

ABCDEFGF Family Edition

מדרש
אותיות
דרבי
עקיבא

Otiot D'Rabbi Akiba

The Letters of Rabbi Akiba
With Translation and Elucidation



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Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva — The Letters of Rabbi Akiva

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Sample edition

BS"D

*With heartfelt gratitude to Hashem,
this sefer is lovingly dedicated
in loving memory of*

**R' Avraham ben Yaakov z"l
and Sarah bas Moshe a"h**

*who cherished every letter of the holy Torah
and lived by its light*

The ABCDEFG Family

(full-page dedication — sample)

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The Torah of the Letters

Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva—also known as *Alef Beis DeRabbi Akiva*—is one of the most remarkable works in the world of Midrash. Its subject is nothing less than the Hebrew alphabet: the twenty-two sacred letters through which the Torah was given, through which the words of prophecy were written, and through which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought His world into being. Yet the letters that appear in this Midrash are not treated as lifeless signs. Each one possesses a name, a form, a numerical value, a place within the order of the *alef-beis*, and an inner world of Torah. Their strokes and crowns, their openings and closures, and even the words that may be drawn from their names become entrances into *aggadah*, *mussar*, theology, the praise of Heaven, the destiny of Yisrael, and the mysteries of Creation.

The Midrash proceeds in the manner of Chazal. A letter may be opened through *notarikon*, its name read as an abbreviated sentence. It may be interpreted through its shape, through another word that begins with it, through a verse in Tanach, or through its relationship to the letters that stand before and after it. A single letter may teach the obligation of truthful speech, the purpose of *shirah*, the order of Creation, the form of a letter in *ksav Ashuris*, or the reward prepared for the righteous. The work moves freely between the revealed and the hidden, but its purpose is consistently one of Torah: to train the eye to see that no element of the sacred text is empty and that every detail may bear witness to its Creator.

The opening chapter offers a fitting doorway into the entire work. Alef is read as ***emes lamed picha***, “teach your mouth truth,” and in reverse as ***picha lamed emes***, “your mouth—teach it truth.” The Midrash then explains that the Holy One Himself is called Truth; His throne, His words, His judgments, and His ways are all truth. A second exposition reads Alef as ***eftach lesbon peh***, “I shall open the tongue of the mouth.” From this the Midrash unfolds a vision of all Creation engaged in praise: heaven and earth, seas and rivers, mountains and hills, man and ministering angel. The world was created for *shirah*, and the human mouth fulfills its highest purpose when it speaks truth and gives praise to Hashem. These themes—close reading, moral demand, cosmic order, and the sanctification of speech—are characteristic of *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva* as a whole.

Because the work speaks of sacred names, angels, crowns, and the heavenly order, it has sometimes been mistaken for a book of Kabbalah in the narrower sense, inaccessible except to a few. That description is misleading. Its teachings are certainly exalted, as are all the words of Chazal, and some passages approach the concealed dimensions of Torah. Nevertheless, Nusach Aleph and Nusach Beit belong primarily to the revealed world of Midrash. Their arguments can be followed through verses, wordplay, the forms of the letters, and the explanations of the Rishonim. They ask for reverence and careful study, not for the reader to abandon the plain meaning of their words.

Rabbi Akiva and the Crowns of the Torah

The work bears the name of Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, the great Tanna whose Torah stands at the heart of the transmission of the Oral Law. Chazal trace the great streams of the Mishnah and *baraita* through the academy of Rabbi Akiva, and the Gemara portrays him as the master who could derive “mounds upon mounds of laws” from the crowns of the letters.¹ After his passing, Chazal said, “the arms of Torah ceased”; Rashi explains this as a reference to the depth of reasoning by which the reasons of the Oral Torah were joined to the fine details of Scripture—its extra letters, unusual expressions, and changing forms.²

That portrait is the natural setting for this Midrash. *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva* preserves the conviction that the letters of Torah are themselves vessels of teaching. Rabbi Akiva does not merely ask what a word means. He asks what Alef means, why Beis has its particular form, why one letter bears a crown while another does not, and what the sequence of the alphabet discloses about the will of its Author. The attribution is therefore not incidental to the book’s title; it expresses the particular path of Torah associated by tradition with Rabbi Akiva—the path that finds significance even in the smallest written form.

