



Portrait of F.M. van Helmont, seventeenth-century Flemish alchemist and writer, classical bust surrounded by cabalistic writings

“A continuous revelation—multi-dimensional, timeless, seeking to be known within each person.”

The Letters of Black Fire: A conversation with Kabbalist Stephen Pope

Eleanor O’Hanlon

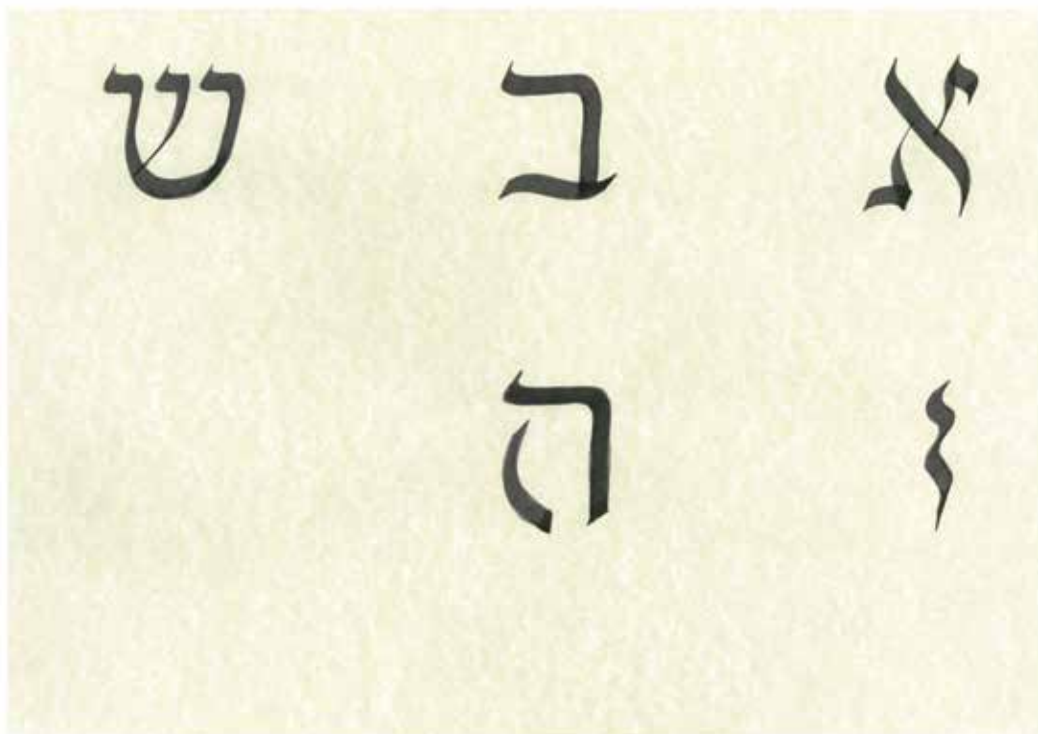
Calligraphy by France Alexandrine

Stephen Pope is a teacher of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition that is also known as the Tree of Life, Etz Ha-Hyim in Hebrew. He teaches the way of inner relationship with the Hebrew letter-numbers, allowing them to be known and experienced as living realities within each person. This ancient approach to biblical Hebrew is passed on in oral tradition and has been preserved within certain early kabbalistic texts, such as the Sephir Yetzirah, the Book of Formation, and the Sephir HaBahir, The Book of Brilliance.

“Kabbalah is not about believing anything,” he says. “It is not about finding some ultimate truth that can be pinned down. When we open to the spiritual wisdom within the Hebrew letters and their sacred texts, the creative patterns of the universe can unfold for us as continuous revelation—multi-dimensional, timeless, seeking to be known within each person.”

By tradition, the sacred Hebrew texts of the Torah are said to be written in letters of black fire upon white fire—a profound image of creative wholeness, beyond any duality or opposition of what we perceive through our minds as darkness and light.

—Eleanor O’Hanlon



Hebrew letters reading from right to left, top line then bottom line: Aleph, Bet, Shin, Vav, Hay

Eleanor O’Hanlon: *In the teachings of Kabbalah, the Hebrew letters themselves are accorded profound spiritual significance. Can you tell me about this and how it originated?*

Stephen Pope: The symbols of the Hebrew Aleph-Bet were received through direct communication with the spiritual dimension, in deep meditation by the ancient mystics of Merkabah, or the Way of the Chariot, as Kabbalah was first known. Each letter, with its numerical value, represents a spiritual resonance; their patterns of relationship to each other reflect the creative dynamics of the universe, emerging from the formless Source. They speak to us of the infinitely beautiful movements of the dance of creation.

