

HEBREW LANGUAGE AND JEWISH THOUGHT

David Patterson

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What makes Jewish thought Jewish? This book proceeds from a view of the Hebrew language as the holy tongue; such a view of Hebrew is, indeed, a distinctively Jewish view as determined by the Jewish religious tradition. Because language shapes thought and Hebrew is the foundational language of Jewish texts, this book explores the idea that Jewish thought is distinguished by concepts and categories rooted in Hebrew.

Drawing on more than 300 Hebrew roots, the author shows that Jewish thought employs Hebrew concepts and categories that are altogether distinct from those that characterize the Western speculative tradition. Among the key categories that shape Jewish thought are holiness, divinity, humanity, prayer, responsibility, exile, dwelling, gratitude, and language itself.

While the Hebrew language is central to the investigation, the reader need not have a knowledge of Hebrew in order to follow it. Essential reading for students and scholars of Judaism, this book will also be of value to anyone interested in the categories of thinking that form humanity's ultimate concerns.

David Patterson holds the Bornblum Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Memphis. He has written numerous books on Jewish thought, Holocaust studies, and other topics. He received the Koret Jewish Book Award for his study of Holocaust diaries *Along the Edge of Annihilation* (1999).

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For my teacher Rabbi Levi Y. Klein,
with deepest gratitude

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago my four-year-old daughter asked me, “What does *Adonai* mean in Hebrew?” As my wife and I had been trying to teach her some Hebrew, I explained, “Well, honey, it’s one of the Hebrew words we use to refer to G-d.” She answered, “But I thought every Hebrew word referred to G-d.” And so my little one taught me something about Hebrew and the לשון הקודש (*leshon hakodesh*), the “holy tongue.”

Although anyone who reads this book should learn some Hebrew, its aim is not to teach Hebrew. Further, one must bear in mind a distinction between the holy tongue—the language of the Bible, Mishnah, and prayer—and modern, spoken Hebrew, which is the vernacular of the state of Israel. While the holy tongue has much to do with modern Hebrew, it is not the same as modern Hebrew. Yes, the holy tongue is Hebrew, but Hebrew, as it is used in the streets of Tel-Aviv, is not the holy tongue. When the term *Hebrew* is used in the pages that follow, then, it is generally used to refer to the holy tongue.

Titled *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, this book explores, among other things, the question of what makes Jewish thought Jewish. The fact that a Jew happens to have a thought does not make it a Jewish thought. There is also the matter of Jewish *philosophy*: is it the same as Jewish thought? If not, how does it differ?

Here Emil Fackenheim makes a helpful distinction, pointing out that in Israel the term *Machshevet Yisrael* “encompasses all ‘Jewish thought,’ from ancient Midrash to modern Zionist thought, including also Jewish philosophy. *Philosophia Yehudit* is the narrower category of the kind of thought that involves a disciplined, systematic encounter between Jewish heritage and relevant philosophy” (Fackenheim 1996: 186). Because “relevant philosophy” includes a speculative tradition inspired by the Greeks, we run a certain risk when attempting to tie it to Jewish thought. For it was said of the talmudic sage who became an apostate, Elisha ben Avuya, that he would secretly study Greek philosophy even before he abandoned Torah (see *Chagigah* 14b, 15b). And it is written that when a man asked Rabbi Yehoshua when he might teach his son the wisdom of the Greeks, the Rabbi answered, “It may be taught at a time which is not part of the day, nor part of the night” (*Midrash Tehilim* 1.1.17; also *Menachot* 99b). Which is to say: we

must heed the Talmud's warning to protect our children from a philosophy based solely on the speculations of reason (see *Berakhot* 28b; also *Bava Kama* 82b).

Even with its critique of the Western speculative tradition in contrast to Jewish tradition, this volume is perhaps more along the lines of *Philosophia Yehudit* than *Machshevet Yisrael*. It is close to *Machshevet Yisrael*, inasmuch as it draws on Jewish texts and teachings from throughout the tradition. And yet it aspires to transcend both categories, inasmuch as it is concerned not so much with how thought shapes concepts as with how Hebrew shapes thought. The Hebrew language, it is maintained, is the key to what makes Jewish thought Jewish. Perhaps the best term for what we are doing in this work is *Machshavah Yehudit*, particularly since the word for "thought," מַחְשָׁבָה (*machshavah*), may also mean "troubled mind," something that most Jewish thinkers have in common. And the root of יְהוּדִי (Yehudit), the word for "Jewish," is הוֹדָה (*hodah*), which means to "offer thanks." It would seem, then, that one definitive feature of Jewish thought is that it is a thinking at once troubled and steeped in gratitude—troubled because of how much is at stake in our thinking, grateful precisely because so much is at stake.

