



אבגדהוזהוהזיכרוןעלפיהציקרשת

The Sages said to R' Joshua ben Levi: Today some young children came to the house of study and told us things [about the Hebrew alphabet, which they had just learned] the likes of which had not been said even in the days of Joshua son of Nun:

Alef (א) Bet (ב) means “Learn wisdom (alef binah).”

Gimmel (ג) Dalet (ד) means “Be kind to the poor (gemol dallim).” Why is the foot of the Gimmel stretched toward the base of the Dalet? Because it is the way of the benevolent to run after the poor (to help them out).

And why is the foot of the Dalet stretched toward the Gimmel? Because the poor must make himself available to the benevolent.

And why is the face of the Dalet averted from the Gimmel? Because help must be given in secrecy, so that the poor will not be humiliated by the presence of the giver.

Hey (ה) and Vav (ו) are two letters that form the Name of the Holy One.

Zayin (ז), Chet (ח), Tet (ט), Yud (י), Khaf (כ), Lammed (ל): If you act thus (as commanded), the Holy One will sustain (zan) you, be gracious (chan) to you, show goodness (metiv) to you, give you a heritage (yerushah), and bind a crown (keter) about your head in the next world (le-olam ha'ba).

The open Mem (מ) and the closed Mem (ם) signify that one utterance (in Scripture) may be open and another may be closed (esoteric) [and inquiry into it may be forbidden].

The bent Nun (נ) and the upright Nun (ן) mean that those who are faithful (ne'eman) when bent with suffering (in this world) will be made upright (in the world-to-come).

Samekh (ס) and Ayin (ע) stand for “Uphold the poor (semokh aniyyim).” (Others say: The two letters stand for “Devise {aseh} mnemonics {simmanim} in Scripture thus commit it to memory.”)

The bent Peh (פּ) and the open Peh (פֿ) signify that there are times when the mouth (peh) should be open and times when it should stay closed.

The bent Tzaddi (צּ) and the erect Tzaddi (צֿ) signify that while in this world the righteous (tzaddik/tzodeket) is bent down, in the world-to-come s/he will be enabled to stand erect.

Quf (קּ) signifies “holy (qadosh).” Reysh (רּ) signifies “wicked (ra’a).”

Why is the face of the Quf averted from the Reysh? Because The Holy One says, “I cannot bear looking at the wicked.”

And why is the upper tip on the crown over the Quf turned toward the Reysh? Because the Holy One says: If the wicked (ra’a) repents, I will bind a crown over his/her head like the crown over the Quf.

Shin (שׁ) stands for “falsehood (sheqer),” and Tav (תּ) for “truth (emet)”. Why do the letters of sheqer in the alphabet closely follow one another, while the letters in emet are far apart [the Alef at the beginning, the Mem in the middle and the Tav at the end]? Because falsehoods follow close upon one another, while truth is encountered only at intervals far apart.

And why does sheqer stand on one leg [the long stroke of Quf, the second letter of sheqer, extends below the line, so the word looks as if it is standing on one leg], while emet is made up of letters which have (solid) brick-like bases [both the Alef and the Tav rest on two legs, while the Mem has a horizontal bar at its base]? Because truth stands firmly; falsehood does not.

[T”B. Shab 104a].

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