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HEBREW LINGUISTICS: BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND THE SOCIOCULTURAL

Abstract: In the Hebrew language, notions such as the issue of temporality and a well-established sociocultural view have been conceptualised and internalised in a distinctive manner, making full use of the language's particularities. A cultural frame of reference with regards to Hebrew has not been the main focus of the linguistic community in several decades, with most recent studies typically centring instead on a psychological or morphological viewpoint, if not on the traditional topic of Biblical Hebrew itself. Consequently, this approach to Hebrew's linguistic individuality will address existing research in the field of cultural linguistics, as well as the expansive repositories of Rabbinic wisdom (the exegetical commentaries of the *Talmud* and the Jewish esoteric theosophy of the *Kabbalah* and *Gematria*). The approach to the Jewish occult is made necessary by its direct connection with the spiritual, which provided this language's cryogenic state of existence for nearly two millennia of Jewish diaspora.

Keywords: Hebrew, cultural linguistics, Jewish sociocultural view, Kabbalah, Talmud

This paper will aim to outline certain aspects of the existing research and published works on Hebrew linguistics, specifically the cultural and spiritual aspects. The current state of this research reveals a rather restricted amount of attention which is paid to this particular field of study, the sociocultural, with more focus placed on either the history and development of this language and Biblical Hebrew, or on Modern Hebrew from the perspective of psycholinguistics. Therefore, this article will attempt an analysis of certain aspects of this language in terms of the various ways its speakers' culture has been shaped by their conceptualisation of their universe through language.

The issue of temporality

In the Hebrew language, the concept of temporality is manifested at morphological level, in accordance with existing verb tenses. That language informs the mind and, ultimately, our worldview (the way in which we conceptualise the world or how we ascribe relational constructs to significant objects or events that are, in fact, arbitrary) is well documented. The Hebrew language is no exception, in both its ancient “textual” form and its more modern form as a living language in Israel (and diaspora) today. In fact, in its more modern form it has arguably undergone a deliberate refashioning of worldview due to its revival as a former “dead” language. Rabbi Binyamin Sheldrake¹ (Norwich, England) asserts that in Hebrew “the perception of the world comes through in such simple and basic ideas as the absence of the present tense of the verb ‘to be’, the concept being occasionally reflected through a heightened pronominal use with the Copula, if needed at all.” Consequently, such absence reflects the worldview that “nowness” is a reality not needing verbalisation, a redundant language feature, according to Sheldrake. He explains the fact that in the Hebrew mindset, this absence takes on added strength due to the understanding of “‘life’, that all three grammatical tempora are in essence one and are connected in the human ‘business’ of living. As a holy language, Hebrew also reflects the idea of eternity ever present in the ‘now’. The now *is* to such an extent it does not need to be communicated.” The influence asserted by this “nowness” becomes even more noticeable when Hebrew does actually use verb tense markers, and the perception of the world and its chronology makes itself felt once more. “The Hebrew perfect verb connotes completed action rather than temporal action,” posits Binyamin Sheldrake. He explains the fact that such actions can be completed in the past or in the future.

In his book on Hebrew grammar, Wilhelm Gesenius wrote that the perfect tense in Hebrew is used “to express future actions, when the speaker intends by an express assurance to represent them as finished, or as equivalent to accomplished facts.” (Gesenius 1910, 312) Rabbi Sheldrake states that “the tense is often referred to as the ‘future perfective tense’ to describe something so certain in the future it is as if it had already happened. Thus in the

¹ Rabbi, former lecturer at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, specialised in linguistics and the pedagogy of foreign languages. His observations are the result of personal correspondence carried over e-mail in October 2015.