There have been many thinkers throughout history who happened to be Jewish, but not all of them have generated what I refer to as Jewish thought. I do not regard the philosophy of Spinoza, who identified G-d with nature, as an instance of Jewish thought. Nor do I see the communist thinking of Karl Marx as Jewish. What characterizes Jewish thought, as I define the term, is an understanding and/or questioning of G-d, world, and humanity that is couched in the holy tongue and in the texts of the sacred tradition, which include Torah, Talmud, Bible, Midrash, Kabbalah, and the commentaries and teachings of the sages. This does not mean that one must master spoken Hebrew in order to think Jewishly; nor does it mean that one must be a strictly Orthodox adherent of Torah and Talmud. But it does mean that if thinking is to be regarded as distinctively Jewish, it must stand in some kind of informed relation to the Hebrew language and the sacred tradition.

Briefly stated, then, Jewish thinking is shaped by the teachings of Judaism. And it is the Hebrew word—the language of Torah—that defines Judaism, as Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira (1889–1943), the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, has said: not only are the ideas contained in the words of Torah meaningful but also of profound importance are the vessels, the words and letters, that convey those ideas (see Shapira 2000: 46). To be sure, it is written in the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy that when a father begins to speak with his son in the holy tongue, he begins to teach his son Torah (*Sifre Ekev* 46). Which is to say: the holy tongue is itself part of what is revealed in Torah, and not just a medium of Torah. In the words of the Zohar, the holy tongue is a manifestation of the *Ruach HaKodesh*, or the "Holy Spirit," as it "issues forth and arouses the secrets of Torah" (*Zohar* III, 61a).

This investigation of the relation between Hebrew language and Jewish thought, therefore, is grounded in Judaism and Torah, as revealed through the holy tongue. I take this approach while fully accepting its limitations and fully acknowledging the varieties of Jewish thought that range from mysticism to rationalism.

Jewish thought is not “one thing,” but it is one thing that, with the help of the Hebrew language, may open up a deeper understanding of the human soul. “According to Torah and Judaism,” Matityahu Glazerson states it, “the written word is not merely a vehicle for making known the speaker’s intent. Nor is the alef-bet a set of symbols or conventions. Rather, the words and letters shape the soul” (Glazerson 1997: 63–66). To sound the depths of the holy tongue is to penetrate the depths of the human soul as it comes from the hand of G-d, through the holy tongue. Rooted in the holiness of the holy tongue, Jewish thought is above all a philosophy of life that addresses the holiness of life.

Drawing heavily on Jewish texts both from the sacred and from the philosophical tradition, this volume is what might be called a “Jewish book.” It is written from a Jewish perspective that might be deemed “religious,” but it is not written for Jews alone, nor even for those who think of themselves as religious. Rather, it speaks to anyone who has an interest in the question of what imparts value and meaning to the life of a human being. Nor is it necessary to know Hebrew in order to follow the line of thinking presented here, since a phonetic spelling of each Hebrew word is given when the word is introduced. Hence, in keeping with the universalism of Judaism, which affirms the absolute sanctity of every human being as a being created in the image of the Holy One, this book is intended for all. Its purpose is to bring to light the abundance of meaning that abides in the language of Torah and to pursue the ramifications of that meaning for how we understand our lives. As generated from Jewish thought, then, a Jewish philosophy of life is a general approach to life that affirms the infinite value of every human life. For the Torah that comes to the world through the Jews opens up to all humanity just such an exalted view of the human being.

It must also be pointed out that this book is not a linguistic or etymological study of Hebrew. Although a careful examination of Hebrew words and letters is central to the investigation, the aim is not simply to explore the letters and words of the Hebrew language. To be sure, a number of excellent works have already accomplished such a task. This book, however, differs from other books about Hebrew words and Hebrew letters, inasmuch as it is not concerned with etymology or with mystical meanings. While the book contains elements of such investigations, its primary aim is to look for ways in which the possibilities of meaning in Hebrew words may (1) inform our understanding of what distinguishes Jewish thought as Jewish and (2) enhance our thinking about some fundamental questions of human existence. Because language imparts form and substance to life, the question here is: How does the Hebrew language illuminate human life? And because Hebrew is the specifically Jewish language, we ask: How does the holy tongue lead us toward a *Jewish* philosophy of life?