Around 2600 to 2800 years ago the Aleph-Bet emerged as a whole system of preserving the spiritual teachings of the ancient Israelite seers, the prophets

and prophetesses. Their written forms evolved out of the Phoenician alphabet and changed according to the medium people used, whether scratched or carved onto stones, marked in clay with a stylus, or written in ink on vellum or parchment. They were written down using twenty-seven symbols: the twenty-two single letters of the original Aleph-Bet and the five additional double or final letters, making twenty-seven symbols in all.

So these ancient symbols emerged out of deep meditation, and what they represent is the creative unfolding of the multi-dimensional, multi-layered universe.

What we now see from the physical end of the spectrum, through science, as subatomic waves and particles, and the codes of DNA—these visions into the patterns of the universe are present in the patterns of the Hebrew

letters. The understanding they contain may not be as detailed as what comes through modern science, but these mystics could also see that everything is emerging and disappearing, out of and into, the Unified Field. They were looking into the subatomic, which is possible in deep meditation, and the letter-numbers emerged for them as ways of expressing and relating to these mysteries of the universe.

I studied biblical Hebrew in an academic way for five years at university and that was a truly wonderful experience. But it is when I meditate with the letters that I feel them awaken within me; I become truly alive and see into the universe, beneath the surface phenomena of life. Because these letters and their sacred texts are outside of time, as the linear mind understands it, they bring me into timeless Presence—the same timeless Presence in which they were first received and written down, which is always of this moment now.

EOH: *What you have just said reminds me of a wonderful quote from the physicist Carlo Rovelli. He says that the physical universe “is a handful of types of elementary particles, which vibrate and fluctuate constantly between existence and non-existence, and swarm in space even when it seems there is nothing there, combined together to infinity like the letters of a cosmic alphabet...”*

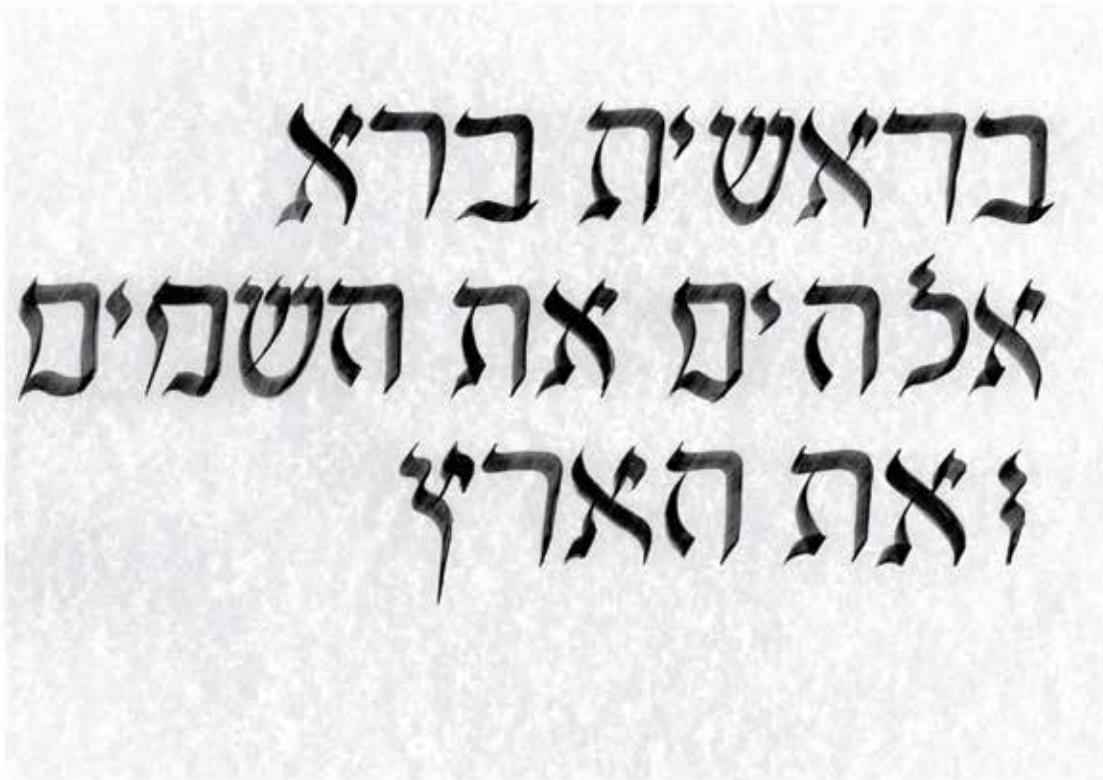
SP: Yes, that is really beautiful and it sounds like it comes straight from the teachings of the Aleph-Bet! The first letter, Aleph, *a* with its numerical value of 0/1, represents formless creative Presence, pulsating into and out of existence, everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Aleph cannot be analyzed or pinned down. Aleph is life as continual

