

Abraham and the Universal Sounds of Healing Peace: Kabbalah of the Mother Letters Alef, Mem, and Shin

Yitzak Ahron

The Hebrew letter Mem has four sides. The letter Shin is a triangle, and the letter Alef suggests circularity. “Mem hums, Shin hisses, and Alef is the Breath of Air deciding between them.” —Sefer Yetzirah

Sheikh Yusef Abu Sneina, imam of El-Aksa Mosque, told Bruce Feiler, that if Muslims, Christians, and Jews follow what is said about Abraham in their respective holy texts, then we can reach unity. “You have a true heart, you have to believe there is one God. Maybe we have different approaches, but the destination is the same” (Feiler, 2002:182).

There are many different stories about Abraham and more about his descendants. Most Muslims identify with Ishmael; Isaac is my namesake. For me, Torah suggests that God’s blessing to Abraham inured to all his descendants. Our contentious interaction with the blessing began with Sarah asking Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their tents. Each tradition claims they are the only real descendants of Abraham. As a descendant of Isaac, I apologize to the descendants of Ishmael for how he was treated and then regarded by our rabbis since then.

The American Muslim editor Sheila Musaji said, “Abraham—the friend of God—is spiritually the shared ancestor of half the people alive today—

Jews, Christians and Muslims. In the story of Abraham we can find justification for continued suspicion and mistrust, or we can find in Abraham the point of contact, the cornerstone for a new relationship” (Musaji 2002).

Our mystical teachings may be key to achieving this new relationship. *Sefer Yetzirah*, or the *Book of Creation*, which contains teachings attributed to Abraham, may be translated in the third person, past tense, describing the creative process. Or it may be translated in the imperative, suggesting a meditation or guide to inner work; something we are to do now. This way, the text is an instruction manual for empowering the reader with an inner framework for receiving inspiration.

I believe that Torah’s teachings are for *all* beings, and should be read in a manner that sheds light upon our inner-self in this day. Inner-Torah enables us to see traditional religious doctrines in a new light. The concept of inner teaching, espoused by Joseph Campbell and a number of others, contemplates religious and mythological stories as metaphors for personal experience.

Instead of the outer-Torah question as to whether the God of Torah intended the disinheritance of Ishmael, consider the inner-teachings. What must I do now as a Jew to make peace between my Isaac and my Ishmael within? Can we now share God’s blessing to Abraham’s

seed with all who claim to be his descendants? Can Christians and Muslims today accept Jesus/Mohammed as their path yet not the only path for all people? It's the outer teachings we fight about. They define our separateness, whereas the inner teachings are universal. If we embody the inner teachings of Abraham, we may cease fighting. In our hearts, and out there in the world.

Inner listening brings us to sounds and silent meditation. Shema means "listen." As a Jewish prayer expressing divine singularity, its commonly accepted translation is, "Hear, O Yisrael, God is One." But suppose we translate it, "Listen, Yisrael, to God's Oneness, to your Oneness with God." Where might this lead us? What might we hear? Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan suggests Shema as a meditative focus (Kaplan 1985:130-131, 175-177). In his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*, Kaplan (1977) draws our attention to the Mother Letters, three primal and transcendent forces associated with fire, water and air, suggesting that they are creative inner-listening practices. Shin and Mem, the Fire and Water, are the sounds of Shema. Alef is our connection to the Silent Oneness.

The sounds of Shema are in the common greeting "Manishma?" meaning, "How are you?" But it means literally, "What do you hear?" At a deeper level, we are asking, "What are you listening to? What are you attuned to?"

Rabbi Kaplan taught that the lowest part of the soul interfaces with the physical body. "Here a person gains awareness of the body as a receptacle for the spiritual. This is only possible, however, when one is able to isolate himself from the

constant stream of internal and external stimuli that occupy his thoughts.

Awareness of the spiritual thus necessarily begins by quieting down the awareness of the physical" (Kaplan 1990:18).

Most sounds wake us up. Two quiet us down. The sounds of Shin and Mem—shhh and hmmm—contain universal messages that quiet our minds and evoke listening. Shushing calls upon the stream of thoughts to cease. Mem is the only letter we pronounce without opening our mouths. It implies, "I'm listening." It is the only sound we make that doesn't interrupt someone else's train of thought. Notice how just thinking these sounds affects you.