In an effort to respond to these questions, I have ordered the chapters in the book according to some key concepts and key terms in Hebrew. After some opening remarks on the holy tongue in the first chapter, the book moves directly into the “First things,” as Chapter 2 is titled, that go into our existence. Chapter 3,

“Giving voice to G-d,” then, addresses the higher things by examining a few of the ways of referring to G-d in Hebrew. Since from G-d we have “the Good,” that idea is the topic of Chapter 4; and since the Good arises in an act that transpires between two, Chapter 5 explores what it means to live “for the sake of another.” That living is what goes into the life of the soul, so that Hebrew thinking about “the soul” is examined in Chapter 6. Because the life of the soul opens up the issue of being at home in the world, and not merely surviving, Chapters 7 and 8 explore what the Hebrew language reveals about “exile” and “dwelling” in the world. Chapter 9 proceeds from there to the house that is our most fundamental dwelling place, “the house of the book.” And since the word in which and through which we dwell is the fundamental element of the book, Chapter 10 is an exploration of “the word.” Through the word of the holy tongue, then, we finally arrive at the topic of Chapter 11: “The holy.”

In the process of exploring these questions, it will be shown that the thinking couched in the holy tongue is quite different from the predominant thinking in the Western world, both ancient and modern. From Aristotle to Aquinas, from Descartes to Kant, from Hegel to Heidegger—despite all their differences—Western thought has its origins in a rationalistic speculative tradition, a tradition that has largely—and, from a Jewish perspective, erroneously—shaped our view of G-d, world, and humanity. Indeed, Western thought has basically collapsed G-d, world, and humanity into thought itself. Because the Jewish thought couched in the holy tongue maintains a radical distinction between G-d, world, and humanity, a reading of this book might require stepping out of a mold of thought to which we have grown dangerously accustomed. Indeed, the term *holy tongue* already goes against the grain of such thinking, since the category of holiness invokes something that sanctifies all there is and thus exceeds all there is. To use a phrase from one of the great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Emmanuel Lévinas, the holy is “otherwise than being.” Grounded in the holy tongue, Jewish thought opens up the “otherwise.”

While the ordering of the chapters and the topics covered in this book is not random, it has come to be what it is according what the Hebrew language reveals, within the limits and shortcomings of my understanding of that revelation. Let me also acknowledge the danger of reading into the holy tongue and not listening to it, but this is a risk that must be taken if one is to pursue a deeper understanding of anything. In any case, my failure to have properly grasped what the holy tongue teaches is my responsibility alone. And I welcome correction. For my aim in writing this book is as much to understand as to be understood. Therefore I offer my thanks beforehand to the reader who would oppose me for the sake of Torah and Truth.

Finally, a note on citations: I have generally used the Harvard reference system for citations. In the case of the holy texts of the Jewish tradition, such as the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah, and writings of major sages, I have used a standard system of noting chapter, verse, page numbers, and so on. I have also

INTRODUCTION

used the universal notation for certain philosophical works, such as the dialogues of Plato, the *Meditations* of Descartes, and the critiques of Kant, when referring to those texts.

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Memphis, Tennessee

OPENING REMARKS ON THE HOLY TONGUE

The Torah portion *Vayakhel* (Exodus 35–38) relates how the Israelites built the *Mishkan* (the Holy Tabernacle) as a dwelling place for the *Shekhinah* (G-d's Indwelling Presence); creating such a dwelling place for the Holy Presence was essential for the Israelites to find their way through the wilderness. One of the artisans chosen to oversee the work was Betsalel. In fact, it was he who made the ark that was to be the vessel of the Holy Word. According to the Talmud, Betsalel was chosen for this most sacred of tasks because he knew the secret combinations and meanings of the Hebrew words and letters that G-d uses at every instant to do the work of creation (*Berakhot* 55a).¹ Which means: Betsalel had the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to sound the depths of the holy word contained within the Ark of the Covenant. For out of that word heaven and earth—the sum and significance of life—came into existence. If “Hebrew words describe not only an object but its very essence,” as the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loeve (1513–1609), has said (Loeve 1997: 288), it is because an object is in some sense *made of* its Hebrew word. Betsalel's wisdom lay in understanding that connection between word and reality.

As we participate in the work of creation, we engage in the work of Betsalel, transforming the world itself into a *Mishkan* where the holy may find a dwelling place in a realm that is otherwise a wilderness. Indeed, the Mishnah identifies the thirty-nine categories of labor that are forbidden on the Sabbath according to the categories of labor that went into the construction of the *Mishkan* (see *Shabbat* 7:2). The purpose of our labor, therefore, is to make the world into a place where the *Shekhinah* may dwell, transforming all of creation into a *Mishkan*, so that life may take on meaning. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, then, מְלָאכָה (*melakhah*) or “labor,” is the effort to create a dwelling place for holiness in the world, without which there is no meaning in the world. The key to such labor is the insight into the word that guided the labor of Betsalel: the key to meaning in life is meaning in the word. When meaning is torn from words, life is drained of its substance and the world is transformed into a wasteland. That is when the world as *Mishkan* is in need of mending, even as the Holy of Holies in the Temple (which was also called a *Mishkan*) on occasion required repairs.

