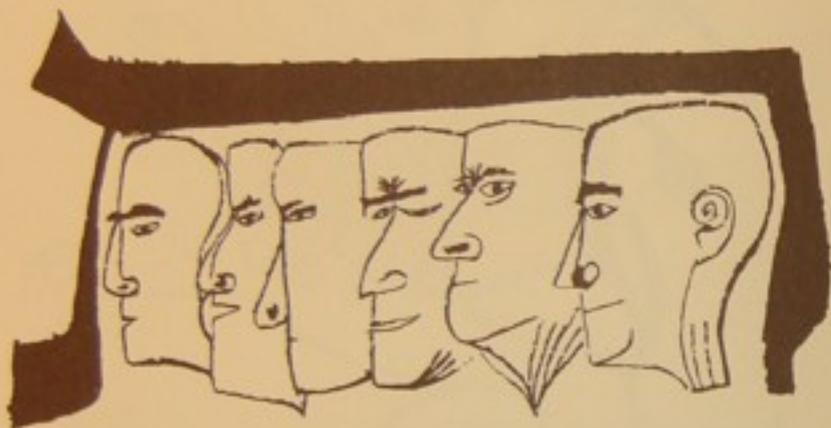


and one after another spoke and
entreated, each one, that the world
be created through him.

The first to step forward was
Tav. "O Lord of the World,"
said he, "be it Thy will to
create the world through me,



seeing that it is through me that
Thou wilt give the Torah to Israel
by way of the hand of Moses. For
it is written: 'Moses commanded
us to keep the Torah.' ”



The Holy One, blessed be He,
made answer and said, “No . . .

Because in the days to come I
shall place thee as a sign of death
upon the foreheads of men.” And
Tav retired.



Shin then stepped forward. “O
Lord of the World, create Thy
world through me, seeing that

Thine own name, Shaddai, begins
with me!" But Shin was rejected
because it was his ill fortune to



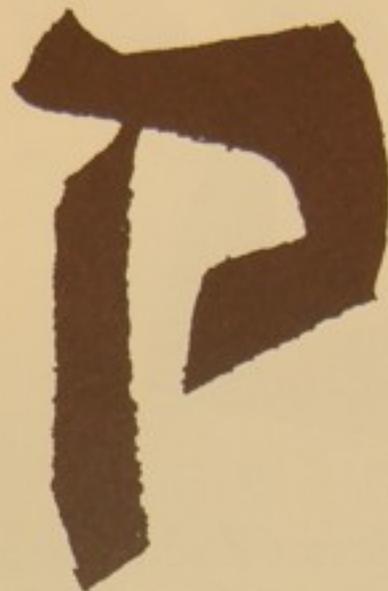
stand at the beginning of the words
Shav, lie, and Sheker, falsehood.



So it was with Resh that stands
at the head of Ra, wicked, and
Rasha, evil, even though he could



claim the honor of being the first
letter in the name of God –
Rahum, the Merciful.



Koph, in his turn, had to be
rejected, for although he begins the
word Kodesh, the Holy One, he
also suffers himself to be used for
the word curse – Kelalah.



When the letter Zadhe presented himself, saying that he stood at



the head of the word Zaddik, the Righteous One, God replied, "O letter Zadhe, you are good and you

