Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation): Between Hinduism and Kabbalah

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**Introduction**

In this book, I intend to show that there is a textual and conceptual analogy between the teachings of the *Sefer Yetzirah* with the *Maitri-Upanishad* (also called *Maitrainia Upanishad*) and the associated philosophy of the *Sāṃkhya* school of thought and the yoga based on it. In addition to offering the reader such an analogy, the current book reassesses the time of the writing of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Various contemporary researchers estimate the time of its writing as between the first century AD (or even earlier) and the eighth or ninth century AD. This book also considers the geographical location in which the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah* was compiled.

A comparison between the Indian teaching with the Hebrew text makes it possible to deduce an understanding of the original character and content of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, as well as other motifs uncovered in medieval Kabbalah: namely, the same method of thought seen in the *Sefer Yetzirah* as a foundation for its ideas.

**3**. **Parallels between *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Maitri Upanishad***

The *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Maitri Upanishad* share a common theory of an infinite, all-embracing deity (in the *Maitri* it is Brahman-Atman). Moreover, it is possible to easily identify virtually identical textual passages in the two works. This phenomenon has great significance for deciphering the enigmatic character of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, assessing its estimated time of compilation, and cataloging it within the various streams of ancient Judaism.

**3.1 Textual parallels**

3.1.1 The infinite God in the six dimensions of space

**Sefer Yetzirah:**

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their measure is ten which have no end. A depth of beginning, a depth of end; a depth of good, a depth of evil; a depth above, a depth below; a depth east, a depth west; a depth north, a depth south. The singular Master, God faithful King, dominates them all from His holy dwelling until eternity of eternities (para. 7).

**Maitri:**

The Brahman,[[1]](#footnote-1) indeed, was this world in the beginning, the one, the boundless, unbounded towards the east, unbounded towards the south, unbounded towards the west, unbounded towards the north, above and below, boundless on all sides. For him there is nothing to the east, or nothing otherwise going towards up in the heavens, nothing in oblique direction, nothing below or above. He is the inconceivable highest Ātman,[[2]](#footnote-2) immeasurable, unborn, unexplorable; he is ‘this whose self is infinitude’ (ākāśātmā).[[3]](#footnote-3) It is he who, when the whole world disappears, alone remains awake; and it is who, again, awakens the pure spirit; through him alone, it thinks and in him again it disappears. (6.17)

**Interpretation:**

In both texts, the creator is singular, and spreads to infinity through the six directions of space. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, he reigns and spreads through them from the center of space: “from the abode of His holiness forever and ever” (see Chapter 1.3.1). As elaborated upon below, this central point is the same place from which the deity in the *Maitri* emanates (see Chapter 3.1.4).

3.1.4 The six directions of space that emanate from the central dimension of the cosmos

**Sefer Yetzirah:**

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking. And if your heart runs, return to the place, as it is written, “The living creatures ran and returned” (Ezekiel 1:14). Regarding this, the covenant was made. (para. 5)

Their measure is ten, which have no end. Their end is embedded in their beginning, and their beginning in their end, like a flame in a burning ember. For the Master is One, He has no second. And before one, what do you count? (para. 6)

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their measure is ten which have no end. A depth of beginning, a depth of end; a depth of good, a depth of evil; a depth above, a depth below; a depth east, a depth west; a depth north, a depth south. The singular Master, God, faithful King, dominates them all from His holy dwelling until eternity of eternities. (para. 7)

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their vision is like the “appearance of lightning,” their limit has no end. They rush to His words like a whirlwind, and before His throne they prostrate themselves. (para. 8)

Seven Doubles: Bet (ב), Gimel (ג), Dalet (ד), Kaf (כ), Peh (פ), Resh (ר), Tav (ת). Seven and not six. Seven and not eight [meaning six ribs for six orders]. And the Holy Temple is prepared in the center. Blessed is the Glory of God from His place. He is the place of the world, and the world is not His place. And he bears them all. (para. 38)