The Talmud relates that whenever the Holy of Holies required mending, a craftsman would be lowered into the sacred enclosure in a *tevah* (תבה) or a “box” (*Midot* 37a). There were openings in the box just large enough for the craftsman to see what had to be repaired and to do his work, so that he would not be tempted to feast his eyes upon the glory of the *Shekhinah*. Now the word תבה signifies not only a vessel; it also means “word.” Entering the vessel of the word—entering the תבה—we may descend into the world to undertake the task of restoring the world as a holy place. This mending, moreover, is a mending of our own souls, as Adin Steinsaltz helps us to realize: “Beyond our creations, words are also our creators ‘The soul is full of words,’ . . . so much so that people believe that each person gets an allocation of words for a lifetime, and once it is used up, life ends” (Steinsaltz 1999: 18). If we come into being through an utterance of the Holy One, our being is also sustained—or threatened—by our own utterances. An investigation into the meanings of Hebrew words will not exhaust the words we are allotted, but it may open up an insight into the soul that is full of words and, through that insight, reveal the depth of meaning entrusted to our care.

Pursuing the ramifications of the meanings of Hebrew words, we take up the task of exploring the wisdom we receive through the Hebrew language. Thus sounding the depths of the holy tongue, we may sound the depths of Jewish thought. In principle, of course, any language might serve as the basis for exploring thought, inasmuch as every language contains its own consciousness and ordering of reality. Still, it may not be clear as to why the Hebrew language in particular is crucial to an exploration of Jewish thought. Why, then, Hebrew? What makes it holy? And how is it related to Jewish thought?

The holiness of Hebrew

Hebrew is the focus of this investigation precisely because it is the לשון הקודש (*leshon hakodesh*), the “holy tongue.” And it is the holy tongue for several reasons. In his *Esh Kodesh*, the journal of Torah commentary that he kept in the Warsaw Ghetto, for instance, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira compares the holiness of Hebrew to the holiness of the Sabbath. Just as the Sabbath imparts meaning and sanctity to the other days of the week, he maintains, so does the Hebrew language impart meaning and sanctity to the other languages of humanity (see Shapira 2000: 46–47). Significantly, Rabbi Shapira makes this observation in the midst of the Nazi assault on language: the assault on the word is among their major means of assaulting the Holy One. As Sara Nomberg-Przytyk recalls in her Holocaust memoir, “the new set of meanings” that the Nazis imposed on the word, beginning with the word *Jew*, “provided the best evidence of the devastation that Auschwitz created” (Nomberg-Przytyk 1985: 72).

Rabbi Shapira’s insight from the time of the Shoah has its roots in a teaching from the talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan, who maintains that when G-d created

the heavens and the earth, His first utterance broke into seventy sparks. From those seventy sparks emerged the seventy languages of the world (*Shabbat* 88b). The Midrash on Psalms contains a variation on this theme: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave forth the divine word, the voice divided itself into seven voices, and from the seven voices passed into the seventy languages of the seventy nations” (*Midrash Tehilim* 2,68,6). But if the seventy languages of the seventy nations arise from a Divine utterance, what language does G-d speak when He makes that utterance? It is Hebrew, as the talmudic commentary on Betsalel suggests. “For all seventy languages flow forth from the holy tongue,” says Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905), the great Chasidic sage of the nineteenth century. “It is the Torah that gives life to all those languages” (Alter 1988: 62). Because “it is the Torah that gives life to all those languages,” they all harbor a trace of the Divine Utterance; that spark of the Divine is what instills language with meaning. Hence, according to the Midrash, when Moses reviewed and taught the teachings of Torah just before the Israelites entered the Holy Land, he taught them not only in the holy tongue but also in all the seventy languages of the world (*Tanchuma Devarim* 2). And that is why, according to the tradition, there are seventy legitimate ways of interpreting the written Torah (see, for example, the *Or HaChayim* on Deuteronomy 23:23; see also *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15).

Thus Hebrew is not among the seventy languages of the seventy nations; rather, as the vehicle of the divine voice, it precedes those languages.² Indeed, according to an ancient mystical text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (*The Book of Creation*), the thirty-two references to G-d in the first chapter of Genesis correspond to the ten *sefirot*³ and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1). Michael Munk points out an additional teaching:

That the twenty-two letters of the *Aleph-Bais* [alphabet] were used to create the world is alluded to by the *gematria* [numerical value] of the first three words of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים [*bereshit bara Elohim*, “in the beginning G-d created”] (1202), which is the same as the *gematria* of בָּכָב אֲחִיזָה בָּרָא [*bekh”v otivot bara*], “with 22 letters He created” the world.