Hebrew mind the ‘present’ experiential world is formed not only by the past but informed by the future too.” The linguist Zelda Newman’s research on the issue of temporality in the Hebrew language claims that Modern Hebrew “has within it relics of a completely different metaphoric structuring of time.” (Newman 2009, 150) According to this alternative metaphor, says Newman, “time is like a river that sweeps things along in its path.” (Newman 2009, 150) Therefore, this interpretation presents completed/past events which have already been “swept up” by this river of time, as ahead of us, while future events (which have not yet been swept ahead by the river of time) are behind us. Thus, according to Zelda Newman,

this is why the Modern Hebrew expression for ‘a week ago’ is לפני שבוע (*lifne shavua*, literally, before a week). The time that has passed is right there ahead of us. But לפני (*lifne*) is not the only lexical item of Modern Hebrew that presupposes this metaphor for time.” (Newman 2009, 150)

Newman specifies the fact that in the Hebrew language, there is an entire set of adverbs and prepositions which share this metaphor of time, such as the roots א.ה.ר and ג.ד.ק. In terms of the ways in which the future is conceptualised by Modern Hebrew, Newman claims that “the distant future is called אחרית הימים (*aharit ha-yamim*, the back [time] of days) because the future is behind us, while (in formal Hebrew) for ‘formerly,’ we say מקדם (*mi-qodem*, from in front) because the past is in front of us.” (Newman 2009, 150) Similarly, Newman asserts that ancient eras are termed זמן קדום (*zman qadum*, time [that has been] fronted). Zelda Newman states that there is no doubt that such usage stems from Biblical Hebrew.

Concerning all of the facts examined above with respect to Hebrew verb tenses, as well as the effective absence of a present tense for the verb “to be”, one may understand that Rabbi Sheldrake’s observation captures the very spirit of this perception of temporality in the Hebrew language. He concludes that through the tenses and the lack of the verb “to be”, the Jewish people are locked into a perception of the world of an eternal now patterned by the past and yet dictating the future. Therefore, to speak Hebrew is to experience being part of a historical flow of time in which all points are joined, from the beginning to the end. It allows for purpose, personal meaning and human value.

Linguistic particularities of the Hebrew language from a cultural perspective

As regards the unifying character of the Hebrew language according to (the majority of) the Jewish people, in his 1957 publication titled *Hebrew, the eternal language*, William Chomsky considers a certain diachronic aspect by exploring the language's sociocultural relationship with its speakers:

Hebrew has not been a denationalized universal tongue, the medium of a specific religion, (...) it has persisted as a living language for many centuries after it had ceased to be a spoken vernacular in the accepted sense of the term. (...) Hebrew has been the *sacred language* of the Jewish people—the language of its religion, culture and civilization. It has been, in sum, the language of Judaism and intimately identified with the national and religious experiences of the Jewish people throughout the generations. (Chomsky 1957, 2-3)

It is this distinctive trait of the Hebrew language, of continuity through its cultural and religious *spirit*, that has always maintained Jewish identity, regardless of the social changes or damage the people have suffered (such as diaspora after the Babylonian captivity). This was made possible by the fundamental and intrinsic character of language as maker of meaning, as well as through its *spiritual activity* (as theorized by Wilhelm von Humboldt) which, as a cognitive function, allows conceptualisation and internalisation of the individual's universe. William Chomsky reinforces this fact in his above-mentioned book:

Language is not merely a means of expression and communication; it is an instrument of experiencing, thinking and feeling, as well as a means of self-expression and personal growth. (...) Language and experience are inextricably interwoven, and the awareness of one awakens the other. (Chomsky 1957, 3)

An interesting, but rather controversial view (which has caused indignation among speakers of Hebrew over the last century), as put forward by Rabbi Reuven Klein in his book *Lashon Hakodesh*, is the observation Hasidic rabbi Schneerson² makes about the fact that

² Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson (1892-1920), the fifth leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement.

even those who have adopted *Lashon HaKodesh*³ as *lingua franca* do not refer to it as such, but instead deny its holiness and “simply refer to it as *Ivrit* (‘Hebrew’), a term used to describe the pre-Sinaitic Jews (the term ‘Hebrew’ is almost always used in the Bible to refer to the Jews before they received the Torah). Afterwards, they are called ‘Israelites,’ or ‘Jews,’ because the term ‘Hebrew’ implies a Jew on a lower spiritual level, not yet connected to the holiness of the Torah.” (Klein 2014, 241)

