**Chapter One – MA Thesis on “The Concept of the Book and its Page as an Actual (Real) and Metaphysical Space in Michael Gordon’s Works”**

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Note - I translated the entire thesis, but am sending you an excerpt as an example.

**Like a Thread of Scarlet: The Culture of the Hebrew Book**

**The thread of scarlet** is a red string, mentioned twice in the scriptures: in Chapter Two of the Book of Joshua, the spies instruct Rahab to mark her home with a red string, so that they will be able to identify it during wartime:

"אֶת תִּקְוַת **חוּט הַשָּׁנִי** הַזֶּה תִּקְשְׁרִי בַּחַלּוֹן אֲשֶׁר הוֹרַדְתֵּנוּ בוֹ…" (פסוק יח)

“thou shalt bind this line of scarlet thread in the window which thou didst let us down by” (Verse 18).[[1]](#footnote-1)

This phrase is cited again in Song of Solomon 4:3: “Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet…”.

"**כְּחוּט הַשָּׁנִי** שִׂפְתֹתַיִךְ..." (שיר השירים ד, ג)

According to the Grimm Brothers’ historical dictionary of the German language, the renowned author Goethe was credited for making the connection between the “red string” and the concept of a “common thread” or “guiding principle” [[2]](#footnote-2). In his book Die Wahlverwandtschaften (Elective Affinities) of 1809, Goethe describes the red thread - roter faden – which was woven into the ropes of the British fleet in order to mark them as property of the Kingdom. If the string came undone in a single place, the entire rope would become unwound. In other words, even the smallest section of the rope bears a mark connecting it to the crown: “All the ropes of the royal fleet, from the strongest to the thinnest, are spun in such a manner that a **red thread** (in the original = ein roter Faden) runs through the whole which cannot be removed without unravelling everything, and by means of which even the smallest pieces are recognizable as belonging to the crown”. [[3]](#footnote-3)

When the expression “roter faden” was loaned to Hebrew – whether directly from the German or indirectly through Russian – it did not retain its literal translation “red thread”, but rather proudly boasted the biblical phrase **“the thread of scarlet”**. The first time this usage was found in Hebrew, in the sense of a “guiding principle”, is in the publisher’s preface (probably H.Y. Rawnitzki) to “Al Parashat Drakhim”, a collection of essays published by Ahad Ha’am in 1895: “One primary concept runs throughout the book as a **guiding principle**”. It appears that the translator chose the phrase “thread of scarlet” in order to add a biblical feel to Goethe’s work, thereby bringing the reader closer to the Jewish People’s world of written, spiritual and cultural references.” **[[4]](#footnote-4)**

**Matter and Spirit**

Judaism is commonly considered the first of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths (the others are Christianity and Islam). Its beginnings can be traced to the moment that God revealed himself to Abraham, as related in the book of Genesis 22:11:

"וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי" (בראשית כב, יא).

“the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied.”

Although the Jewish People’s written scriptures were not created at the time of Abraham, but hundreds of years later, following a long canonization process that spanned the entire first and second temple periods, culminating in the Jewish People’s canonical codex, the *Tanakh (according to most estimates its formulation was completed between the second century BCE*, and the second century CE at the end of the second temple period),[[5]](#footnote-5) Judaism developed a sacred relationship with this canonical text. Judaism treated the text as the living word of God transmitted at Mount Sinai, when God made his covenant with the Children of Israel. The Torah of the Jewish People, which was granted before God and transmitted through the agency of Moses, was conveyed to the Jews as a moral commandment set in stone, on the tablets of the covenant:

"וַיַּגֵּד לָכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים וַיִּכְתְּבֵם עַל שְׁנֵי לֻחוֹת אֲבָנִים" [דברים ד, יג].

“He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets (Deuteronomy 4:13). The sanctity of the written word was crystallized when it was conveyed to the Jewish people as a physical object representing “the living words of God”. At this moment, God’s words were transformed into a metaphysical, multi-dimensional object, which embodies the synthesis between matter and spirit.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Deity and the Book**