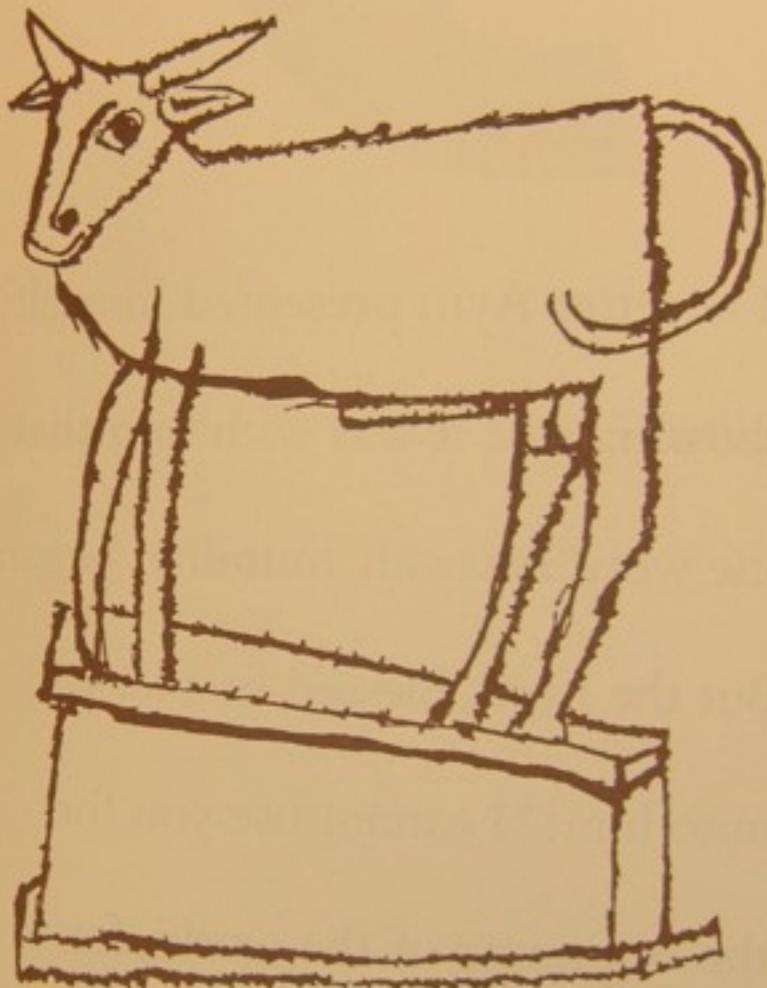


are true, but it is you that will stand for Zarot, the misfortunes of Israel!" And Zadhe went away.



Next came Pe that claimed the word Podeh, the Redeemer, to his credit. But God said, "You have the lowered head, symbol of the sinner who, ashamed, lowers his head and covers it with his

arm. Besides, Peshah, transgression, reflects dishonor upon the letter Pe."





The letter Ayin presented himself, showing that it was with him that the word Anawah, humility, began. But the Lord, blessed be He, said unto him: "I cannot use you for the beginning of the world, for it

is with you that the word Aerwah, immorality, begins."



And when the Ayin had left,
Samekh entered saying: "O Lord,



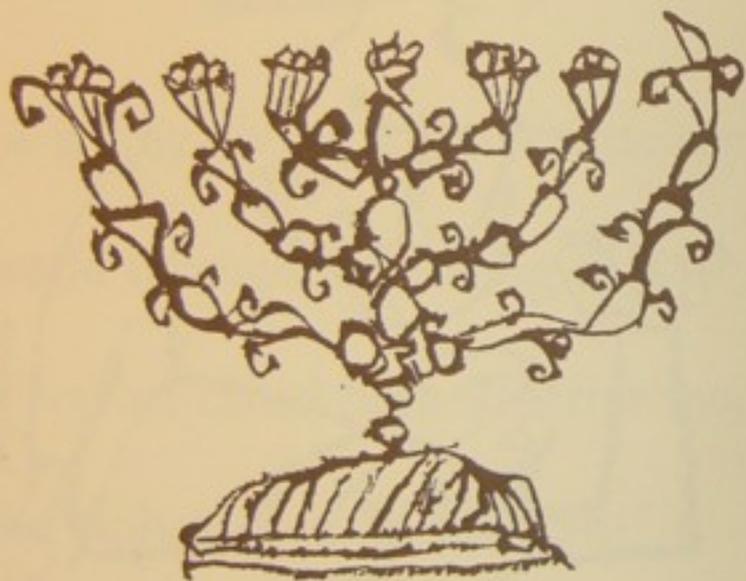
be it Thy divine will to create the
world through me, seeing that
Thou art called Samekh after me,
the Upholder of all that fall!"