Indeed, this view denies the possibility of accepting Hebrew as a spoken language in accordance with the political criteria which underpin the foundation of a state, and Schneerson’s political inclination was known to be against the establishment or recognition of the State of Israel. Nevertheless, since then there have been many outspoken, enthusiastic advocates of this revival of the Hebrew language and the restoration of its status as *lingua franca*, one of whom was William Chomsky, who alleged that “it is a delusion to assume that one can fully understand the essence of Judaism in any language but Hebrew.” (Chomsky 1957, 12)

Chomsky fully understood the matter of the signifying/representative function of language as fundamental to not just its reality, but actual survival, stressing that “meaning is not inherent in the sounds or the words, but rather in our personal and group experiences which are fused with the particular words. In themselves words have no meanings; it is our reactions to them or our experiences with them that lend them their meaning.” (Chomsky 1957, 11)

With regards to the manner in which Jewish people relate to their universe through language, throughout history certain relationships – mostly semantic – have developed between Hebrew and the way in which speakers of this language perceive their universe, largely in terms of the spiritual and cultural, but the socio-political, as well. These relationships are manifest in the development of several Hebrew words, having been thoroughly analysed by many Jewish scholars, especially rabbis. Beginning in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century (around the time of the Zionist movement) a revived interest for the study of the linguistic phenomenon of Hebrew emerged, from a cultural and historical perspective, as is the case with William Chomsky’s publication.

³ “the holy language”

In *Hebrew, The Eternal Language*, William Chomsky quotes Dr Max L. Margolis, editor of the Jewish Publication Society Bible translation: “it frequently happens that the translator, vainly seeking an equivalent for a Hebrew word or phrase, realizes that translation deals not so much with words as with civilizations.” (Chomsky 1957, 12-13) This aspect of translation from the Hebrew language emphasises a manifestation of the signifying function that is particular to this language, as well as the manner in which Hebrew has created and established the identitary consciousness of the Jewish people.

A prime example with regard to the role of the Hebrew language as creator of the global view of a particular community is presented by Chomsky by analysing one of the most famous Hebrew words:

The word *shalom*, usually rendered by ‘peace,’ has in effect little in common with its English equivalent. *Shalom* does not have the passive, even negative, connotation of the word ‘peace.’ It does not mean merely the absence of strife. It is pregnant with positive, active and energetic meaning and association. It connotes totality, health, wholesomeness, harmony, success, the completeness and richness of living in an integrated social milieu. (Chomsky 1957, 4)

William Chomsky examines the specious equivalence between the Hebrew *shalom* and the English word *peace*, taking into account the discrepancies caused by the way the Jewish people experience life compared to the Anglo-Saxon individual; the sociocultural mentality of the Jews was developed through the language and reflects its particular personality.

With regard to the spiritual element of the Hebrew language, William Chomsky notes that Hebrew thought does not perceive the traditional spirit–soul–body “triad” in the same manner as other linguistic communities. This perspective could be argued at theological level, but what is remarkable is the unexpected connotation of these terms, as opposed to the way in which the respective concepts were developed in English.

The Hebrew words *ruah* (spirit) and *nefesh* (soul) do not have the implications of a disembodiment, such as are indicated by their English equivalents. There is no dichotomy in the Hebrew mind between body and spirit or soul. One is not the antithesis of the other. These Hebrew words have dynamic, life-giving and motor-urgent connotations. (Chomsky 1957, 4)

A particular case of individualisation of concepts through language (in Judaic culture) is the Hebrew word *tzedakah* (from the stem *tzadak*, “to be just or righteous”). William Chomsky examines it in contrast with its generally accepted interpretation as “charity”. The latter, Chomsky argues, denotes an interaction by which the beneficiary is deemed indebted to his/her benefactor, in one form or another (even in the case of a voluntary act). According to Hebrew mentality, *tzedakah* must be performed as a matter of obligation (as per the divine precepts present within the laws of the Torah), and the beneficiary will not be beholden to the donor in any way. William Chomsky states that in Judaism the needy are entitled to *tzedakah*, just as those possessing means have a duty to give it to those who are lacking. According to the teachings of the Talmud (Gittin 7b), even the needy who have received *tzedakah* must give it in turn. (Chomsky 1957, 5)