**Maitri:**

1. Agni, the Gāytatrī,[[4]](#footnote-4) the Stoma Trivṛt, the Sāman Rathantaram, the Spring, the Prāṇa, the Stars, the Vasus- they rise towards the east of it (the Sun), they shine, they rain down, they extol it, they again enter into it, and glean and peep forth from it through a cleft, but it (the Sun) is unthinkable, formless, deep; it is concealed, blameless, compact, unfathomable, devoid of guṇas; it is full of splendour, it is the enjoyer of consumer of guṇas, it is frightful, devoid of development; it is the lord of the Yogins; it is omniscient, mighty immeasurable, beginingless, endless, blissful, unborn, wise, indescribable; it creates everything, animates all, consumes all, rules over all; it is the innermost, being of all.
2. Indra, the Triṣṭubh, the Stoma Pañcadaśa, the Sāman Bṛhat, the Rudas--these rise forth towards the south of it (the Sun), they shine, they rain, they extol it, they again enter into it and peep forth from it through a cleft, -- but it is without beginning and without end, it is immeasurable, unlimited, it cannot be moved by others, it is free, characterless,[[5]](#footnote-5) formless, it is of unlimited power, it is the creator and the illuminator.
3. The Maruts, the Jagatī, the Saptadśa, the Sāman Vairūpam, the rainy season, the Apāna, the planet Śukra (Venus), the Ādityas--they rise forth towards the west of it, they shine, they rain, they extol it, they again enter into it and peep forth out of it through a cleft- but it is quiet, wordless or taciturn. It is fearless, sorrowless, it is existing joy, it is satiated or gratified, it is firm, unwavering, immortal, unshakable, permanent, it is named Viṣṇu, it is a place having all under it (it is above all).
4. The Viśve Devāh, the Anuṣṭubh, the Stoma Ekaviṁśa, the Sāman Vairājam, the autumn, the Sāman, Varuṇa, the Sādhyas, they rise forth towards the north of it (the Sun), they shine, they rain, they extol it, they again enter into it, and peep forth out it through a split, --but he is inwardly pure, purified, vacant (śūnya), quiet, it is devoid of prāṇa, devoid Ātman it is endless.
5. Mitrā-Varuṇau, the Paṅkti, the Stamas Triṇava and Trayastriṃśa, the Sāmans- Sākavram and Raivatam, the winter (Hemanta) and the cold season (Śiśira), the Udāna, the Aṅgirasas, the Moon, - they rise forth upward from it (the Sun), they shine, they rain, they extol it, they again enter into it, and peep forth out of it through a cleft - but one knows under the name of Praṇava, as the director, it appears as effulgence, it is sleepless, ageless, deathless and sorrowless.
6. Śani (Saturn), Rāhu (the Dragon’s head), Ketu (the Dragon’s tail), the serpents, the Rākṣasas,[[6]](#footnote-6) the Yakṣas,[[7]](#footnote-7) men, birds, the monsters (Śarabha), elephants etc. – they rise forth towards below from it (the Sun), they shine, they rain, they extol it they again enter into it and peep forth out of it through a cleft, from it there rises the wise one, the sustainer of things which are separate, who is the inmost being of all, who is imperishable, pure, purified, full of splendor, patient, and quiet.
7. And it, (the Sun) indeed, is “the Ātman in the inmost being, (inside the heart), fully pure”, just like a blazing fire, who assumes all forms (viśva-rūpa); this universe serves as food for it, all the beings are interwoven like the warp and woof in it: “It is Ātman, the sinless one, free from old age, free from death and free from sorrow, devoid of doubt, devoid of any fetters (bonds); its resolutions always come true, its desires always come true; “it is the almighty, it is the ruler of being, it is the protector of being, it is the bridge which holds together what are separate or asunder”; this Atman, indeed, is called Ῑśāna Śambhu, Bhava, Rudra, Prajāpati, the creator of all, Hiraṇyagarbha, it is the truth, the Prāṇa, the bird of passage (Haṁsa), the controller, the unshakable one, it is Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa; and there it dwells in the fire, and there it dwells in the heart, and there it dwells in the sun; it is all alone the only one. Obeisance to you, assuming all forms, and still remaining concealed in the true ether (of the heart)!