emergent revelation, always new, which the human intellect cannot possibly fathom or limit with our conceptual thought.

The second letter, *Bet*, means house or dwelling in colloquial Hebrew. In Kabbalah, Bet emerges out of the uncontainable Aleph, as the container that is continually dissolving and continually being re-born. Bet is the number two, but this is not a duality.

You need to open up the right mind to feel this, the right mind which knows Life whole, without boundaries, and sees things emerging from within the Unified Field: resonant, emergent revelations. The right mind then passes this revelation to the left mind, the left hemisphere of the brain, where the revelation finds a form that can be received within, and as, the conceptual mind. This is the significance in how the letters and the biblical texts are read—always from right to left, so passing from the right hemisphere of the brain to the left.

There is such beauty and love here—true, deep, boundless love. When we shut down the expansive nature of the right mind, and limit understanding to the left-brain thinking which currently dominates our culture and society, this boundless love and communion are lost. But the light of spiritual wisdom that is contained within these sacred Hebrew texts is *alive*, and it will dissolve these illusions when you hold it within your heart. You become fully conscious of the games played by the egocentric mind. You see the habitual thought forms within yourself. You witness them as they arise and you witness the beginning of their end. Here is the path to true freedom, and it is present within us, in this very moment of creative emergence, now.



Bereshit Bara Elohim / In the Beginning

EOH: *When you speak about the Hebrew letters in this way, I feel that you have a very personal, indeed intimate relationship to them—that you know them as living spiritual realities, indeed as living beings.*

SP: Yes. I feel the spiritual resonances of the letters as a reality in my body, in my mind, and in the depths of my Spirit.

And here I am saying “mine” when there is *only* deeply merging Spirit. Spirit simply is. It is the ocean that carries the essence of every life, and it comes through to our time-bound and limited minds in ways that are unique to each individual: each individual wave that enters time, so to speak, as a particle of the great sea. I feel this intense multidimensional aliveness in my body, in the air that I breathe, and in the water, and sunlight, and through the animals and plants. All are rooted in Spirit and its Essence, just as we humans are.

EOH: *You have told me that the first word of Genesis, Bereshit, in Hebrew, which is translated into English as “In the Beginning,” should really be understood more deeply as creative emergence in the present moment, the beginning that is always now.*

SP: The Creation is here now; timelessly flaring forth, without past or future. Creativity can only emerge in the present moment. *Bereshit Bara Elohim*, always here now, the formless continually taking form, becoming everything we call existence.

That first chapter of Genesis is extremely abstract, for the Hebrew mystics are speaking of what cannot be seen, which is not visual or even visualizable. The text emerged out of their profound inner experiences of the unseen spiritual dimension, and it repeats the word *Bara*—to create—over and over again in the first chapter. The

second chapter uses a different word, “*Yatsab*,” which means to form, and then the third chapter uses the word “*Asah*,” which means making. So taken together, we have this teaching of the unfolding of awakening into conscious participation in the Creation, as the creative impulse of Spirit takes on form and physicality.

This brings us to the light and the darkness. In Hebrew, light is *Aur* and *Heshek* is the darkness. *Aur* is the expansion, the flaring forth of the light of consciousness, opening out, animating the depths of space; in *Heshek* we have this intense gathering-in of consciousness, into a center. In the Genesis text, *Heshek* is the dark source out of which the light emerges. This tells us that from the intensity of the centering of consciousness comes the expansiveness of the light: the great flaring forth in all directions, everywhere simultaneously. *Heshek*, then, is the forming of the primal center, that becomes every center; this is what we call gravity.