(Munk 1983: 222)

Thus tradition has it that Hebrew is older than creation itself, since it is the very stuff of creation. This is one reason why here we attempt to sound the depths of the Hebrew word and regard it as the holy tongue: Hebrew is the wellspring of creation, and the idea of creation is central to Jewish thought.

Mystically understood, then, Hebrew is not *in* the world; rather, the world—all of heaven and earth—consists of the letters that form Hebrew words and the Hebrew language. As Benjamin Blech points out, the Jewish tradition maintains that “in the beginning G-d created the letters, and through the letters and their respective arrangements, G-d was able to create the universe” (Blech 1991: ix). Indeed, the Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760), founder of Chasidism,

teaches that “in each and every letter there are worlds and souls and divine powers that both interconnect and join together” (*Keter Shem Tov* 1). Thus, says the Baal Shem, in the letters of Torah abides the living Light of the Infinite One; that light is the substance of our lives and the subject of our learning (see *Keter Shem Tov* 96). How do we draw nigh unto that light? Through the holy tongue.

Expounding on this idea, Yitzchak Ginsburgh explains that each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet possesses three creative powers known as כֹּחַ (*koach*) or “energy,” חַיּוּת (*chiyut*) or “life,” and אִוֶּר (*or*) or “light,” corresponding to physical matter, organic matter, and soul respectively. The Hebrew letters, says Rabbi Ginsburgh, function as “the energy building-blocks of all reality; as the manifestation of the inner life-pulse permeating the universe as a whole and each of its individual creatures . . . ; and as the channels which direct the influx of Divine revelation into created consciousness” (Ginsburgh 1991: 2–3). The creative power of the letters of the holy tongue arises not only in the beginning but also makes every hour a beginning—the beginning of material reality and spiritual meaning. “The *Aleph-Bais*,” says Rabbi Munk, “is a ladder and a link. It binds us to the spiritual origin of creation and life” (Munk 1983: 231). Arising prior to the world, the holy letters of the holy tongue connect us to the world from beyond the world.

According to Jewish tradition, moreover, the Hebrew alphabet is the source not only of the animation but also of the enlightenment of all life. “The soul,” Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) teaches, “is full of [Hebrew] letters that abound with the light of life, intellect and will, a spirit of vision, and complete existence” (Kook 1993: 93). And the thirteenth-century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240–c. 1291) asserts that “the letters are without any doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge” (quoted in Idel 1988a: 101). Although they lived in quite different times and places, these sages maintain that not only Hebrew words but also the letters that form them constitute both the fabric of creation and the ground of its meaning. As far as I can determine, no other language that uses an alphabet contains such teachings and traditions surrounding the very letters of its alphabet.⁴ Perhaps that is because unlike other languages, which are a means of communication between human and human, Hebrew is one way in which G-d communicates with humanity. “It thus conceals within its structure,” Rabbi Daniel Lapin points out, “many of the secrets that a benevolent deity wanted us to know” (Lapin 2001: 56). Hebrew is not a language among languages. It is the eloquent silence that precedes and reverberates throughout all tongues; it is the language that imparts meaning to language.

Hebrew therefore is not only the wellspring of creation but is also the medium of Revelation. For the Midrash Tanchuma relates that when G-d spoke the Ten Utterances at Mount Sinai “in a single Voice,” the “Voice was divided into seven voices and from there into seventy languages” (*Tanchuma Yitro* 11). When G-d speaks at Mount Sinai, He speaks Torah; if He speaks Hebrew, then that too is Torah. Thus Hebrew is the language of Torah, of what the Midrash calls black

fire written upon white fire (*Devarim Rabbah* 3:12), in a double sense—both as medium and as message. If the seventy sparks that formed the seventy languages come from the black fire and the white fire of Torah, then each spark corresponds to one of the seventy facets of the Torah [the renowned sage of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Chayim ben Attar (1696–1743), comments on the seventy facets of the Torah in his remarks on Leviticus 26:3 in the *Or HaChayim*]. Understanding the Torah to be such a primal fire, the Zohar describes it as the blueprint—the soul and substance—of all creation: four times, says Rabbi Shimon, the Holy One looked into the Torah before beginning His work of creation (*Zohar* I, 5a; see also *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1; *Tanchuma Bereshit* 1). The famous sixteenth-century mystic Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), in fact, reads the first word of Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית (*bereshit*) not as “in the beginning” but as “by means of the first thing,” where the “first thing” is Torah: creating by means of the first thing, G-d created by means of Torah (Cordovero 2002: 23).