כִּי־תָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ, וִירִשְׁתָּהּ, וְיָשַׁבְתָּה בָּהּ; וְאָמַרְתָּ, אָשִׂימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ, כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם, אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתָי: שׂוֹם תָּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ, אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ: מִקֶּרֶב אַחֶיךָ, תָּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ: לֹא תוּכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-אָחִיךָ הוּא: רַק, לֹא־יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ סוּסִים, וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֶת־הָעָם מִצְרַיְמָה, לְמַעַן הַרְבּוֹת סוּס; וַיהוָה, אָמַר לָכֶם, לֹא תֹסִפוּן לָשׁוּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה, עוֹד: וְלֹא יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ נָשִׁים, וְלֹא יָסוּר לְבָבוֹ; וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב, לֹא יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ מְאֹד: וְהָיָה כְשִׁבְתּוֹ, עַל כִּסֵּא מַמְלַכְתּוֹ **וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת, עַל־סֵפֶר**, מִלִּפְנֵי, הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם: **וְהָיְתָה עִמּוֹ, וְקָרָא בוֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד, לְיִרְאָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו, לִשְׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה, לַעֲשֹׂתָם**: לְבִלְתִּי רוּם־לְבָבוֹ מֵאֶחָיו, וּלְבִלְתִּי סוּר מִן־הַמִּצְוָה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאול **לְמַעַן יַאֲרִיךְ יָמִים עַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו, בְּקֶרֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל**: (דברים יז, יד–כ).

**14**When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” **15**be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. **16**The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” **17**He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

**18**When he takes the throne of his kingdom**, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law,** taken from that of the Levitical priests. **19It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees** **20**and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. **Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel**. (Deuteronomy 17: 14 – 20).

The seven verses that close Chapter 17 of the Book of Deuteronomy (verses 14 – 20) are coined “the King’s Law”, and they are part of a series of laws regarding public figures. The section about the appointment of the king follows a series of rules relating to the basic principles of law. These verses describe the people’s desire to lead their lives in accordance with the covenant they have made with God, on one hand, without a need for any external authority in the form of a king to manage their lives, while on the other hand recognizing reality and human nature, which tends to depend on kings, as reflected in the customs of the gentiles. Moshe understands that he must compile the law of conduct of the Jewish People into a book (“Mishne Torah”, or secondary Torah, is another name for the book of Deuteronomy). This process reflects Moshe’s understanding as a leader that the physical book, including the rules written in it, will serve as a tool in the hands of the spiritual and political leaders to help lead the people and protect it from evil. The law, therefore, permits the appointment of a king – but only under certain circumstances, under which those in positions of power are subject to the rules of the Torah.

וַיְהִי כְּכַלּוֹת מֹשֶׁה, לִכְתֹּב אֶת־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה־הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר: עַד, תֻּמָּם: וַיְצַו מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם, נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר: **לָקֹחַ, אֵת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה, וְשַׂמְתֶּם אֹתוֹ, מִצַּד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם; וְהָיָה־שָׁם בְּךָ, לְעֵד**: (דברים לא, כד–כו)

So it was, when Moses had completed writing the words of this law in a book, when they were finished, **25**that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying: **26**“**Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there as a witness against you;**” (Deuteronomy 31:24 – 26).

These verses reflect a deep understanding that the Torah is meant to be both a physical book, stored in the temple beside the ark, as well as something abstract in the awareness and soul of the member of the covenant, who takes the laws of the Torah upon himself. The physical placement of the Torah in the Holy of Holies reflects its spiritual status, and its centrality in the relationship between the believer and God. Thus, the metaphysical power of the material object, the written book, is strengthened, as well as the ongoing circular dynamic between the book and its reader.

The Torah received by Moses travelled with the Jewish People in their wanderings in the desert, and served as a moral anchor that regulated their way of life until they reached a permanent physical home in the Land of Israel. Yet the danger of arriving in a safe place was that over time, the Jewish People would risk losing its moral compass and forgetting its covenant with God. Therefore, even in later periods, when the people forgot the Torah, the rediscovery of the physical book enabled the people to return to the right path.