At the same time, the text before us has traveled through many generations of oral teaching, manuscript copying, excerpting, and printing. Like other ancient Midrashim, its received form contains textual variants, occasional lacunae, and passages preserved more fully in one witness than in another. This history does not diminish its holiness or its value. On the contrary, the labor of the Rishonim, copyists, printers, and later editors allows us to hear teachings that might otherwise have been lost.

Nusach Aleph and Nusach Beit

The present volume contains the two principal forms traditionally known as **Nusach Aleph** and **Nusach Beit**. The word *nusach* should not mislead the reader. These are not simply two manuscripts offering minor variants of the same paragraph-by-paragraph composition. They are distinct but closely related presentations of the Torah of the letters, and they are best understood as companion parts of a broader midrashic tradition.

Nusach Aleph proceeds through the letters with extended expositions built from *notarikon*, verses, names, forms, and associations. It frequently develops a short observation into a wide theological or moral teaching. The chapter on Alef, for example, joins the form and name of the letter to truth, the throne of Heaven, the song of Creation, Adam HaRishon, the ministering angels, and the destiny of man in this world and the World to Come. Elsewhere the same method opens discussions of Torah, reward and punishment, the names of the Holy One and of the angels, the future redemption, and the spiritual structure of Creation.

Nusach Beit is shorter in many places but no less important. Its best-known opening describes all twenty-two letters descending and standing before the Holy One, each requesting that the world be created through it. Beginning with Tav and proceeding backward, the letters present their merits and are answered according to the other meanings or future events associated with them. The drama culminates in the choice of Beis for *Bereishis* and in the unique honor accorded to Alef.

¹ Menachos 29b. On Rabbi Akiva’s central place in the transmission of the Oral Torah, see Sanhedrin 86a.

² Sotah 49b and Rashi ad loc., as cited in the Hebrew editor’s introduction.

This form of the Midrash also contains teachings that became important to the Rishonim in their discussions of the shapes of the letters, the crowns, and the writing of *Sifrei Torah*, *tefillin*, and *mezuzos*.

The relationship between the two is visible in the literature of the Rishonim, who often cite teachings from either form simply as *Alef Beis DeRabbi Akiva* or *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva*, without distinguishing “Aleph” from “Beit.” This suggests that they encountered the material as one recognized body of Midrash. Manuscript evidence likewise shows that the two could circulate together. The traditional labels remain useful for navigation, but the reader should remember that they name two complementary arrangements rather than two rival versions from which only one must be chosen.

The Hebrew textual tradition also contains additional material sometimes printed under the title **Nusach Gimmel**. That material lies outside the scope of the present work. **This English edition translates and explains Nusach Aleph and Nusach Beit only.**

An Ancient and Widely Used Midrash

The age and authority of *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva* are reflected not only in its traditional attribution but also in the breadth of its reception. Its language and method belong to the world of ancient Midrash, and later authorities treated it as part of the corpus of *baraitot* transmitted after the Mishnah. Rabbi Shmuel HaNagid, in his *Mevo HaTalmud*, counts “the Letters of Rabbi Akiva” among the early works preserved by the sages, alongside the collections associated with Rabbi Chiya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, and the *Mechilta* of Rabbi Yishmael.³

Evidence of the work’s antiquity also survives in early *piyyut*. Rabbi Elazar HaKalir alludes to teachings found in both Nusach Aleph and Nusach Beit: that the world was prepared through the second letter, Beis, while “Anochi” begins with the first letter, Alef; and that Alef waited through twenty-six generations until it was placed at the head of the Aseres HaDibros. Rabbi Shlomo ben Yehudah HaBavli describes the twenty-two letters standing before their Creator and Beis opening like a doorway, themes that parallel the Midrash closely. A *yotzer* attributed to the early paytan Rabbi Binyamin follows the letters in the order and manner of Nusach Aleph.⁴ These poetic witnesses are especially valuable, for the early paytanim regularly built their compositions upon Midrashim known in their batei midrash.