Another case of significant semantic particularity noted by William Chomsky is the Hebrew word *rahamin* or *rahmanut* compared to its English equivalent *pity* or *mercy*. The Hebrew word denotes the concept of love, family feeling (Chomsky refers to Genesis 43:30⁴), even motherhood, due to the stem shared with the word *rehem* (mother’s womb). William Chomsky argues that not one of these connotations is implied by the English equivalents mentioned above. He also asserts that the meaningful and “historically hallowed” implications of the Hebrew *torah* (law, teaching/instruction) are absent in the English equivalent *law*. The term *torah* comprises “the totality of Jewish creative labor throughout the ages.” (Chomsky 1957, 5) An important characteristic of the concept of “law” is that within rabbinic Judaism it implies a distinction between the *written* (the Torah/the Pentateuch) and the *oral* law (the Talmud). Michael Munk includes an explanation of this concept by quoting Rabbi Hirsch, comparing the written law with court testimony, which can be recorded accurately in writing, but will never manage to fully reproduce the spirit in which it was spoken. “Thus the Oral Law captures that which cannot be put into writing. It conveys reflections of basic human attitudes and emotions, matters which cannot fully be transmitted in the fixed form of the written script, for example, the spirit that prevailed in the lives of our forefathers.” (Munk 1983, 58) The Oral Law is, in fact, a complex and highly detailed rabbinic interpretation of the Torah, written along a very long period of time. (2nd c. BCE. –5th c. CE)

⁴ Joseph’s reunion with his youngest brother, Benjamin: “Then Yosef hurried out, because his feelings toward his brother were so strong that he wanted to cry; he went into his bedroom and there he wept.” (the *Complete Jewish Bible*, David H. Stern, 1998)

The temporal and sociocultural aspects of the Jewish mindset, as well as the ways in which they are formed by the Hebrew language, were analysed above in order to highlight the individual character of the concept of temporality within the Hebrew language, as well as to emphasise the fact that the Hebrew language, due to the nature of language itself, is not a mere nomenclature, but the very essence of the Jewish people's understanding of the reality of their universe.

Characteristics of Hebrew according to rabbinic tradition and Jewish mysticism

The philosopher Ernst Cassirer postulates that ancient language is “a difficult instrument to handle, particularly for religious purposes”. This fact, Cassirer asserts, is entirely due to human language, which has no ability to express the abstract without use of metaphor, which is why “the whole dictionary of ancient religion” is essentially made up of metaphors. Therefore, religious texts are a constant source of confusion, “many of which have maintained their place in the religion and in the mythology of the ancient world.” (Cassirer 1944, 143) This observation could also be deemed valid in the case of Hebrew, and can be perceived mainly in rabbinic interpretations of the Bible (the Talmud), as well as the subsequent Jewish occult, where the *spirit* of the Hebrew language often takes on the form of metaphor to conceptualise the religious universe which is at the core of Hebrew mentality.

With regard to how this mentality is reflected within Hebrew, Chomsky asserts that the term *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) denotes the idea of selflessness and willingness of individuals to devote their entire life to an ideal. In this case, Chomsky argues that the English equivalents of these terms fail to convey even a shade of the meaning of these “repositories of Jewish experiences”. (Chomsky 1957, 11)

In terms of etymology, William Chomsky notes that the Hebrew language presents us with a unique instance, and that the rabbis argue that no other language (except for Hebrew) can provide a common stem for the words *man* and *woman*. In Hebrew, they are *ish* (man) and *ishah* (woman). Chomsky refers to Genesis 2:23: “the woman was called *ishah* ‘because she was taken out of man’.” (Chomsky 1957, 18)