וַיְהִי, בִּשְׁמֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה, לַמֶּלֶךְ, יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ; שָׁלַח הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-שָׁפָן בֶּן-אֲצַלְיָהוּ בֶן־מְשֻׁלָּם, הַסֹּפֵר, בֵּית יְהוָה, לֵאמֹר: עֲלֵה, אֶל-חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל, וְיַתֵּם אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף, הַמּוּבָא בֵּית יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אָסְפוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַסַּף, מֵאֵת הָעָם: וְיִתְּנוּהוּ, עַל־יַד עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה, הַמֻּפְקָדִים, בֶּבֵּית יְהוָה; וְיִתְּנוּ אֹתוֹ, לְעֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית יְהוָה, לְחַזֵּק, בֶּדֶק הַבָּיִת: לֶחָרָשִׁים, וְלַבֹּנִים וְלַגֹּדְרִים; וְלִקְנוֹת עֵצִים וְאַבְנֵי מַחְצֵב, לְחַזֵּק אֶת־הַבָּיִת: אַךְ לֹא־יֵחָשֵׁב אִתָּם, הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּתָּן עַל־יָדָם: כִּי בֶאֱמוּנָה, הֵם עֹשִׂים: וַיֹּאמֶר חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל, עַל־שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר, סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה מָצָאתִי, בְּבֵית יְהוָה; וַיִּתֵּן חִלְקִיָּה אֶת־הַסֵּפֶר אֶל־שָׁפָן, וַיִּקְרָאֵהוּ: וַיָּבֹא שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר, אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ, וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ, דָּבָר; וַיֹּאמֶר, הִתִּיכוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא בַבַּיִת, וַיִּתְּנֻהוּ עַל־יַד עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה, הַמֻּפְקָדִים בֵּית יְהוָה: **וַיַּגֵּד שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר, לַמֶּלֶךְ לֵאמֹר, סֵפֶר נָתַן לִי, חִלְקִיָּה הַכֹּהֵן; וַיִּקְרָאֵהוּ שָׁפָן, לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֹעַ הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֶת־דִּבְרֵי סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה; וַיִּקְרַע, אֶת־בְּגָדָיו**: וַיְצַו הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־חִלְקִיָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶת־אֲחִיקָם בֶּן־שָׁפָן וְאֶת־עַכְבּוֹר בֶּן־מִיכָיָה וְאֵת שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר, וְאֵת עֲשָׂיָה עֶבֶד־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֵאמֹר: לְכוּ דִרְשׁוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בַּעֲדִי וּבְעַד־הָעָם, וּבְעַד כָּל־יְהוּדָה, עַל־דִּבְרֵי הַסֵּפֶר הַנִּמְצָא, הַזֶּה: כִּי־גְדוֹלָה חֲמַת יְהוָה, אֲשֶׁר־הִיא נִצְּתָה בָנוּ, עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֲבֹתֵינוּ עַל־דִּבְרֵי הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה, לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל־הַכָּתוּב עָלֵינוּ: (מלכים ב כב, ג–יג)

Now it came to pass, in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, *that* the king sent Shaphan the scribe, the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, to the house of the Lord, saying: **4**“Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the money which has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the doorkeepers have gathered from the people. **5**And let them deliver it into the hand of those doing the work, who are the overseers in the house of the Lord; let them give it to those who *are* in the house of the Lord doing the work, to repair the damages of the house— **6**to carpenters and builders and masons—and to buy timber and hewn stone to repair the house. **7**However there need be no accounting made with them of the money delivered into their hand, because they deal faithfully.”

**8**Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, “I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord.” And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. **9**So Shaphan the scribe went to the king, bringing the king word, saying, “Your servants have [[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+kings+22&version=NKJV#fen-NKJV-10155a)]gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of those who do the work, who oversee the house of the Lord.” **10 Then Shaphan the scribe showed the king, saying, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read it before the king.11Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes. 12**Then the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, [[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+kings+22&version=NKJV#fen-NKJV-10158b)]Achbor the son of Michaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king, saying, **13**“Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great *is* the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

Another aspect of the metaphysical connection between the ritual content and the object in which it is “stored” is the fact that the Tanakh is a collective compilation. The books and stories of the Tanakh were not written by a single author, but rather by multiple leaders and religious figures who wrote separate works over the generations, which were then compiled into one complete Canon, within an ongoing process that spanned hundreds of years. Some claim that the complete canonization of the Tanakh, the process of formulating its final text as known to us today, lasted approximately 900 years: it began in the fourth century BCE (the laws of the Torah), continued in the second century BCE (the prophets) and was completed (the writings), according to most contemporary scholars, around the time of the destruction of the second temple (70 CE), which also served as an impetus for completion of the compilation.[[7]](#footnote-7) One scholarly position is that the canonical version of the book known today as the Tanakh was compiled by Ezra the Scribe in the second temple period. [[8]](#footnote-8)