The introduction to the Hebrew edition also records a reference from a contemporary of Rav Saadia Gaon, placing an identifiable mention within the Geonic age. Whether preserved in direct citation, in *piyyut*, or through a parallel Midrash, the evidence shows that the teachings of this work were known well before the surviving printed editions. The compiler of *Midrash Mishlei* appears to direct the reader back to an exposition of Lamed found in *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva*, and *Pereq Shirah* may likewise preserve and employ its conception of Creation’s song.⁵

³ Rabbi Shmuel HaNagid, *Mevo HaTalmud*, s.v. *veha-baraita*; cited in the introduction to *Batei Midrashos* and in the Hebrew editor’s introduction.

⁴ See the introduction of Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer to *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva*, discussing the Shavuot *piyyutim* of Rabbi Elazar HaKalir, Rabbi Shlomo ben Yehudah HaBavli, and Rabbi Binyamin.

⁵ *Midrash Mishlei* 13; compare the exposition of Lamed in *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva*. On *Pereq Shirah*, see Wertheimer’s introduction and the parallels noted in the annotated Hebrew edition.

The Rishonim and the Authority of the Work

The most powerful testimony to the place of this Midrash is the number and stature of the Rishonim who cite it. They did not regard it as an obscure book of letter-mysticism. They drew upon it for *derashah*, *mussar*, *aggadah*, eschatology, and practical questions concerning the sacred script.

Rashi appears to use its interpretation of the words *nitnah rosh* in the episode of the spies, where “head” is understood as a term associated with idolatry.⁶ Rabbeinu Tam cites *Alef Beis De-Rabbi Akiva* in his *Tikkun Sefer Torah* when discussing the form of the Yud and the precision demanded of a *sofer*. He writes that one whose craft is the “work of Heaven” should understand these teachings and perform the mitzvah properly. The *Sefer HaTerumah*, the *Hagabos Maimoniyos*, the *Raavyah*, and the *Manhig* likewise invoke the work in connection with the forms of the letters and the writing of *STaM*.⁷ Their use of the Midrash demonstrates that its interpretations were not merely homiletical ornaments; they helped preserve the traditional visual grammar of the Torah scroll.

Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra states in the introduction to *Safah Berurah* that “the letters of Rabbi Akiva contain *mussar*.”⁸ The Baalei HaTosafos draw upon the teaching that the Torah begins with Beis as an allusion to the two destructions. Rabbi Elazar of Worms, the Rokeach, cites the Midrash repeatedly: its opening instruction to “teach your mouth truth,” its praise of the brokenhearted, its teaching concerning the future Kaddish of Zerubbabel, and its interpretations of individual letters. Material from the work also entered writings associated with *Sefer Raziel* and the Ashkenazic pietistic tradition.⁹

The Ramban quotes it explicitly in *Shaar HaGemul*. One citation concerns the resurrection of the dead and the special status of Eretz Yisrael; another concerns the Day of Judgment and the kingdom of Beis David in the sixth millennium.¹⁰ Rabbeinu Yitzchak of Vienna begins the *Or Zarua* with his own “Commentary on the Alef-Beis,” expressly founded upon *Alef Beis De-Rabbi Akiva*. He cites the Midrash’s opening—“Alef teaches: teach your mouth truth”—as evidence of Rabbi Akiva’s method of expounding the letters, and he returns to it elsewhere in the work.¹¹

Rabbeinu Bachya cites the exposition “Kuf—this is the Creator.” Rabbi Estori HaParchi quotes both the teaching that Eretz Yisrael is the land whose dead will live first and an alphabetical numerical teaching that is no longer present in the received text. *Yalkut Shimoni* quotes the Midrash by name at the beginning of Bereishis—“Rabbi Akiva said: These are the twenty-two letters through which the entire Torah was given”—and elsewhere transmits complete passages without repeating the title.¹² The *Rokeach*, *Or Zarua*, Ramban, Rabbeinu Tam, the Baalei HaTosafos,

⁶ Rashi to Bamidbar 14:4, as compared with Nusach Aleph, the exposition of Reish.