As far as the theme of the creation of man and woman (as reflected in Hebrew) is concerned, in his 2014 book *Lashon Hakodesh*, Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein claims that

according to Jewish tradition, God spoke to Adam and Eve in this language, *Lashon HaKodesh*, which Adam and Eve spoke themselves. Klein argues that this becomes clear after analysing the stem of the names of the two biblical figures and of some of their descendants:

Adam is derived from the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah* (אדמה), Eve from *chai* (חַי, meaning life), Kayin from *kanissi* (קניתי, I acquired), Seth from *shais* (שׂת, provide), and Noah from *yenachameini* (ינחמני, He will comfort me). According to the testimony of the Torah, *Lashon HaKodesh* was passed down to Eber from Noah and from Adam. Since it was the language spoken by Eber, who preserved it after the division of languages, it is called ‘Hebrew.’ (Klein 2014, 27)

An early instance of lexical borrowing and adaptation within Hebrew is the word “Sanhedrin” (rather famous within Judeo-Christian culture), i.e. the High Court which operated during the period of the Second Temple. A less-known fact about this term is that its origin is not Hebrew, but Greek (derived from Greek Συνέδριον, *synedrion* – sitting together, assembly). This term may seem familiar to Christians due to New Testament writings concerning the prosecution of Christ by such a court of law, but it cannot be found in the Hebrew Bible, and is first documented by rabbis in their writings (following the completion of the Old Testament) as סנהדרין *Sanhedrin*. (Klein 2014, 155)

Another example of Greek borrowings (possibly dating back to the 1st c. CE) is the word *Gematria* גימטריא, which denotes the numerology of the Hebrew alphabet and “links together multiple words or phrases because of their numerical influence”. (Klein 2014, 156) The term *Gematria* is a portmanteau of two Greek words (*gamma* – related to the Hebrew letter *gimmel* – and trio); Reuven Klein explains that “*Trio* means ‘third’ in Greek, and *gimmel* was the third letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Thus, the word *gematria* alludes to the numerical values of letters” (Klein 2014, 156), but also to Geometry because rabbis have adopted this term to serve as reference to all types of calculations and mathematics.

The *Gematria* can be found in two forms: firstly, the one which is mainly employed by hermeneutic methodology specific to rabbinic writings, and secondly, the mystical practice of the *Kabbalah* (which stems from the verb *lecabel* לקבל, “to receive”). This practice of mystical interpretation which has been developed so richly in Judaism can be considered the

result of questions raised by the absence of certain elements within Hebrew script, such as the fact that the Torah was written without any indication of the beginning and end of each verse. Furthermore, the Hebrew alphabet (and consequently, Hebrew writing) does not have a vowel system in itself. As such, a Hebrew text is actually a series of consonants even in Modern Hebrew, and while reading, the task of placing vowels in the right place lies with the experienced reader of Hebrew.

The same is true of written Hebrew, and consequently, these functional writing “shortcomings” enabled the development of this complex tradition of mystical hermeneutics. The matter of the absence of a vowel system and a clear segmentation within the text of the Torah can be explained (with the help of rabbinic tradition) in the writings of Rabbi Bachyei, Matityahu Glazerson states in his 1991 volume titled *Letters of Fire*:

Rabbenu Bachyei answers this question in *Chovot HaLevavot*⁵. He says that this is in order to enable us to discover numerous and varied new meanings by punctuating and vocalizing the Torah in ways other than the standard ones, and by grouping the letters into new words, different from those which appear in our Torah scrolls. In this way, hidden worlds are opened and revealed to us. (Glazerson 1991, 12)

Matityahu Glazerson analyses the dynamism and unusual “behaviour” of letters within Hebrew words by referring to the balance of man’s relationship with God:

The general idea that identical letters can change their meaning from negative to positive when arranged in a different order explains an important concept of Judaism. The Sages say that when motivated by love of God, a person repents of his sins, his former deliberate transgressions are transformed to merits. (Glazerson 1991, 104)

The Hebrew alphabet also boasts a purpose which can be noted in the case of alphabetic acrostics. Rabbi Michael Munk asserts that these acrostics are meant to symbolise the totality of the destruction and violation of divine Law, and can be found in the book of Lamentations, according to the teachings of the Talmud:

⁵ *The Duties of the Heart*, the most famous philosophical work of Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, 1040 C.E.