The power attributed to the Torah scrolls and the sacred objects used in prayer in some cases far exceeds their official function in the synagogue. As early as the ancient period, the scroll was granted the status of a sacred ritual object, which should be elevated, decorated, and glorified in any way possible. The sages developed the concept of the book as a tangible sacred object.[[9]](#footnote-9)Therefore, rules of conduct were set regarding the scroll: the scroll should not be touched with a bare hand; it should not be carried unnecessarily; one should rise in reverence when it is taken in and out of the ark; if it falls the person who dropped it must rip his garment as if in mourning, fast and beg for forgiveness, and so forth and so on. Over the generations the decorated book became the most sacred tangible object in the Jewish world, and great magic power was ascribed to it. This great importance is apparent even today, within the context of the craft of transcribing sacred books, which is the task of special scribes. [[10]](#footnote-10)These scribes engage in a rigorous craft and they are subject to a long list of laws and specific copying techniques, to which they must adhere before these books can find their way into the ark of a synagogue. [[11]](#footnote-11)

As a result, each generation has been able to treat all of the books included in the scriptural canon as a revelation for its own time. This process intensified continuously following the destruction of the temple, when most of the Jewish People went into exile, and the Tanakh came to serve as a kind of ‘traveling homeland’. With the destruction of the physical center, the spiritual center became more prominent. [[12]](#footnote-12)

**The People of the Book**

During the period of Persian rule, about a year after the completion of the construction of the second temple, Ezra the Scribe immigrated from Babylonia to Israel, leading a group of 1800 immigrants to Jerusalem. This wave of immigration, coined “Ezra’s Immigration”, was part of the return to Zion. Under the leadership and inspiration of Ezra the Scribe, there was a return to Zion from the Babylonian Exile. Ezra’s main contribution was strengthening Torah learning and adherence to religious commandments. He instituted new regulations relating to Torah study, which were named “Ezra’s Regulations”. These regulations made the main principles of the Torah more accessible to the people, and *inter alia*, set regular days for reading from the Torah, so that three days would never pass without Torah learning. Thus, Ezra promoted the democratization of religion, which linked the written and oral traditions together.

As a result of Ezra’s Regulations, the “book” passed from the hands of the priestly class (Kohanim) and scholars, which until then had been the only ones who read or interpreted it, into the hands of the entire people, enabling shared study for all ranks of society, a characteristic unique to Judaism. This practice even led to the establishment of the first institutions of learning engaged in instruction on the Tanakh, which were called “houses of the book” (the Hebrew term for “schools” until today). This opened the community and the public up to the biblical texts, and laid fertile ground for their reception and creative renewal[[13]](#footnote-13) as well as the ability to criticize or raise doubts about the texts. [[14]](#footnote-14)

It is worth noting that the concept “the people of the book” has its roots in the establishment of Islam.[[15]](#footnote-15)The Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, unwittingly used the term “people of the book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*) to describe Jews in numerous places in the Quran. According to Gershom Scholem, this was an “admission of the Jews possessing a founding text [….] which suits or stems from the single book of God in the heavens.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

Scholem continues and writes about the people’s inseverable tie to the book: “the Jewish people, which in terms of its biological existence was almost no more worthy of attention than any other people from the ancient East which long ago faded into extinction, appeared on the stage of history together with its book. The people and the book were embedded into the Jewish people’s self-consciousness and the consciousness of the world. […] The connection between the people and the book was so strong and organic, that the storms of history could not undo it.” [[17]](#footnote-17)

Or as the author Heine Heinrich described it: "like a ghost guarding a treasure placed in its hands while it was still alive, that is how this persecuted people sat, with this ghost, in the darkness of its ghettoes and maintained the Hebrew bible." [[18]](#footnote-18)

**The Geniza**

וְנִתַּצְתֶּם אֶת־מִזְבְּחֹתָם, וְשִׁבַּרְתֶּם אֶת־מַצֵּבֹתָם, וַאֲשֵׁרֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרְפוּן בָּאֵשׁ, וּפְסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם תְּגַדֵּעוּן; וְאִבַּדְתֶּם אֶת־שְׁמָם, מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּן כֵּן, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: [דברים יב, ג–ד]

3 “Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.

**4**You must not worship the Lord your God in their way.

(Deuteronomy 12:3-4)

Maimonides addressed these verses in his work Mishneh Torah [illustration 3], and interpreted them as a prohibition against destroying or erasing any text in Hebrew containing one of God’s names. This interpretation became widespread in Jewish tradition and was transformed in the middle ages into a more comprehensive custom of preserving sacred texts written in Hebrew characters which were no longer in use. This custom is called “geniza”, which is also the name of the receptacle in which the unused texts are stored [illustration 4]. [[19]](#footnote-19)

The texts stored in the geniza include excerpts from texts, editions and publications of books that wore out from use, and according to the Jewish tradition that developed in the middle ages, especially in the East, were not abandoned or used for another purpose, but were rather stored (or buried) as is. The most famous geniza is of course the giant Cairo Geniza which was preserved in the synagogue of the Israeli community in Fustat (Ancient Cairo), until many of the works stored in it were exhumed at the end of the nineteenth century [illustrations 6 – 5]. [[20]](#footnote-20)