**Interpretation**:

The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes the dialectical movement of the *sefirot* as running from and returning to God in the center. They have “the appearance of lightning” or resemble “a flame in a burning ember.” In addition, the “whirlwind” image indicates the speed of their movement. The meaning is clear: the movement of the *sefirot* is illuminating and spreads rapidly, but always returns to its divine origin in the center of space. The center is described as an “ember” or is referred to as the “Tabernacle” or “Holy Temple” Also, the *sefirot* are described as living beings or creatures who respond to God’s words and bow before His throne.

In the *Maitri* we find a parallel to the descriptions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in several respects:

First, in the *Maitri*, the Sun is the center of the space, and from it, like sunbeams, all the phenomena of the world spread out towards the six directions of space. The phenomena are: religious hymns, the seasons of the year, the celestial bodies, the Earth’s creatures, and more. Their resemblance to the *sefirot* is reflected in their description as illuminated and flashing. (para. 6, 8)

Second, the dialectical movement of world phenomena in six directions, which, on the one hand, rise up and spread out, and on the other hand, give praise and return to the Atman in the center (the Sun), is similar to the *sefirot*, which respond God’s words and bow to Him (para. 5, 6, 8)

Third, in both teachings, God resides in a special abode in space. In the *Sefer Yetzirah* the abode of the “spirit of the Living God” is called a “Tabernacle,” “Holy Hall,” or “Throne” (para. 7, 8, 38). In the *Maitri*, Atman’s abode is in the Sun. This is even more pronounced elsewhere in the Upanishad: “But that golden man[[8]](#footnote-8) inside the Sun, who gazes down on this Earth from his golden seat… it is who, as the solar fire residing in the heavens…” (6.1-2)

Fourth, in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a single God reigns from His abode in all spheres (para. 7) and bears them all (para. 38), while in the *Maitri* it is said, for example, that Atman controls all phenomena, gives them life, makes them exist, has the spirit of life (Prāṇa), and so forth (e.g., 7.1; 7.7). He is also described as a “bridge” between all these separate phenomena, so that all the creatures of the world are linked together through it (7.7). These characteristics are similar to the role of “bearing everything” described in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Moreover, elsewhere in the Upanishad, Atman’s character is described as the "primeval man" (prajāpati), which literally means one who “bears” the entire world: “This, indeed, is the form of prajāpati, who bears or maintains everything; in it is this whole world resolved and in this whole world it (that form) is resolved” (6.6).[[9]](#footnote-9) This phrase is reminiscent of a text included in the *Sefer Yetirah*: “He is the place of the world, and the world is not His place. And he bears them all.” (para 38)

Fifth, as I mentioned above, in both teachings the divine is infinite in its dimensions and its expansion in space (see Chapter 3.1.1), and therefore it is beyond human understanding. In the *Maitri*, it is impossible to reach the end of Atman’s depth, as in this description: “it (the Sun) is unthinkable, formless, deep; it is concealed, blameless, unfathomable” (7.1). In my opinion, this is precisely the meaning of the term “depth” in the *Sefer Yetzirah*: it is not limited to an expression of infinity regarding the dimensions of the *sefirot*, but also as an inability to achieve an understanding of its essence. On the one hand, it is “devoid of attributes” and, on the other, it is “full of attributes” (ibid): “Bridle your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking” (para. 5).