In the period before the destruction of the First Temple when Israel no longer deserved blessings, the prophet Jeremiah composed the Book of *Eichah [Lamentations]*, which contains a series of lamentations, with the initials of the verses following the twenty-two letters of the *Aleph-Beis*⁶, to indicate that God's *full* fury was unleashed against the people of Israel because 'they transgressed the Torah which was given them with the twenty-two letters' (*Sanhedrin* 104a). (Munk 1983, 35)

The Orthodox Rabbi Nosson Scherman, general editor of ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, characterises the twenty-two sacred letters of the Hebrew alphabet as deeply spiritual primordial forces that are actually the raw material of Creation, which grants the Hebrew alphabet the standing of divine science (in the Hebrew mindset), a characteristic that is apparent in early mystical writings:

Sefer Yetzirah ['The Book of Creation'], the early Kabbalistic work ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham, describes how the sacred letters were used as the agency of creation. The letters can be ordered in countless combinations, by changing their order within words and interchanging letters in line with the rules of various Kabbalistic letter-systems. Each rearrangement of the same letters results in a new blend of the cosmic spiritual forces represented by the letters. (Munk 1983, 19)

According to Michael Munk, the Jerusalem Talmud presents a series of metaphysical characteristics of Hebrew letters and the way in which they were employed within the process of creation, including a dialogue between the first letter of the alphabet, א (*aleph*), and God:

After ב (*beit*) was chosen for Creation, א (*aleph*) withdrew from the competition of the letters and did not make a claim for itself. God asked it, 'Why do you remain silent?' א responded, 'In the face of the other letters I can make no claim, for they all represent plurality — ב is two, ג (*gimel*) is three... while I am only one.' (...) God said to Aleph: 'א, do not fear, for you stand at the head of the *Aleph-Beis* like a king. You are one, I am One... It is My intention to create a world solely to implant My Divine Spirit in it. This will be accomplished through the unique

⁶alphabet

Torah which I will give My people, Israel. When I present them with the Torah, I shall begin with the Ten Commandments, and they shall start with an א— as it is written: אֲנֹכִי, ‘I am [HASHEM, your God]’ (*Midrash Aseres HaDibros*). (Munk 1983, 57-58)

One of the issues which has always benefited from particularly careful Kabbalistic research is the matter of the creation of the universe, which was achieved through utterance, not speech, as Rabbi Michael Munk points out, again quoting Nosson Scherman:

In teaching us that the universe was created with *Ten Godly Utterances* (*Avos* 5:1), the Sages have given us an insight into the process of creation. *Maharal* explains that the term מאמרות (*ma'amrot*) which we translate as *utterances* is different from the synonymous דיבור (*dibbur*; *speech*). The word מאמר (*ma'amar*; *utterance*) alludes primarily to the intent, the forethought, the motive of the One Who spoke, while דיבור (*dibbur*; *speech*) connotes the external, physical process of speech. (Munk 1983, 17)

Nosson Scherman alleges that when the Sages stated that “God created the universe בעשרה מאמרות (*ba'assarah ma'amrot*), with *Ten Utterances*,” (Munk 1983, 17) they wished to explain that the constituent elements of creation were the spiritual reasons underlying speech. They conclude that God had an aim, and the world came into being in order to achieve it.