Looking further at the first line of the Torah, we note that the word אֶת (*et*) is untranslated: וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים (bereshit bara Elokim et hashamayim v’et haarets), “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). It is the word that precedes הַמַּיִם (*hashamayim*), or “the heavens,” and הָאָרֶץ (*haarets*), or “the earth”—that is, the אֶת precedes the created realms. Made of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, א (*alef*) and ת (*tav*), the אֶת contains every letter and every word of Hebrew. What is left untranslated—the Hebrew alphabet couched in the אֶת—is the vessel of all of creation. Just as a vessel is distinct from yet gives shape to what it contains, so is Hebrew distinct from yet gives shape to heaven and earth. Unlike the vessel, however, it also permeates and thus gives substance to heaven and earth. Like the holiness that sanctifies all of creation, Hebrew is both beyond and inherent to creation.

Further, according to the Zohar, the *alef* and *tav* of the אֶת attach themselves to the first letter of the next word, which is ה (*hey*), a letter that signifies G-d (see *Zohar* I, 15b). When the sum of Hebrew utterance is thus attached to the Holy One, we have the word אַתָּה (*atah*), or “you” (אַתָּה, of course, is the masculine form of “you,” while את is the feminine form, a point discussed in Chapter 10). Thus in the beginning there is a profound saying of אַתָּה that is the basis of creation’s meaning: in the beginning G-d created You, the one without whom there is no creation because without the You there is neither meaning nor relation. Each time we say “you” in Hebrew, we gather together all the letters of the language to affirm a relation to G-d that lends meaning to every word that passes our lips; we affirm that our words have meaning inasmuch as they draw us into a deeper relation to the one we address as “you.” For in every address to the “you” we address the Eternal You (cf. Buber 1970: 123). That is what makes Hebrew the לשון הקודש.

A legend from the mystical tradition illustrates further the significance of the letters of the Hebrew language and their capacity for transmitting those teachings which characterize Jewish thought. The tale relates that before heaven and earth came into being, in the time before time, the letters of the Hebrew

alphabet had an argument over which of them would be the first letter in the Torah, the one to initiate G-d's act of creation. Knowing that G-d would pronounce His creation to be good, the letter ט (tet) maintained that it should be first, since it begins the word טוב (tov), which means "good." Then the letter ת (tav) spoke up, arguing that without it there could be no Torah, since it is the first letter in the word תורה (Torah). Finally, after the other letters had stated their case, G-d decided on ב (beit), the first letter in the word ברוך (barukh), meaning "blessed." For creation came into being in order to open up a realm of blessing.⁵ Closed on three sides, the ב is also the womb that harbors the seed from which creation is born; for the realm of blessing is, above all, a realm of birth. Thus born from the womb of the ב the Torah begins with the ב of בְּרֵאשִׁית (bereshit): "In the beginning . . ."

Because Torah assumes a Hebrew form, dressing itself in Hebrew clothing, its form and its substance are of a piece: the revelation that is Torah unfolds not only *in* Hebrew but also *through* Hebrew. Each is interwoven with the other, as the soul is interwoven with the body. Hence, according to the teaching of the great halakhic scholar of the sixteenth century, Moshe Isserles (c. 1525–1572), "in the Hebrew language itself there is holiness" (quoted in Schiff 1996: 14). Hebrew derives its holiness not from the fact that it is the language of Scripture but from its status as the primal ground of the truth and meaning of creation—hence it becomes the language of Scripture. Which is to say: Hebrew is the holy tongue not because it is the language of Torah; rather, Hebrew is the language of Torah because it is the holy tongue. "To Hebrew," says the twelfth-century sage Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141), "belongs the first place, both as regards the *nature of the language*, and as to *fullness of meanings*" (*Kitav al khazari* 2:66, italics added). This understanding of Hebrew is not so much an article of faith concerning a language as it is a distinctively Jewish way of thinking about language as such. It is a means of getting at the truth of language and the language of truth. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, and contrary to what is maintained by the likes of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), language is not the "house of being" (see, for example, Heidegger 1959: 166)—it is a breach of being, the avenue through which being is sanctified and thus made meaningful from beyond being.

And so we come to a question: what does the Hebrew word reveal about the truth and meaning of life? The question is a crucial one, especially in our time, because in our time—as perhaps in every human era—there is a hunger for meaning. Indeed, I do not think it is too much to say that we are living in the midst of a "meaning famine." The dictum that terrified the thinkers of the last few centuries—namely that nothing is true and everything is permitted—is now glorified by intellectuals who run from one postmodern fad to another to barter the serious for the superfluous. For as the body needs bread, so does the soul need meaning in order to live. And our souls are starving. Our souls crave the sustenance that is also their substance, for in the words of Matityahu Glazerson, "the Torah and the soul are both woven from the same threads—the letters of the holy tongue" (Glazerson 1997: 72). What, then, does the Hebrew language

reveal about the meaning that sustains the soul? And how does the Jewish thought shaped by Hebrew characterize that meaning?