⁷ Rabbeinu Tam, *Tikkun Sefer Torah*; *Sefer HaTerumah*, end of Hilchos Tefillin; *Hagabos Maimoniyos*, Hilchos Tefillin 1:19; *Raavyah*, cited by *Baruch She’amar*; *Sefer HaManhig*, Hilchos Tefillin.

⁸ Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, introduction to *Safah Berurah*.

⁹ *Rokeach*, Bologna ed., fols. 5, 7a, and 9b, and §362; compare *Sefer Raziel* at the passages cited in Wertheimer’s introduction.

¹⁰ Ramban, *Shaar HaGemul*, near its conclusion; see also his discourse *Toras Hashem Temimah* for the second citation.

¹¹ *Or Zarua*, vol. 1, “Peirush al Alef-Beis,” §§1–2; see also §§21 and 28.

¹² Rabbeinu Bachya, *Kad HaKemach*, s.v. *Berachah*, and commentary to Shemos, Parashas Bo; Rabbi Estori HaParchi, *Kafzor VaFerach*, chs. 10 and 25; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Bereishis, remez 1, and the further passages catalogued in Wertheimer’s introduction.

Rabbeinu Bachya, and the other authorities who employ it reveal how widely the Midrash circulated across the Jewish world: Ashkenaz and Provence, Spain and Eretz Yisrael, the academies of *halachah* and the schools of *piyyut* and *sod* alike.

From Manuscript to Printed Book

The textual history of *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva* is itself a story of preservation. Nusach Aleph was first printed in Constantinople around the year 5276 (1515–1516), and again in Venice in 5306 (1545–1546). Those editions lacked complete teachings and, in places, entire lines. A Krakow edition of 5339 (1578–1579), based on another manuscript, supplied additional passages and also printed Nusach Beit. Later editions appeared in Amsterdam, Shklov, Leipzig, and Piotrków, and the work was included in the great midrashic collections of the nineteenth century.¹³

No single printed text, however, was free of omission or corruption. A passage in Nusach Beit could end with isolated words whose relationship was no longer intelligible; comparison with a fuller New York manuscript revealed that a substantial section had fallen out. Elsewhere a scribe omitted proof-verses while retaining the exposition that depended upon them. Such difficulties are common in works copied for centuries, especially when copyists confronted unusual letterforms, strings of divine or angelic names, or passages whose structure they did not immediately recognize.

An important stage in the recovery of the text came through Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer, the renowned scholar and publisher of *Batei Midrashos*. He worked from a precious Bukharan manuscript copied by Rabbi Elnasan HaKohen, son of Rabbi Eliezer HaKohen. The codex contained 311 folios of thick reddish paper, written on both sides in an old Rashi-like hand, twenty-two lines to a page, with marginal supplements for material omitted by the scribe. Its unusual Alefs and Zayins, its scribal corrections, and even its errors provided evidence of a faithful copying tradition rather than a later rewriting according to taste.¹⁴ Wertheimer compared this witness with earlier printings and other manuscript fragments, choosing the strongest reading while recording significant variants.

The annotated Hebrew edition underlying the present translation continues this work of recovery. It draws upon manuscript witnesses and the earlier printed tradition, distinguishes clear additions and restorations, and surrounds the Midrash with the *Biur*, *Pesher Davar*, and further explanations gathered from *Midrash HaItamari*, *Avraham Azkor*, *Be'er Moshe*, and other sources. The result is not merely a diplomatic reproduction of one manuscript. It is a learned attempt to make the received Midrash readable while allowing the reader to see where a wording is uncertain, where a verse appears to have fallen out, and where the commentators preserve another interpretation.