The documents found in the Geniza demonstrate that most of the remains of manuscripts stored in it were dated between 1000 CE and the middle of the 13th century CE. [[21]](#footnote-21)

The many findings in the Geniza demonstrate that the practice of burying worn out books did not necessarily stem from the sanctity of the copied texts, since not only were non-sacred texts found, but also everyday texts and certificates which do not even contain biblical quotations, and are not even written in the Hebrew language, as many of them were written in Arabic (the language which served Jews living in Arabic speaking lands and which was called Judeo-Arabic – Arabic written in Hebrew letters). Therefore, the practice of storing these writings in a geniza stemmed from the mere fact that they were written in Hebrew letters. Although some documents written in Arabic letters were also found among the many writings, it appears that the geniza practice stemmed from the sanctity ascribed to Hebrew characters in general, due to their association with sacred texts.[[22]](#footnote-22) Therefore, not only what was said in the texts, but also their physical aspects – were treated with the same reverence characteristic of a sacred object. The aspect of sanctity was inherent in the use of Hebrew letters, beyond the content conveyed. [[23]](#footnote-23)

**The Importance of the Hebrew Text in the Jewish Experience**

The immense importance of the Hebrew text in the Jewish experience, as reflected in the geniza practice, has accompanied the Jewish people throughout its existence. What is unique about the Hebrew language, claims researcher Stephen Lubell, is the intimate connection between the Jewish religion and the Hebrew alphabet. [[24]](#footnote-24)In rabbinic literature, Hebrew is normally called “the holy tongue”. This expression appears as early as the Mishna in Sotah 7:A “the following may be recited in any language: the section concerning the suspected woman,[4](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_4)  the confession made at the presentation of the tithe,[5](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_5)  the *shema'*,[6](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_6)  the 'prayer',[7](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_7) ...the following are recited in the holy tongue:[11](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_11)  the declaration made at the offering of the firstfruits,[12](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_12)  the formula of *halizah*,[13](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_13)  the blessings and curses,[14](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_14)  the priestly benediction,[15](https://halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_32.html#32a_15)..."[[25]](#footnote-25) When interpreted narrowly, the expression “holy tongue” does not refer to just any kind of Hebrew, but rather exclusively to Biblical Hebrew. A more inclusive interpretation would include a combination of Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic found in Rabbinic Hebrew used to write Torah literature from the Middle Ages until today[[26]](#footnote-26). In the view of the early scholars, *the Rishonim*, the holy tongue was the language of the bible, as opposed to the language of the scholars. In the 16th century, Lubell claims, Hebrew was considered the mother of all languages (in Latin: Hebraica est linguagem mater), indicating a belief that Hebrew was spoken in the Garden of Eden. The Hebrew letter is embedded with religious functionality from the minute the Hebrew letters are carved into the tablets of the covenant which presented the ten commandments to the People of Israel. This had a direct impact on the development of the Hebrew alphabet, which cannot be compared to the development of Greek and Latin characters. [[27]](#footnote-27)

During the Babylonian Exile, the Hebrew language remained a unifying factor among the Jews who were distanced from their land, and it was preserved by the exiles who longed for the day when they would return to their land. However, the long exile forced upon the Jewish people after the destruction of the second temple ended the use of Hebrew as a living language, and it was rendered marginal in the face of Aramaic which was spoken by all. Hebrew, which had been spoken for more than 1300 years, ceased to serve as a living language around the second century CE, and was replaced as an everyday spoken language by the Lingua Franca of the period, Aramaic (the international spoken language which was widespread in the Assyrian Empire and afterwards in the Babylonian Empire). [[28]](#footnote-28) The Jews ceased to use Hebrew as a daily spoken language and it was transformed into a language that served exclusively for the purposes of prayer in synagogues in exile. The Jews became integrated in the countries they immigrated to and spoke the languages of the places where they lived. Over the years, influences from those local languages began to enter into Hebrew and new dialects of Jews in exile developed, which were written in Hebrew letters: Judeo Arabic which was spoken by Jews in Arab countries, and Yiddish and Ladino in Eastern Europe and Spain. [[29]](#footnote-29)