The issue of meaning

The Hebrew word for “meaning,” “sense,” or “significance” is מַשְׁמָעוּת (*mashmaut*), from the root שָׁמַע (*shama*), which means to “hear.” Like language, meaning is first of all *heard*; like language, meaning *addresses* us. Jewish thinking, then, is not so much a manner of speculation as it is a mode of hearing and responding. To have a sense of meaning in life is to hear something or someone calling out to us; to receive a message is to receive a summons to follow a particular path. To have meaning, in other words, is to have direction.

Indeed, the word for “direction” in Hebrew, כִּוּוּן (*kiyun*), is a cognate of כָּוֶה (*kavanah*), another word for “meaning”; כָּוֶה also means “purpose” and “devotion.” Here lies the key to determining who we are and what is the purpose of our lives. It has nothing to do with dreams or obsessions, no matter how magnificent. Rather, the purpose of life is inscribed in the name that gives us life. A cognate of כָּוֶה, מְכַוֶּה (*mekhumeh*), drives home this point; for מְכַוֶּה means “named,” “called,” and “designated.” The issue of meaning, then, is an issue of identity. The Jewish tradition teaches that G-d names each soul and that each soul’s purpose is inscribed in its name.⁶ The summons that each of us receives in life—the summons that defines the meaning of life before it is lived—consists of our name. *That* is what we struggle to hear when we thirst for meaning.

Once we hear this summons inscribed in our name—once we have a sense of מַשְׁמָעוּת or meaning—we must summon from within ourselves the devotion required to follow it. This brings us to another word whose root is שָׁמַע: it is מִשְׁמָעוּת (*mishmaat*) or “discipline,” which is necessary to mend our deeds. Once we find that discipline, it grows and nurtures itself. Recall here the wisdom of the Gerer Rebbe: “By properly mending our deeds, we can come to hear more and more. This goes on forever” (Y. L. Alter 1998: 20). The greater our hearing, the greater our sense of meaning; the greater our sense of meaning, the greater our capacity for mending our deeds. Each reinforces the other. Those of us who lose a sense of meaning in life—those of us who are empty of devotion—are set adrift without a sense of who we *are*. And so we do not know what to *do*. We struggle to lend an ear to the world, to retrieve the message, but we hear only the sound and the fury signifying nothing. Thus we grow afraid and clamber to fill our lives with more noise, so that we do not have to endure the silence that lurks beneath the anonymous rumbling. To be sure, there has never been an age noisier than ours. Or emptier. For this noise is the sound of meaninglessness that returns to haunt us upon the cessation of every other noise.

Because the noise is empty, the collision with meaninglessness is a collision with silence. In the midst of that collision we seek the face of life, even as we fear that life may be faceless. We seek life’s face because we strain to hear a voice—and it is the face that speaks: the word arises from the face, and the face is revealed in the

word. Stepping before the countenance, we hear the word and encounter meaning; stepping before the face, we receive a summons to which we must respond, “Here I am,” if we are not to be swallowed up by the faceless silence. Further, it is a summons that we hear most profoundly within the very response we offer to it. The commandment that comes from beyond us forms itself on our own lips, like a prayer uttered in a tongue that is not our own, uttered in the holy tongue—uttered in Hebrew. Here the problem of hearing is a problem of hearing the Hebrew word as a *word*, and not as a mere noise, to hear it as *sense*, and not merely as sound. The problem of hearing, then, is a problem of understanding. It is the problem that guides Jewish thought.

Which brings us to another meaning of שמע: to “understand.” Where meaning is concerned, we long to do more than hear; we long to understand, a point that is reinforced when we consider some words derived from הבין (*hevin*), the verb to “understand.” The noun “understanding” that corresponds to the verb is בינה (*binah*); the related word for “meaning” or “sense” is מובן (*muwan*), which also means “understood.” At the core of מובן, הבין, and בינה is בין (*bein*), a word that means “between,” suggesting that meaning or understanding is something that arises *between* two. And so we realize that the silence of emptiness is the sound of our own solitude; we realize that meaning in life is about relation to another. Thus, where meaning in life is concerned, we long to do more than understand—we long for the depth and dearness of a relation to another: we long to love. Unlike much of the thinking that belongs to speculative philosophy, Jewish thought struggles to fathom what there is to love. For coming to a realization of what there is to love, we realize what must be done, as when holding a newborn in our hands for the first time. And Jewish thought is about the matter of what must be done. Informed by the Hebrew language, Jewish thought understands meaning in terms of doing, so that with the hearing that belongs to the realization of meaning a mission unfolds.