Sixth, there is no doubt that the conceptual similarity found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Maitri* is primarily the worship of one deity. The *Sefer Yetzirah* emphasizes that God the Creator is singular: “The Master is One, He has no second, and before one, what do you count?” (p. 6), while in the *Maitri*, Brahman-Atman is “all alone, the only one,” and is elsewhere described as the “father of all living things,” “the creator of all,” etc.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The source for Atman’s description in the passage under discussion can be found in the Chandogya Upanishad.[[11]](#footnote-11) As mentioned earlier, this is one of the earliest Upanishads. However, in this Upanishad, the cosmological account of the sun and its six rays (the phenomena of the world) is compared to a hive and honeybees. The sun (Brahman) is the honey, and its rays (the six directions of space) are the cells in which honey is stored. In this Upanishad, there is no extensive description of the phenomena of the world, but in some other religious teachings, such as the Vedas, with its image of bees, these phenomena are what spread through the six dimensions of the world (Chandogya 3.1-5). Therefore, it is difficult to assume that *Sefer Yetzirah* is the source of what is written in *Maitri*, the latter being based on an earlier text from its own culture. Moreover, I will elaborate further on the passage in *Maitri* under discussion in the context of Yoga-meditation.

However, the above discussion is not meant in any way as a denial of the theological independence of the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The vocabulary of biblical concepts shows its Jewish distinctiveness. For example, the Hebrew term for “nothingness” is used in the Book of Job (26, 7),[[12]](#footnote-12) and there are multiple terms and motifs from the Book of Ezekiel, such as the description of the movement of the *sefirot* as living creatures “running and returning like flashes of lightning” (1:14).[[13]](#footnote-13) The Hebrew word for “sapphire” (ibid, 26) sounds similar to the word for “enumerate,” and “ember of fire” (ibid., 13) is used to describe a “spirit” or “living spirit” (ibid., 20-21). There is a general association between the Sun and Ezekiel’s “vision of the chariot” (e.g., ibid., 4). All of these indicate a trend of processing and integrating early Israelite teachings of the vision of the chariot with the Indian teaching of Atman (the “spirit”), the six directions of space, and the dialectic movement. It can be added that the “likeness of a man” on the throne in Ezekiel’s vision (ibid. 26) can be compared to the “primeval man” on his throne in the Sun in the *Maitri*.

It follows from a comparison of these two teachings that questions investigating the essence of the central point in space have been resolved. According to the *Sefer Yetzirah,* the “abode” or “the Holy Temple” is in the Sun, and not elsewhere (!), as will be discussed further below.

On the other hand, a significant difference must be emphasized between the two teachings under discussion. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *sefirot* emanate from the deity and are not a variety of worldly phenomena. In my opinion, it is of the utmost importance to the Jewish essence of *Sefer Yetzirah* that the “seven divine powers” (like the *me* in Mesopotamian mythology) played a strong role in the tradition of God’s revelation in this world. They are the “holy beings,” an ancient teaching from the biblical era, which still existed in literature of the Second Temple period (see Section A. 3. 3. 3. and below). Therefore, it seems that the later Kabbalists misunderstood the essential framework of the *Sefer Yetzirah,* as it relates to the ancient tradition of these divine powers.

**3.1.11 The concept of the “*sefirot*”**

**Sefer Yetzirah**

Ten *sefirot* of nothingness and twenty-two foundational letters (para. 2)

**Interpretation:**

The meaning of the word “*Sāṃkhya*” in Sanskrit is enumeration.[[14]](#footnote-14) As its name implies, the essence of the *Sāṃkhya* school of thought is based on a pattern or schema of counting or enumerating. These are three distinct primary systems: the twenty-four principles of emanation (or twenty-five, including *Purusha*); enumeration of the eight dispositions of the principle of “understanding” (classical *Sāṃkhya*); and fifty basic categories created through “understanding,” a sense of self, and consciousness.[[15]](#footnote-15) Therefore, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which was influenced by the teachings found in the *Maitri Upanishad* and the associated *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, also formulates its constituents in terms of enumeration. This does not refer to the literal meaning of numbers, but rather, as Liebes argues, in the sense of “enumerated things.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In practice, the *Sefer Yetzirah* enumerates and counts the foundational principles of the world, similar to the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy.