The Purpose of This English Edition

The present edition seeks to open this ancient Midrash to the English-speaking Torah reader without flattening its language or replacing its method with a modern paraphrase. Each unit there-

¹³ For the publication history, see Wertheimer's introduction: Constantinople, ca. 5276; Venice, 5306; Krakow, 5339 and ca. 5361; Amsterdam, 5468; Shklov, 5545; the Leipzig *Beis HaMidrash* edition; and Piotrków, 5644.

¹⁴ Wertheimer's description of the Bukharan manuscript appears at the conclusion of his introduction to *Batei Midrashos* and is reproduced in the introductory material to the annotated Hebrew edition.

fore begins with the Hebrew text and a close English translation. The commentary then explains the Midrash's use of *notarikon*, wordplay, letter-form, and proof-verses; identifies its parallels in Chazal and the Rishonim; and records important textual variants where they affect the meaning.

Certain Hebrew terms are retained because no single English word can carry their full content. *Torah*, *Midrash*, *aggadah*, *mussar*, *shirah*, *notarikon*, *tagin*, *ksav Ashuris*, and *Olam Haba* belong to the conceptual world of the work. They are explained as they arise, but they are not stripped of their traditional sound. Likewise, names of Torah books and sages generally follow familiar frum usage: *Yirmiya*, *Yeshaya*, *Tehillim*, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbeinu Tam, and the Ramban.

The commentary does not attempt to force every exposition into a single category. Some teachings are primarily moral, some exegetical, some scribal, and some belong to the concealed order of Creation. Often the same passage operates on several levels at once. The reader is invited to follow the Midrash on its own terms: to attend carefully to every letter, to compare the verses it summons, and to recognize that the written Torah and the Oral Torah illuminate one another.

Above all, this edition is intended as a work of Torah study. *Otiyot DeRabbi Akiva* teaches that truth must be trained upon the mouth, that all Creation owes song to its Maker, and that even the smallest crown upon a letter may contain instruction. Its long journey—from the beis midrash of Rabbi Akiva, through the teachings of the paytanim, the Geonic age, and the Rishonim, through fragile manuscripts and early presses, into the hands of later editors—testifies to the devotion with which Klal Yisrael has guarded not only the words of Torah but its very letters.

May the study of these sacred letters deepen our attachment to Torah, refine our speech in truth, and join our voices to the *shirah* of all Creation before the Holy One, blessed be He.



The Letter Alef: Truth as the Foundation of Creation and the World's Dependence on Song

SUMMARY

The chapter opens the entire alef-beis with two complementary expositions of the letter Alef, each built on *notarikon* read first in order and then in reverse. The first reading treats אֵלֶּיךָ as אֵלֶּיךָ — “teach your mouth truth” — and its reversal, פִּיךָ לִימַד אֶמֶת, — “your mouth, teach it truth.” The Midrash grounds the demand for truth in the nature of the Holy One Himself, who “is called truth,” whose throne, words, judgments, and ways are all truth, marshaling a chain of proof-verses from Yirmiya, Yeshaya, and Tehillim.

The second exposition reads אֶפְתָּה לְשׁוֹן פִּיהֶם — “I shall open the tongue of the mouth” — and its reversal. Here the letter becomes the vehicle for the Midrash’s great cosmological claim: the Holy One opens the mouths of all flesh so that they may praise and enthrone Him, “for were it not for the song and melody they utter before Me each day, I would not have created My world.” A cascade of verses then demonstrates that every stratum of creation — heavens, earth, seas and rivers, mountains and hills, all the orders of Bereishis, and finally Adam HaRishon himself — sings before the Creator.

The Torah basis is thus almost entirely from Tehillim and the Prophets, read homiletically: verses about God's throne and glory are turned into statements about truth and song, and the doubled *notarikon* readings encode a recurring theme drawn from Chullin 91b — that the song above waits upon the song below, and that human beings precede even the ministering angels in praise. The theological point is twofold: that truthful speech binds a person to the God who is Truth and secures both worlds, and that the very purpose of creation is the *shira* that rises from the mouths of God's creatures.