To receive the revelation from the holy tongue is to be charged with a sacred mission: having heard, we are now enjoined. Having heard, we now must *heed*, which is another meaning of שמע. Here life becomes life *time*, which is the future time that opens up all time. Where there is something we must heed, living *now* means having something to live *for*, so that life assumes a *direction* defined by a *devotion*, a בין steeped in בינה. Direction and devotion—בין and בינה—constitute the *yet* that constitutes meaning in a life. Made of this *yet*, time is the presence of meaning in life; just as the word is the vessel of meaning, so is it the vessel of time. Hence the Name of the Holy One—the Tetragrammaton יהוה-יהוה (*yud-heh-vav-heh*), from which all meaning and all of creation are derived—contains all the tenses of time: הָיָה (*hayah*) or “was,” הוּא (*hoveh*) or “is,” and יִהְיֶה (*yihyeh*) or “will be.” As it is written in the *Sefer Yétzirah*, “All that is formed, all that is spoken, emanates from one Name” (*Sefer Yétzirah* 2:5). All that emanates from the Name has meaning because the Name is the vessel of all time.

A commentary on the Holy Name from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan reveals something of the mystery of holiness, time, and meaning in the Name. He suggests

that the first letter in the Name, the ך, represents a coin. The first ן, with a numerical value of five, denotes the five fingers of a hand that is about to give the coin to another in an act of loving kindness. The ך connects the hand to the body, and, with the value of six, it moves in the six directions of physical space to create a connection with another person. The second ן is the hand that receives the gift. The five that receives and the five that gives add up to ten, which is the value of the ך that is the gift itself (see Kaplan 1985: 73–74; see also Haralick 1995: 159). Thus, it is written in the Zohar, “he that gives charity to the poor makes the Holy Name complete as it should be above” (*Zohar* III, 113b). If Jewish thought entails thinking about the holy, it entails thinking about this giving that is revealed through the Holy Name. For holiness is precisely this mystery of giving; what is given is *meaning*, through the Divine Name. And, inasmuch as meaning opens up a mission that we have *yet* to achieve, meaning opens up time. That is why the Name is the vessel of all time.

This concern with the Holy Name returns us to our own name. Since time is tied to meaning and the Holy Name is the vessel of time, the meaning of all words, of all names, arises from the Holy Name, including the meaning of our own name. If the highest revelation possible is the revelation of our own soul, as Rabbi Steinsaltz argues (Steinsaltz 1989: 50), then the word we seek in our exploration of the soul is our own name. For “the name *is* the soul,” says the Chasidic master Nachman of Breslov (1772–1811) (Nachman of Breslov 1984: 102), a teaching tied to the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra (1093–1167) on Isaiah 14:22, where he noted that the word שם (*shem*) designates not just a “name” but “the person himself.” Attending to the holy word, we strive to respond more thoroughly to our name and to penetrate more profoundly into our soul. Thus taking up an effort to understand why we live, we take up the project of hearing the word on deeper and deeper levels. More than speaking of the word, the aspiration here is to hear the word speak. And that is precisely the aspiration of Jewish thought.

In keeping with the methods that characterize much of Jewish thought, this book pursues both an analytical organization of ideas and a conceptual association of key words. The line of thinking may follow paths that perhaps are not evident at first glance, as in the aforementioned reflection on the relation between meaning and hearing. This may be due to the fact that the reference points that stake out these paths are not so much the markers of linguistic science or mystical speculation as they are the signposts of spiritual seeking. For there is no Jewish thinking that is not also a spiritual seeking, a seeking guided by the holy tongue. This book, therefore, is a book more of questions than of answers. If G-d, אֵל (*el*), is ultimately what we seek in the holy tongue, we seek Him in the midst of the “question,” in the שאלה (*shelah*).

According to the mystical tradition, in the act of creation G-d undertakes a movement of צמצום (*tsimtsum*) or “contraction,” so that the finite can come into being in the midst of the infinite—so that the finite can become a *vessel* of the infinite. Just as the creation arising from this צמצום issues from the Hebrew word, so does the Hebrew word undergo a kind of צמצום: the word contracts into a שרש

(*shresh*) or three-letter “root,” from which a multitude of meaning unfolds. Thus word generates word to impart meaning to creation. Let us go now into the שָׁרֵשׁ of the Hebrew word that will return us to the meaning of the word; let us go into the vessel that is the תִּכְוָה, the “word,” as Noach went into the ark that carried him over the face of the deep. For “ark,” is also a meaning of תִּכְוָה. Like Noach, we too live in the days of a flood—a flood of noise that inundates us with silence. It is a silence that returns us to the silence that was broken upon the first utterance of creation. It is the silence of the origin of the word.

Thus we begin with the issue of the origin and the silence of the beginning.