Following this, the Hebrew language was relegated to religious ritual and Jewish law matters, and served primarily as a written language. Thus, the intimate connection between the Jewish religion and Hebrew characters grew even stronger.[[30]](#footnote-30) As early as the first century BCE, processes to preserve Hebrew characters in the different Hebrew sacred texts commenced, while formulating rules and regulations for writing in Hebrew characters.[[31]](#footnote-31) These regulations included the stipulation that the characters should not be combined, but rather each character should be written individually. This prevented the development of combinations of different letters. The ongoing preservation of the shape of each and every character prevented changes that occur independently in the process of writing. [[32]](#footnote-32)

When Hebrew speech ceased entirely among Jews who lived in the Land of Israel and the diaspora in the beginning of the middle ages, in different centers throughout the world (in the Land of Israel, in Babylonia and in Yemen) groups of Jewish authors and copyists, began to develop. These groups engaged in preserving the suitable manner of reading the Tanakh text, in order to create a common version for all Jewish communities in the diaspora. For this purpose, the Masoretes invented the vowel system, and chanting trope (which denoted the correct tune for reading) were created. The Masoretes also added comments and compositions that help maintain the precision of the text. The Masoretes did not yet develop grammatical reasoning, rather they concentrated primarily on recording the manner of chanting and the wording of the text, and in practice created a kind of "recording" of the version of the Torah as known in their time. The most widespread version today, which was set down as the accepted version, is the version of the Masoretes from Tiberias.

Hebrew again became a living and spoken language at the end of the 19th century in the Land of Israel (Palestine) as part of the national movement called “the revival of the Hebrew Language”, and its most prominent proponent was Eliezer Ben Yehuda. [[33]](#footnote-33) In their attempts to revive Hebrew and define its new roles, members of this movement relied primarily on Biblical Hebrew, but also drew on rabbinic traditions, the language of the sages and the Hebrew that was used in the diaspora until the beginning of the contemporary period. Thus, following two thousand years of disuse, Hebrew again served as a spoken language in the Land of Israel, a kind of "resurrection from the dead", and the language became a cultural and national symbol of the Jewish people in Israel. [[34]](#footnote-34)

**Development of the Hebrew Alphabet**

Due to the unique status it enjoyed as the language of the Tanakh, Hebrew continued to play a role in religious contexts even after it had ceased completely to be spoken as an everyday language, and reading it was like being transported into a sacred space. “The Jewish tradition perceived the Hebrew alphabet as sacred”, writes researcher Shani Avni. The shape of the letters and the order of their appearance were also considered sacred and contained a deep religious meaning. [[35]](#footnote-35)

The ancient Hebrew alphabet is a version of the Phoenecian alphabet, which was customary throughout the Land of Israel, in the Southern kingdom (Yehuda) and the Northern kingdom (Shomron), beginning in the first century BCE. This writing is called “ancient Hebrew writing”. The Phoenecian writing itself developed from the Proto-Canaanite which was common throughout the Land of Israel – Canaan starting in the seventeenth century BCE. A small number of remnants of the ancient Hebrew writing have been found in the area of the Land of Israel, and they are dated approximately from the tenth century BCE to the third century CE. These remnants include wedding certificates carved in stone, mosaics, and a few manuscripts. [[36]](#footnote-36)

The long reigns of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires in large parts of the Near East until the fourth century BCE established Aramaic, the Lingua Franca (international language) of the area during this period as the main language of the Jews who lived first in the Land of Israel and later in the Babylonian Exile. During the 6th to 2nd centuries BCE, from the period of Yehuda to the Hashmonean kings, ancient Hebrew characters were still used, mixed with Aramaic characters, but between the second and the first centuries BCE, use of ancient Hebrew characters ceased among Jews, except for symbolic or sacred uses (a specific variation continued to be used among the Samaritans). During the first centuries CE, the form of the Aramaic characters crystallized, as used among the Jews, and it adopted its “square” shape, which serves as the prototype for today’s Hebrew writing.[[37]](#footnote-37)

At the end of the first millenium CE, changes occurred in Hebrew characters, and stylistic changes began to appear in the form of handwriting. From fancy letters with dramatic decorative characteristics, the letters became more simplified and were "cleaned" of their decorations, although they continued to have a calligraphic feel [illustrations 7 – 8]. This intermediate stage led Hebrew calligraphy to a further stage of simplification, to modular letterpress carved from wood. [[38]](#footnote-38)With the invention of the printing press, and about 25 years after the publication of the Gutenberg Bible in Latin, the first book was published in Hebrew, in 1475 in Calabria, Italy. It was Rashi's commentary on the Torah, [[39]](#footnote-39) which falls under the category of religious literature.[[40]](#footnote-40) The first printers who worked in Italy were mostly immigrants from Germany and France, and therefore the first types of printing were based on the Ashkenazic style (Rashi script represents these influences). However, these first attempts did not succeed greatly, and in the end the square letter form, which is based on the Sephardic style, became the more widely used form (even when Ashkenazic stylistic characteristics were added to it). [[41]](#footnote-41)