אֶלֶף רַבִּי אֶקִּיבָא, אֶלֶף, מִהוּ אֶלֶף Rabbi Akiva said: Alef — what is Alef? The Midrash asks after the root of the letter's name. The Biur explains that *Alef* is understood as a form of the Aramaic *ulifna*, “to teach,” so that the question is what this first letter comes to instruct, and the answer will be unfolded through *notarikon* of the word אֶלֶף פִּיהּ. מְלִמַּד שְׁאִמְרָה תוֹרָה אֵימַת לִמַּד פִּיהּ. It teaches that the Torah said: “Teach your mouth truth,” so that you may merit the life of this world. The three letters open as אֵימַת לִמַּד פִּיהּ. The Biur reads this as training oneself to conduct with truth and to guard one's speech, for one whose word is reliable is trusted and lives a settled life in this world. פִּיהּ לִמַּד אֵימַת כְּדֵי שְׁתַּזְכֶּה לַחַיִּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. “Your mouth — teach it truth,” so that you may merit the life of the World to Come. Read now in reverse, פִּיהּ לִמַּד אֵימַת, the phrase describes taking one's mouth and making it a vessel for truth so that truth becomes the very course of one's life — a higher rung, which earns the life of the World to Come. As the notes to *Batei Midrashos* observe, once truth becomes habit it becomes

second nature, and then “your mouth teaches truth” of itself.¹ **מִפְּנֵי מָה, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא** Why so? Because the Holy One is called Truth. One must walk in the ways of the Holy One and cleave to his Creator. The Biur notes a second layer folded into the *notarikon*: א’ for the One, the Holy One who is one; ל’ for His throne; and פ’ for “kindness and truth go before His face.” **וְכָסֵאוֹ מֵאֲזַי יוֹשֵׁב עָלָיו בְּאֱמֶת, וּפָנָיו יִקְדְּמוּ חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת, וְכָל דְּבָרָיו דְּבָרֵי אֱמֶת, וְכָל מִשְׁפָּטָיו** and His throne — from of old He sits upon it in truth; and His face — kindness and truth go before it; and all His words are words of truth; and all His judgments are judgments of truth; and all His ways are kindness and truth. The phrase “from of old” (מֵאֲזַי) leans on “Your throne is established of old” (Tehillim 93:2) — the throne that stands from before the world was created, as the Sages teach that the Throne of Glory preceded Creation. **וּמִנֵּין שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נִקְרָא אֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְה’ אֱלֹהִים אֱמֶת** And whence that the Holy One is called Truth? As it is said, “But the Lord God is truth” (Yirmiya 10:10). **וּמִנֵּין שֶׁכֶּסֶאוֹ מֵאֲזַי יוֹשֵׁב עָלָיו בְּאֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְהוּכֹן בְּחֶסֶד כֶּסֶא וְיֹשֵׁב עָלָיו בְּאֱמֶת** And whence that from of old He sits upon His throne in truth? As it is said, “And a throne shall be established in kindness, and one shall sit upon it in truth” (Yeshaya 16:5). **וּמִנֵּין שֶׁפָּנָיו יִקְדְּמוּ חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט מְכוֹן כֶּסֶא, חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת יִקְדְּמוּ פָּנָיו** And whence that kindness and truth go before His face? As it is said, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; kindness and truth go before Your face” (Tehillim 89:15). **וּמִנֵּין שֶׁדְּבָרָיו אֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר רֵאשׁ דְּבָרְךָ** And whence that His words are truth? As it is said, “The beginning of Your word is truth” (Tehillim 119:160). **וּמִנֵּין שֶׁמִּשְׁפָּטָיו אֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר מִשְׁפָּטֵי ה’ אֱמֶת, צֶדֶק וַיַּחֲדוּ** And whence that His judgments are truth? As it is said, “The judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether” (Tehillim 19:10). **וְכָל אֲרָחוֹתָיו חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כָּל אֲרָחוֹת ה’ חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת** and all His ways are kindness and truth, as it is said, “All the ways of the Lord are kindness and truth” (Tehillim 25:10).²