As Greenold correctly notes, “anyone who reads *Sefer Yetzirah* cannot help but be impressed by the schematic nature through which the conceptual systems are presented, whether they stand independently or are intertwined.” However, he argues (as do others) that there are possible connections between *Sefer Yetzirah* and Pythagorean concepts.[[17]](#footnote-17) In my opinion, he can indeed find similarities between the Kabbalah and Hellenistic thought (see below), but the Indian teachings have a direct and distinct affinity with it.

I assume it is not by chance that the Kabbalists divided their theosophical concepts according to terms of enumeration. They were simply misled regarding the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. In the Jewish tradition, the seven divine powers have always been associated with the color sapphire (sky blue). In addition, the Greek word *sphere* (meaning sphere or globe) also denotes the form of these “divine powers,” and puts forth a description of the firmament or a geocentric concept of the heavens, prevalent in the Second Temple period and afterwards, which is identified with these powers.[[18]](#footnote-18) Therefore, it would have been easy for those who came after the *Sefer Yetzirah*, who were unfamiliar with the Indian background of the book, to assign additional meanings to the concept of enumeration. As I wrote previously, the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* integrated the theory of the seven powers that existed in his own tradition with the Indian teaching. Therefore, one may consider that the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* sought to “grasp the rope by both ends,” and to hint at interpretations that were accepted within his own tradition and cultural environment; but even if this is true, they are not the crux of its original doctrine.[[19]](#footnote-19)

However, the Hellenistic spirit of the book cannot be ignored. For example, the idea that the number seven represents aspects of reality in terms of the number of planets, the firmament, and more (pp. 42, 43) is classically Pythagorean (see below). Indeed, Philo formulated the essentials of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in his teachings, and represented them as numbers.[[20]](#footnote-20) I believe that this is precisely the explanation for the expansion of the original seven forces into ten. That is to say, that if in *Sāṃkhya* philosophy the term “enumeration” was used only as a technical tool for enumerating the constituents of the cosmos, it is possible that Pythagorean thought was also integrated into the teachings of the *Sefer Yetzirah.* Pythagorean philosophy views not only the number seven as having a divine essence, but also considers the number ten as the perfect (complete) number, and therefore the number of *sefirot* was expanded from seven to ten.[[21]](#footnote-21) This kind of adaptation, as noted, is a theme of his work.

Be that as it may, the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* chose the Indian concept of “enumeration” to denote the first system of designation in his book, which is fundamentally different from the theory in the *Maitri Upanishad* and its literary source (*Chandogya Upanishad*), which saw the six emanations simply as spatial directions. In the *Sefer Yetzirah,* the *sefirot* that emanate from the center (the Sun) are ontological entities, and, in accordance with the hidden teachings of his tradition, he uses the image of living beings from Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot (para. 5, 8). It should also be recalled that, in the Indian context, the phenomena of the world are the words of praise and honor given to the deity in the center, and are not the emanations themselves.[[22]](#footnote-22) This difference is quite significant, and thereby it is possible to clarify and discern the dedication of the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and his circle of disciples to Jewish tradition.