“But first of all, I would like to draw a new Hebrew character, which is different from any character that ever existed before. It will put an end to the curls, the decoration, the multiple meanings, the flourishes! [...] There is a need for new characters, characters that are straight, clear and hard-edged, without Talmudic complications, moldy Arabesques, wings or dying chickens, without funeral processions, without asterisks and circles – strong letters, prouder than military statues, more intimidating than monsters of stone, like the giant in which the futuristic songs of the large cities are written, with exclamation marks like chimneys, Pentateuchs like telegraphs, verses like electrical towers... we need a clear character, full of sunlight, without regulations, rules or protective ordinances! We will demolish the old characters, remove them from the world and turn them into porridge!" [[42]](#footnote-42)

**The Beginning of the Hebrew Press in the Land of Israel**

Until the modern period, the Tanakh was published only by Christian printers who operated outside the Land of Israel. With the beginning of Jewish immigration to Israel and the commencement of the project to revive the Hebrew language, Hebrew printing presses also began to develop in the Land of Israel. However, only after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was the first edition of a complete Tanakh in Hebrew published by Koren Publishers, in 1962. The text of this version was treated with precision in accordance with the rules of the Jewish Masoretes, and many graphic innovations were included therein, including designing a unique typeface for this Tanakh. This Tanakh was called "Koren", after the individual who initiated the work and founder of the publishing house, Eliyahu Korngold (or his shorter, Hebrew name, Koren). In addition, from the moment of publication, this Tanakh became the official Tanakh of the State of Israel, and the State's presidents took their oaths of loyalty on it.[[43]](#footnote-43) The Koren typeface was designed in 1957. Its design is based primarily on manuscripts from the Middle Ages in the Sephardic style, but it appears that it also incorporates elements from more ancient traditions. "The first Hebrew prints and ancient manuscripts served as a source and a foundation. However, I was interested in a character with a modern feel [...] a completely new form to print the bible," Koren said about designing the typeface. [[44]](#footnote-44)

The main innovation brought by the Koren typeface was providing a comprehensive solution to the problem of vowels and trope symbols, which had previously been common in Tanakhs: vowels and trope symbols overlapped, or for example bumped into the top of the letter "lamed". The Koren Tanakh found innovative solutions for many of the obstacles in Hebrew typesetting, which had plagued the Jewish publication project from the outset, as a result of technological innovations and cultural developments that occurred over time.

In addition, Koren created two similar versions of the typeface that were designated for print: one for the Tanakh, and the second for other books. The difference is not apparent in each and every character in the typeface, yet the alphabet intended for "other books" was easily distinguishable since it was far more geometrical than the version designated for printing the Tanakh. From the time the mold for the typeface was created (in both of its versions) it appears that use of the "secular version" was highly unusual and did not become widespread among the general public. "It is possible that the association of the Koren typeface with the Tanakh and the high level of similarity between both versions, prevented the "secular" version from being adopted in the commercial field". [[45]](#footnote-45)

Throughout Jewish history, constant changes and developments have occurred in the concept of the book. These changes represent the relationship of many generations of Jews to the spiritual object. The importance of its unity and the sanctity of its structural completeness enabled change and creativity, interpretation and rules, and the presence of "the book" in the center of a constant mutual dialogue with the ancient traditions of the Jewish people.

Gershom Scholem, who dealt with the Jewish people’s close connection to its writings, views this historical connection between the people and the book as a truly unbreakable link “because they not only preserved the book but lived within it”. [[46]](#footnote-46) He ends his essay on "the People of the Book" with a question: "today, when the immoral appears inevitable, does the bible still draw us into reading? Is there anything else the People of the Book can do with their book? Will the time ever come when it will fall silent? I am convinced that the existence of this people is far more dependent on the answer to this question, than on the ups and downs of politics. [[47]](#footnote-47)

1. All biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. B. Dalmatzki – Fishler, “Passes Like a Common Thread”, in *“Today’s Compounds and the Historical Dictionary”*, Lashoneinu Laam 57, A (2007), pgs. 35 – 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Elective Affinities, translated from the German by H. M. Waidson, (London: Alma Classics) 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MichaelCoogan, *The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1–2; Tod Linafelt*, The Hebrew Bible as Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016), pp. 2–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Riches, *The Bible: A very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Louis Ginzberg*,* ”Ezra”, *The Legends of the Jews,* trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909), Vol. IV, p. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shalom Tsabar, Torah and Magic: The Torah Scroll and its Accessories as Magical Objects in Jewish Culture in Europe and the Islamic Lands (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1999) p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A scribe is an individual who engages in preparing Torah scrolls, tefillin, mezuzahs and megillas. Jewish religious meaning is ascribed to this act, and it is subject to clear rules that apply to the individual who engages in this craft, the materials used, and the manner of writing.