But God said, "Remain, Samekh,
where you are. For you must con-
tinue to uphold all that fall."

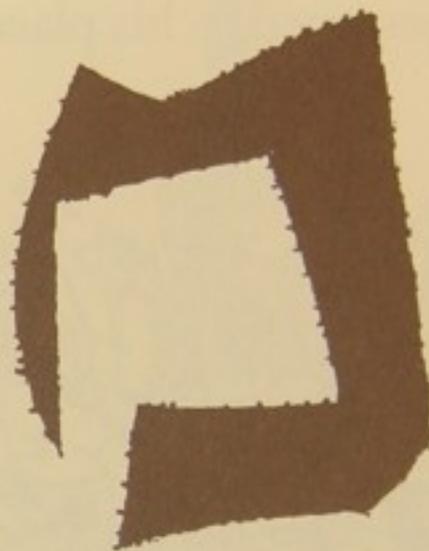




Nun, although he introduces Ner,
“the lamp of the Lord which is the

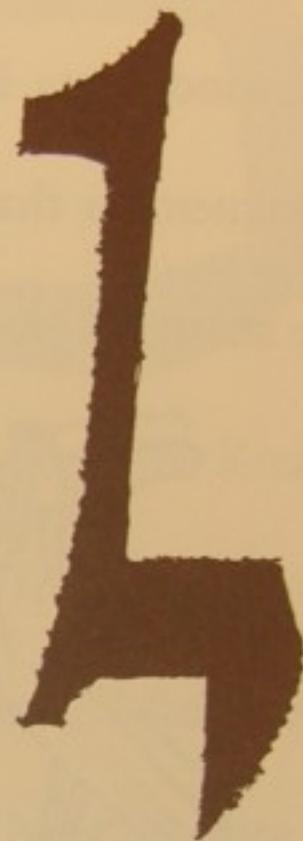


spirit of men,” equally introduces
Ner, “the lamp of the wicked
which will be put out by God.”



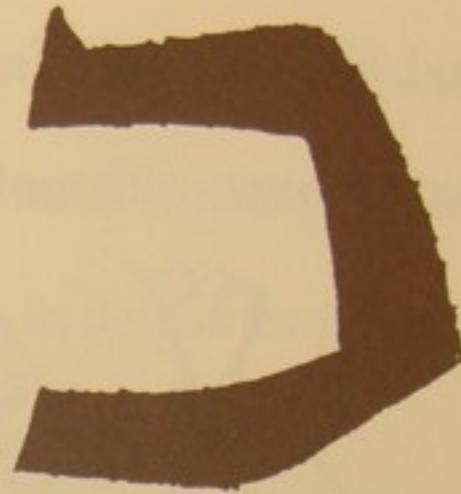
And as for Mem, “It is true,” the
Lord said, “that you serve Me by
starting the word Melek, king,

which is one of the titles of God,
but you are also the first letter
of Mehumah, confusion.” So the
Mem returned to his place.



Lamedh now came forward, boldly
proclaiming himself to be the first
letter of Luhot, the celestial tables

on which would be inscribed the Ten Commandments. But he had failed to remember that the tables would be shattered by Moses.



At this moment the letter Khaph descended from the glorious crown and cried out, "Master of the Universe! May it please Thee to use me for the creation of the world. For it is known that Kisseh, the throne of God, as well as

Kabod, his honor, and Keter, his crown, all begin with me!" And



the Lord, blessed be He, said,
"I will smite together my hands,
Khaph, in despair over the mis-
fortunes of Israel!"



Yodh then entered and asked to be
chosen, for did he not form the
first letter of the sacred name of
God—Yah? But then it was pointed

out that Yezer ha-Ra, the evil inclination, begins also with Yodh.