The darkness and the light balance each other, allowing existence to be, allowing creation to unfold out of the timeless present moment.

Remember that we are speaking here at the level of metaphysical ideas: the principles of Creation. In *Bereshit*, *Heshek*, the Darkness of Creation, and *Aur*, the Light of Creation, are spiritual principles that are never separate from each other. They are always in dynamic unison: the play of consciousness gathering in and opening out, drawing in again to centers of awareness. As each star ignites, it becomes a center within a gravitational field, simultaneously expanding the universe and participating in the great unfolding dance of creation.

So there is no duality here, no separation between Darkness and Light, between *Aur* and *Heshek*, between the expansion and the centering of consciousness. Each includes the other; the expansion includes the centering, and the centering includes the expansion.

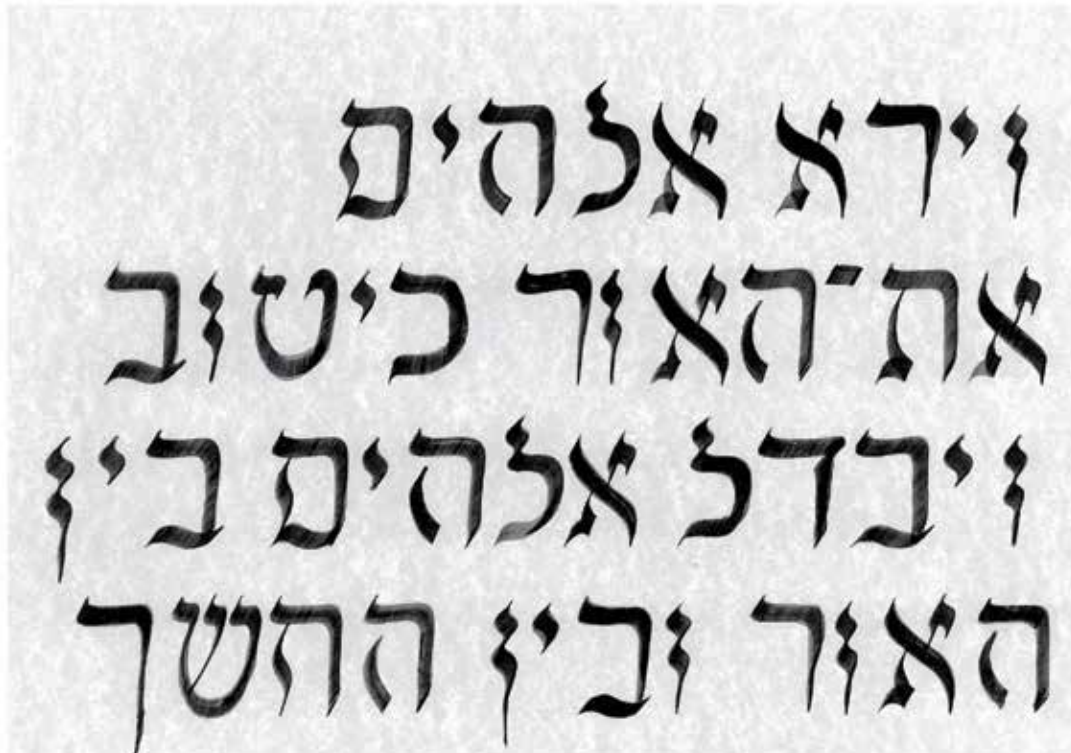
And then the text says that Elohim arises in the heart of every center, expanding out from the heart and Elohim sings—the word is *kora*, which means to sing—the light as *yom*, a cycle, a pulse of light, and *lila*, the night that holds the seed of potential of all the diverse forms.

I know this can seem very abstract. But we can experience and know these principles as realities, and not as theories or abstractions, when we awaken spiritually to the Creative Source within ourselves, the core of our own being.