See: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/torah-scroll/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A very long and detailed set of rules has been formulated for the proper and exact writing of each and every character in a Torah scroll, kri v ktiv (differences in the way the word is written and chanted), characters with unusual forms, the spaces between letters, between lines, between columns, between each Sidra, special designs for poetical sections and more. Great importance as also ascribed to the surface on which the scroll is written (parchment), the manner in which it is prepared, seams between sheets of parchment and the materials used for writing the scroll, all intensifying the level of respect accorded to the scroll. See above, Tzabar, *supra* Note 10, pgs. 149-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gershom Scholem, "The People of the Book", in **Another Thing** (Od Davar), (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1989), p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mordechai (Max) Shatner, **The Success of the Storytellers: How Jewish Culture Cultivates Unusual Individuals** (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 2014), p. 125, 206-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Norman Solomon, *Judaism: A very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996-2014), p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Scholem *supra*, note 12, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, pgs. 160-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heinrich Heine as quoted in Scholem, *supra* note 12 . [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Malachi Beit-Arié, *Hebrew Codicology: Historical and Comparative Typology of Hebrew Medieval Codices Based on Documentation of the Extant Dated Manuscripts Using Quantitative Approach* (Pre-Print version 2020), pp. 396-399. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid; see also: David Nathan Myers, *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), pp. 60–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In modern times the ancient manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, also called: "Qumran Scrolls" or "Geniza Scrolls", were also discovered. The writing of these manuscripts is dated to the period between the third century BCE and the first century CE. They were discovered in Israel from 1947 – 1956 in eleven caves adjacent to Qumran (Arabic: خربة قمران) on the Northwest shore of the Dead Sea, alongside other scrolls found in the Judean Desert. The scrolls are written primarily in Hebrew and are considered one of the most important archaeological findings in scholarship on the Land of Israel and Jewish History. See: Timothy H. Lim, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005/2017), pp. 19–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dr. Stephen Lubell, “Hebrew Typography: from the Sacred to the Mundane”, *Typo/graphic*, 41 (1991), p 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Taken from the Soncino Translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Jack Fellman, *Contributions to the Sociology of Language [CSL]: The Revival of Classical Tongue: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew language* (The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton 1973), p 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Adi Stern, Some Guidelines and Recommendations for the Design of a Hebrew Book Typeface (Reading: University of Reading 2003), pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Fellman, op.cit. note 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Henry Friedlander, "The Basis of the Development of Hebrew Script and Latin Script", **Hed Hadfus** 1, 39 (1955). See also Ada Yardeni, The Book of Hebrew Script (Jerusalem: Carta 1991), pgs. 43 – 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Friedlander, *supra* note 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Fellman, op.cit. note 27, p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Shani Avni, *The First Multi-Style Typeface Family by Ismar David*. (Master’s Dissertation, University of Reading, 2016), p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Stern, op.cit note 28, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Moshe Spitzer, “About Our Letters”**: *Alei Ayin*: In Honor of Salman Schocken Upon Reaching the Age of 70** (Jerusalem: 1948 – 1952), pp. 487 – 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Rabbi Shlomo Yizhaki, otherwise known as Rashi, was a scholar active in France known as one of the founders of French Jewry in the Middle Ages. His is considered the most important commentator on the Tanakh and the Talmud. His life’s work and interpretations had a great impact on modelling the image of Judaism. Rashi’s interpretations of the Tanakh demonstrate the co-existence and merging of two basic modes of interpretation: literal and figurative. Rashi’s commentaries incorporate elements from the world of literature, in order to expand and deepen the connection to the original writings. See: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rashi>. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Stern, op.cit note 28, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Dan Tzalka, **A Thousand Hearts** (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1991), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Adi Stern, “Designing the Hebrew Character in the First Century of the State of Israel”, in Ada Vardi (editor), **Changing Forms: The Design Work of Moshe Shpitzer, Francesca Baruch and Henry Friedlander** (Jerusalem: the Israel Museum 2015 – 2016), pp. 54 – 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Scholem, *supra* note 12, p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)