1. The etymology of the name “Brahman” is ambiguous, but is accepted that the name is derived from the Sanskrit root *bṛh* or *bṛṁh*, which means to grow or spread out. In ancient Vedic literature, its principle teaching is the mysterious, divine power from which the gods are formed. See: 'Brahman', in: J. Bowker (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religion*s, Oxford-New York 1997, p. 163; see also: H. Oldenberg, *Doctrine of the Upaniṣad* (ibid), pp. 29- 30. Notably, the concept of Brahman does not appear as the equivalent of a deity in any of the Upanishads or later texts. At times, it indicates a highly abstract concept, even the most abstract of any abstract concept. In Sanskrit culture, it has a rich variety of meanings, and the Upanishads are different from one another; sometimes quite different. I would like to thank Prof. Dani Raveh for this insight. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The name Ātman is derived from the Sanskrit root meaning “to breathe.” Ātman is “breath.” In Indian philosophy, it is more closely related to the concepts of “spirit-life,” “I,” or “myself,” See: S. Biderman, *Indian Philosophy Foundations*, Tel Aviv 1980, p. 37; and H. Oldenberg, *Doctrine of the* *Upaniṣad* (ibid), pp. 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Sanskrit, Ākāśa is both “aether” a foundational element, and a physical space. Here, the meaning is aether. In this philosophy, aether is considered a foundational element for all the space of the universe. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the name of a prosodic mantra composed in meter, as are the other references in this quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Or its gender is undefined. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The demons. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The deities of the forest. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The meaning of Purusha (literally, "man"), is "the spirit of the world" in Sankhya philosophy, and, in the *Maitri*, itis the inner power of Brahman penetrating into the world; he is Atman. See also: Friedman, *The Upanishads and Brahmanas - Selection of Thought and Mythology of Ancient India*, Jerusalem 2014, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The meaning is that Atman, as the form of the "primeval man," is the form of the entire world; that is, the cosmos is a human figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, the *Maitri* expresses a monotheistic belief, which is to say that Brahman-Atman is also embodied in the other gods in the Indian pantheon. For example, see *Maitri* 7.7 (above), and more. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, God is not embodied, except as the entire world, with no connection to any idolatrous conceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Although it is possible to associate the solar motif with the “cosmic pillar” (and with it, the motif of the “cosmic tree”; see Chapter 3.1.9), which is known as Skambha and appears in Atharva Veda 10.7.12, one of its functions of which is to establish the six directions of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The term “*sefirot* of nothingness" (para. 5, 7, 8) originated with a commentary on a biblical verse from the Book of Job “He stretcheth out the north over the empty space, and hangeth the earth over nothing.” This is to support his claim, as if the land (the world) depends on the “*sefirot* of nothingness.” In the Kabbalah, this term for “nothingness” is related to another biblical term, “emptiness,” which is to say that the *sefirot* have no existence outside of God (or “His spirit”), which reigns in them.

    In my opinion, the selection of this verse in the *Sefer Yetzirah* also hints at the tradition that still survived during the Second Temple period (for example, in the Book of Enoch) whereby the throne of God is described on a mountain in the north, or as a throne resting on the *sefirot* of “nothingness” and “emptiness.” Incidentally, Ezekiel(1:4) also describes the Lord's revelation as coming from the north: “A storm wind comes from the north.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ezekiel describes a dynamic chariot that travels lightning fast on the four winds of heaven, while the description in the *Sefer Yetzirah* is influenced by an Indian motif, such that of the *Maitri's* six directions, and at the center of the world there exists an unchanging abode of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. # See for example: H. Oldenberg, *Doctrine of the Upaniṣad* (ibid), p. 134; E. Harzer, 'Sāṃkhya' (ibid), p. 47; G. J. Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning*, pp. 1- 3.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. E. Harzer, 'Sāṃkhya' (ibid), pp. 47- 48; I should note that I did not find the fifty categories in Sankhya philosophy in the Maitri Upanishad. See note 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See note 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A. Greenold, *From Sefer Yetzirah to Sefer HaBahir* (see note 3), p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. S. Arieli, *On the Origins of Teachings of the Sefirot* (ibid.), pp. 314- 315, 319- 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The term “sapphire” also appears in the “vision of the chariot” in Ezekiel 1, a chapter to which the author of *Sefer Yetzirah* no doubt referred. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See also note 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See chapter A. 3.3.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See chapter 3.1.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)