The sounds of Shema are contained in the word neshama, which means soul and also breath. Psalm 150 says, "Every soul (breath) praises God's name." Breath is a universal in meditation practice. The sounds of Shema beckon us to pay attention more deeply. Shalem means healthy, complete, whole. Shalom and salam are the sounds of (universal) peace. Hashamayim (fire/water) is Hebrew for the heavens. They are also the sounds of Hashem, the ineffable Divine Name. The word "shem" also refers to *our* name, and the very concept of identity.

The letters Shin and Mem also correspond to the Yud and Hey of the ineffable Divine Name and are associated with the basic interplay of divine expansion and contraction. Kabbalah teaches that Mem and Yud are of the sphere (Sefirah) of Wisdom, representing right-brain consciousness, intuitiveness and the awareness of similarities. Shin and Hey are in the Sefirah of

Understanding, the left-brain that does our ordinary thinking, involving language, distinctions, and reasoning. Mem and Yud are associated with water, Shin and Hey with fire. Alef, Breath of Air, is in the Sefirah of Tiferet, the heart-center. Here, in silence, we are One.

Since Mem and Shin relate to Yud and Hey, listening to these sounds can focus our attention on the Divine Name. The third letter of the Divine Name, Vav, relates to the Mother Letter Alef.

*He chose three letters from among the elementals
in the mystery of the Three Mothers, Alef, Mem,
Shin.*

—*Sefer Yetzirah* (1:13)

The Mother Letter Alef teaches that the shape of our oneness is infinite, and that it is silent. As quoted at the beginning, “Mem hums, Shin hisses, and Alef is the Breath of Air deciding between them.” Shushing and humming oscillate our minds back and forth between Understanding and Wisdom. Alef lies in between.

*Understand with Wisdom
Be wise with Understanding
Examine with them
and probe from them.*

—*Sefer Yetzirah* (1:4)

The following words used in prayer or meditation, or as a context for silent meditation, may be followed by breaths that carry just the sounds. It may suffice just to shhh and hmmm. Perhaps only the thought. The sounds are always present. It’s the awareness that we are developing.

*Shema Hashem Shalom
Salam Shalem Shalom*

(Shhh, hmmm...shhh, hmmm)

What are you listening to? To what are you attuned? Manishmah?

*Hear the sounds,
the sounds of peace,
the sounds of healing peace.*

The words comprise a prayer of peace and healing and a chant leading into meditation. (Melody, movements, and additional material on this subject are available by email request to yitzak@greenermediations.net.) In Arabic, the refrain also plays on sounds of the Mothers.

*Issmao issim,
issim il salam,
issim shifa il salam.*

The transition from Understanding to Wisdom involves progressive changes of our thoughts and awareness. The sounds of Shin and Mem by themselves allow mind to step back from the complexity of words and meanings, opening more and more to the universal awareness of silent unity. There’s a “running and returning” in the mind-spirit relationship.

The universality of these images is astounding to me. In Siddha Yoga, I learned from Swami Muktananda that HamSa/SoHam (containing the same sounds), the “Great Mantra,” in many Shaivite traditions are the sounds of the breath that is given no audible sound. In Sanskrit, these inner-sounds of breathing mean, “I am that I am.”

And I am a body. All beings are connected to the Earth’s core by gravity. We all live on one planet. We actually perceive gravity in our ears!

And *Sefer Yetzirah*'s universality grounds us in our whole bodies.

*Three Mothers, Alef Mem Shin
in the soul, male and female,
are the head, belly, and chest.
The head is created from fire,
the belly is created from water
and the chest, from breath,
decides between them.*

—*Sefer Yetzirah* (3:6)

I learned in Aikido that it is with breath that we align ourselves with *Ki*, the energy that creates all things. The founder of the art also spoke of Spirit in terms of three basic shapes (Dobson 1993:10; 1978). The circle represents adaptability and unity. Both Kabbalah and Aikido associate the triangle with the head, the square with the belly (pelvis) and the circle with the breath (chest.) The triangle is focus and direction, and the square is balance and stability. Shin is a triangle, and the number 300. Mem is a square and the number 40. Aleph is the number one, whose geometry is a circle.

Listening (Shema) brings our attention to our ears, into the perception of sound and our sense of space and balance. This increases our awareness

of both the inner sounds of our breathing and our kinesthetic sense of oneness.

Follow the sounds of the Mother Letters into silent breathing. They are opposite qualities, and thus contain all sounds. On an oscilloscope, Shin consists of many vibrations, like white noise. Mem is a pure tone.

May they be for us a gateway into the Silence.

Manishma?

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