This firm belief in the “unknown” and “unrevealed” of the Torah has developed a variety of interpretations of its mysteries, even down to the individual letters. Such an examination (from the perspective of the *Gematria*) occurs in Matityahu Glazerson's *Letters Of Fire*, in this case concerning the unrevealed meaning of the word “heart”:

Let us consider, for example, the word לב (*lev*, ‘heart’), whose gematria is 32. Just as the heart is the source of life for the body, the thirty-two hermeneutic principles of Rabbi Eliezer are the heart of the Torah and through them we can receive the life that the Torah gives. The letters of לב are the first and last letters of the Torah: *Bereshit* begins with ב, and *Devarim* ends with ל. The letter ל represents למוד (*limmud*, ‘study’), as we shall see below. The letter ב represents ‘inner’ meaning — its name is *beit* (בית, ‘house,’ ‘interior’) which is found in the Torah in the expression ‘within the curtain’ (מבית לפרכת). (Glazerson 1991, 14)

Glazerson goes on to explicate some observations by Rabbi Ba'al Ha-Turim (prominent rabbi of the Middle Ages), who claimed that the two letters mentioned above, ל and ב, are the only ones of the entire Hebrew alphabet which can be attached to any constitutive letter of God's name, ה-ו-ה, in order to create inherently meaningful words:

בי (*bi*, 'in me'), בה (*bah*, 'in her'), בו (*bo*, 'in him'); לי (*li*, 'to me'), לה (*lah*, 'to her'), לו (*lo*, 'to him'). None of the other letters have this feature: the letter מ, for example, can form meaningful words when combined with the letters ו and ה, but not with ל. The significance of this observation is as follows: the heart (לב) is the point through which one can become completely connected to his Creator (ה-ו-ה). To this end, one must strive to make his heart pure and devoted to *Hashem*⁷, thus achieving perfect attachment to Him. (Glazerson 1991, 14)

Glazerson posits that the Torah appears to be "enclosed" by the letters of the word לב (*lev*, heart), and this "suggests to us that Torah study depends upon the heart of man, and also upon the thirty-two (לב) principles of interpretation." (Glazerson 1991, 14)

As to the two letters examined above (ב, ל), the rabbinic teachings of the Talmud explain the etymological structure of the word למד (*lamed*, learning), claiming they are meant to be "an acronym of לב מבין דעת (*lev mevi'in da'at*), a heart that understands wisdom (*Talmud, Osios R' Akiva*). The goal of learning Torah is to absorb its teachings into one's לב, heart. Genuine learning penetrates the heart, as the Torah demands והיו הדברים האלה ... על לבבך 'These words... shall be on your heart' (*Deuteronomy 6:6*)." (Munk 1983, 139)

In the Talmud there are instances of semantic distinction by morphological means, such as the one below, which renders completely different meanings, depending on the usage of certain prepositions.

The Talmud states: One who takes leave of his comrade should not wish him, 'לך בשלום' (*lechah b'shalom*), go **in** peace,' but 'לך לשלום' (*lechah l'shalom*), go **toward** peace,' for Jethro wished Moses that he 'go **toward** peace' (*Exodus 4:18*), and Moses grew increasingly successful; but David blessed Absalom with, 'Go **in** peace' (*II Samuel 15:9*), and Absalom

⁷ the Name

was hanged (*Berachos 64a*). A successful person makes progress in the direction of his goal. (Munk 1983, 140)

According to this Talmudic teaching, the Torah warns that speech can have favourable or catastrophic effects, depending on the way in which words are used.

In the Hebrew language, the name of God is an intriguing concept, which in turn can be interpreted in multiple ways, such as an analysis of the numerical values of its constitutive letters which implies one of this name's unique characteristics:

The name ה-ו-ה-י also expresses the humility of the Holy One, Blessed is He, because its component letters have very low numerical values when their names are written out in full. (...) No other letters of the alphabet have such low numerical values when their names are written out in full. (Glazerson 1991, 24)

Michael Munk argues that this four letter name (*tetragrammaton*) is a proper Name of God, and because of this reason, as well as the fact that its vowels are no longer known, it is no longer pronounced as it is written. Moreover, even in ancient times it was uttered exclusively during the divine service at the Temple. "During the reading of Scripture or recitation of prayers, we pronounce the Name reverently as אדני [*Adonai*], but even then that pronunciation is not used in ordinary speech. For that purpose, the term השם [*HASHEM*], literally, *the Name*, is used." (Munk 1983, 44)

This kind of hermeneutic analysis has also been undertaken with regard to the conception of a human being, from a spiritual perspective. Matityahu Glazerson considers the teachings of the Jewish sages:

Three partners take part in [the creation of] a human being: the father, the mother, and the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who gives the soul (*neshamah*).⁷ The word אדם (*adam*) expresses this concept; it can be analyzed as א-ד-ם . The letter א indicates the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who provides the spiritual component; the remaining two letters, ד-ם , spell *dam* ('blood'), which symbolizes the physical aspect contributed by the father and mother. A deeper look at the word אדם reveals that it contains a hint of the father and mother who contribute to its production. (Glazerson 1991, 18)

Glazerson quotes the prominent Jewish mystic Shelah Ha-Kadosh⁸ in order to explain that the analysis of the word “adam” allows us to better comprehend an interesting Biblical commentary concerning the original sin, specifically the fact that this violation of God’s command banished the divine presence from within Adam’s body, only leaving behind the physical, corporeal aspect of it. “‘When Adam sinned, the letter א fled from him, and ם remained.’ The severe sin that Adam committed when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge caused the א, that is, the *Aluf* — the Divine Presence of *Hashem* — to depart from him. What remained was ם, the part connected to physicality.” (Glazerson 1991, 18)

Using rabbinic hermeneutics, Glazerson also touches upon the role played by the day of “rest” (*oneg*, delight) within Judaism, and the way in which it challenges man’s connection to the material world in which he exists: “if a person lacks the necessary spiritual readiness for achieving the *oneg* of Shabbat, then on the Sabbath day he will feel only sadness and bitterness. Instead of being in the state of *oneg*, he will be in that of *nega*, its opposite.” (Glazerson 1991, 96) This dichotomy is obvious in writing because the word *oneg* ענג is made up of the exact same letters as *nega* נגע (sickness, leprosy), but the order in which they appear is different.

According to Glazerson, the negative meaning of the word *nega* has its classic representation in the Biblical leper, of which the Torah says: “‘if the disease (*nega*) of leprosy is upon a person...’ The author of *Shem Mi-Shemuel* explains that the diseased leper embodies the complete opposite of Shabbat, the day of *oneg*.” (Glazerson 1991, 97) The above might lead one to understand that a failure to fulfil the process of delight⁹ (*oneg*) on the day of the Sabbath, specifically a spiritual state that has not been properly prepared, can result in the complete opposite of it, *nega*, conceptualised as a disease with a disciplinary role (Biblical leprosy was not given by God with the purpose of killing, but to draw attention to a certain violation of divine laws).

Traditional mystical hermeneutics does not stop at merely seeking to explain the hidden meanings of man’s relationship with God, but also addresses the Hebrew terms for various creatures, such as the dog: “the word כלב (*kelev*, ‘dog’) reflects this characteristic. It

⁸ Isaiah Horowitz (1565-1630), prominent Levite rabbi and mystic, also known as Shelah ha-Kadosh.

⁹ within Judaism, this *delight* involves prayer and profound, exclusive contemplation of God, therefore the shifting of one’s attention from oneself, not just abstention from doing any kind of work.

can be analyzed as: לֵב-כּ (k'lev, 'similar to the heart'). The dog's faithfulness to its master is like the faithful heart of man." (Glazerson 1991, 242)

Consequently, it can be asserted that over the centuries, rabbinic hermeneutics was not only intended to set up a social order among the Jewish people, but it also took on the mission of researching the "spirit" of Hebrew, to the extent that religious writings would allow said spirit to be revealed to the speakers of this language. Thus, on the one hand, this paper has achieved its aim, specifically to identify certain characteristics of the Hebrew language through some of its distinctive aspects, as reflected in the Jewish cultural and religious mentality. It has therefore emphasised the existence of a specific individuality to Hebrew, as well as provided a picture of this language as preserver of Jewish identity throughout two millennia of diaspora. On the other hand, the article also provides the prospect of future in-depth research of the cultural identitary characteristics of Hebrew, as well as more thorough analysis of the activity of the *creative spirit*, perceived as an element of reality which has always existed in this language.

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