EOH: *I find this beautiful and expansive. And it resonates with my own experience in meditation: as I gather inwards to the center, deep within my heart, I sense this expansiveness spread through my whole being, like a sun radiating light and warmth from the heart.*

And I love what you say about Elohim singing, calling aur, the light of creation into its cycles, and Elohim singing heshek into lila, the night that holds the seed of the diversity of unfolding life. The Song of Creation, in which each being finds its own note within the whole.

There is something else I would like to ask about the darkness. I find it striking that the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which is of course a Greek text, repeats those opening words of Genesis, “In the Beginning.” Yet in John’s Gospel, it also says that “the Light shines in



And Elohim saw that the infinite potential of the Light was good: and Elohim divided the light from from the darkness.

the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

SP: The meaning given to darkness is different here. The Greek text of John’s Gospel uses the word *skotia* to refer to the spiritual darkness, which results from the absence of conscious awareness in a human being. When the light of consciousness shines within the spiritually-unconscious person, and illuminates them, the spiritual darkness has no power; it cannot overcome the light.

EOH: *So this idea of the darkness within the human being has nothing to do with those great spiritual principles that are represented in Genesis, by Heshek and Aur, the primordial Darkness and Light of Creation?*

SP: Exactly. *Skotia*—the word used in John’s Gospel—does not simply mean

the darkness of the night, but the spiritual darkness of the unconscious human being: the blindness, indifference, and ignorance of our lower human nature, which has accumulated in humanity, both individually and collectively, and generated so much misery and suffering. We could say that this is the aspect of us that generates evil, by seeking to manipulate, control, and abuse others.

The darkness and light from biblical Hebrew, these dynamics of the creative outpouring, can get conflated with our ideas of good and evil, but they are different. The real good is to become consciously aware, the evil to behave in a destructive way towards life. This is our choice, from our free will.

EOH: *This brings us back to Genesis, to Bereshit, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil whose fruit is eaten by the*

first human couple. This use of the terms “good” and “evil” appears dualistic, at least in the English translation.

SP: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is about the polarities that arise within the unity. It is actually The Tree of *Da’at* in Hebrew. *Da’at* is a very profound term in Kabbalah: it means unknowing. *Da’at* is the point of un-knowing that allows living knowledge to emerge. Living knowledge that is non-conceptual, that allows us to participate in the flow of creation, within the world tree—*Etz* in Hebrew, a word which means the structuring of life.

Through *Da’at*, we are synchronized and aligned with the pulses and rhythms of the creative energy that flows through the universe and structures life. In this alignment, there can be no manipulation, no desire to amass wealth and control and oppress others. We consciously realize the star-burst of existence in ourselves and in all things, and so we participate in that creative unfolding, as all the other creatures do so naturally, without compulsive thinking.

EOH: *And this creative unfolding you describe works through these polarities, that are called Tov and Ra’a, and are usually translated as good and evil?*

SP: *Tov* in colloquial Hebrew means good; but we need to understand this at a deeper level. *Tov* means the conserving and maintaining of a particular form, while *Ra’a* means the dissolving and the breaking down of a particular form. That aspect of *Ra’a* may become destructive when out of balance: this relates to the spiritual darkness of John’s Gospel, which we commonly call evil. But through *Ra’a*

we also have the ability to allow any form to dissipate when it no longer serves life and so allow the new to arise.

So *Etz Ha-Da’at* refers to being comfortable with unknowing, which allows real knowledge to arise. It refers to the ability to build up and maintain a form and the ability to let it go, and allow it break down when the time has come. This means being truly present in the moment, in balance and alignment with the flow of creative energy, that continually builds up and breaks down forms and structures.

So we don’t hold on to thought forms and we don’t let them repeat, accumulate and generate yet more negativity within us.

When our inner space remains pure and open, the new can arise. And the old can depart and the new can arise, as the waves of the breath: a conscious breathing in harmony with the pulse of life, in dynamic balance within the creative outpouring through which we receive everything we need. As it says in Gospel, your Father in Heaven—*Ab* in Hebrew, Aleph-Bet, which means your inner Source—knows what you need and gives you everything, freely and generously.

Standing in this openness, this spaciousness, creative ideas can come from the spiritual dimension and take form through us, through our work and our relationships, just as they do through all creatures. We humans are not special in that sense. We simply have this choice from our free will: to become destructive and abuse the rest of life, or to become conscious participants in the creative flow of abundance, in humility, with reverence for life and deep gratitude for all that we are given. ♦