Teth based his claim upon being the initial letter of Tov, the good, which is one of the attributes of God.

But God spoke to him saying,

“The truly good is not in this world, it belongs in the world to come.”



Heth, although it is the first letter of Hanun, the Gracious One, is also first in the word for sin – Hattat. So the letter Heth was rejected. Zayin based his plea upon the fact that he begins the verse which

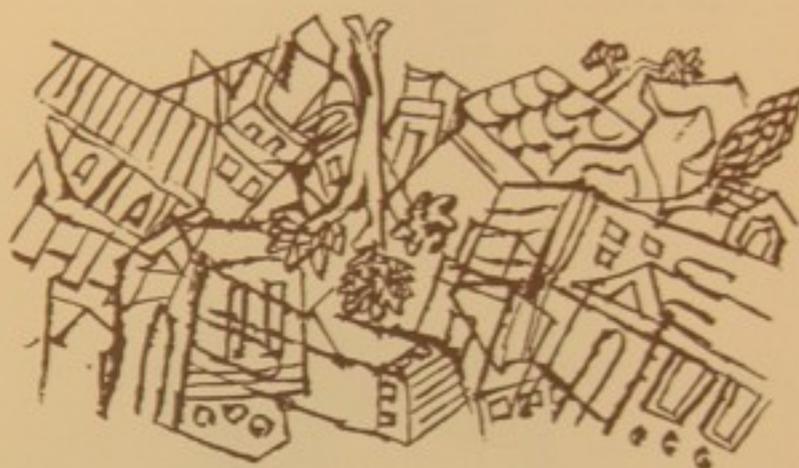


ordains the observance of the Sabbath. But God said, “You may not help Me in the work of the creation of the world, for Zayin is the word for weapon, which is the image of war.”



The letters Vau and He entered together saying, "O Lord, create the world through us, for together we compose the ineffable name of God." But God replied, "You are

too exalted for use in the affairs of the world." So they returned to their places.



If Daleth had begun only the word Dabar, the Divine Word, it might have been used. But it stands also

at the head of Din, justice. And
under a law of justice without
love, the world would have fallen
to ruin.

Thus Daleth was disqualified.



And Gimel, although it reminds
one of Gadol, great, would not do,
because it also stands at the head
of Gemul – retribution.





When the letter Beth left the crown, two hundred thousand worlds, as well as the crown itself, trembled. Beth stepped before the Holy One, blessed be He, and pleaded, "O Lord of the World!

May it be Thy will to create the world through me, seeing that all the dwellers in the world daily



give praise unto Thee through me.
For it is said, 'Baruch—blessed—be
the Lord forever: Amen and



Amen!" The Holy One, blessed
be He, immediately granted the
petition of Beth, saying, "Blessed
be he that cometh in the name of
the Lord!" And He created the

world through Beth; as it is said,
“Bereshith—in the beginning—God
created the Heaven and the Earth.”



The letter Aleph remained in her
place. And the Lord, blessed be He,
said to her, “O Aleph, Aleph, why
have you not presented a claim
before Me, as have the other
letters?” Aleph replied, “Master of
the Universe! Seeing that all these

letters have presented themselves before Thee uselessly, why should I present myself also? And then, since I have seen Thee accord to the letter Beth this precious honor, I would not ask the Heavenly King to reclaim that which He has given to one of His servants."

The Lord, blessed be He, replied, "O Aleph, Aleph! Even though I have chosen the letter Beth to help

Me in the creation of the world, you too shall be honored." And God thereupon rewarded Aleph for her modesty by giving her first place in the Decalogue.



THE ALPHABET OF CREATION is one of the legends from the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, or *Book of Splendor*, an ancient Gnostic work written in Aramaic by a thirteenth century Spanish scholar named Moses de Leon who presented the work, not as his own, but as mystic knowledge revealed many centuries earlier to the Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai. The present interpretation has been rather freely adapted by Ben Shahn from the English translation of Maurice Samuel and other sources.

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