דְּבָר אַחֵר אֶל"ף, אֶפְתָּח לְשׁוֹן פֹּה. וּפֹה לְשׁוֹן אֶפְתָּח Another interpretation: Alef — “I shall open the tongue of the mouth”; and “the mouth — its tongue I shall open.” The letters unfold as **אֶפְתָּח לְשׁוֹן פֹּה** and then in reverse, **פֹּה לְשׁוֹן אֶפְתָּח**. The Biur suggests that the doubling points to the song above and the song below: the ministering angels do not open in song until Yisrael sing below, so that “I shall open the tongue of the mouth” first refers to the mouth opened on earth, and only afterward “the mouth’s tongue I shall open” above. Below, the opening of the mouth precedes the song — first the Holy One opens the mouth and then song is uttered, as it is said, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise” (Tehillim 51:17) — whereas above the angels first come to sing and only then are given leave. **אֶמַר הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אֶפְתָּח לְשׁוֹן פֹּה שָׁל** The Holy One said: I shall open the tongue of the mouth of all flesh and blood. **כָּל בְּנֵי בָשָׂר וְדָם** so that they may

¹ *Biur*; *Batei Midrashos*; cf. Yirmiya 9:4, “they have trained their tongue to speak falsehood.” The doubled *notarikon* is cited by the Rokeach (Bologna ed., fol. 5) and the *Or Zarua* (vol. 1, *Alfa Beisa* §1), and the Match Moshe (*Amud Ha-Torah*, gate 1) links it to the small *alef* and to the penitent’s duty to speak truth (cf. Sheviis 10:8). The New York manuscript lacks the reversed reading; the editor notes a possible dropped phrase (Zichron Aharon ed., notes (ב-ג)). The Be’er Moshe offers a further reading based on Chullin 89a — **אֶל"ף לְמִד פֹּה** as **אֶל"ף** (“make yourself mute — teach your mouth”), reversed to **פִּיךָ לְמִד אֱמֶת**, “the Torah of truth,” at which point one is no longer silent.

² The clause for “all His ways” lacks the *u’minayin* formula found in the others; the editor suggests it may originally have read **וּמִנֵּין שָׁכַל** (Zichron Aharon ed., note (ה)). On the Throne preceding Creation, cf. Nedarim 39b. On the second *notarikon* layer (Alef = the One, His throne, His face), *Biur*, citing *Batei Midrashos*.

³ *Biur; Pesher Davar*; cf. Chullin 91b, that the ministering angels do not sing above until Yisrael sing below. The *Or Zarua* (vol. 1, *Alfa Beisa* §2) reads instead פֶּה (קְדוּשָׁה) אֶפְתָּח לְשׁוֹן, “I shall open a mouth for the language of holiness,” linking it to raising the eyes on high while reciting Kedushah. Variant wordings of the passage appear in the *Or Zarua* and in the New York manuscript (Zichron Aharon ed., notes (1)–(1)).

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and all cattle, creeping things and winged birds; kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all judges of the earth; young men and maidens too, elders together with youths — let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted” (Tehillim 148:9-13). **וּמִנֵּינִי וְגוֹמֵר** **שְׁכָל סִדְרֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית אוֹמְרִים שִׁירָה, שְׁנֹאמֵר מִמְּזֶרַח שָׁמֶשׁ עַד מְבֹאֵי וְגוֹמֵר** And whence that all the orders of Creation utter song? As it is said, “From the rising of the sun to its setting” and so on (Tehillim 113:3). The verse embraces all the orders of Creation that lie between east and west. **וּמִנֵּינִי שְׁאֵף אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן פָּתַח פִּי בְּשִׁירָה, שְׁנֹאמֵר מִזְמֹר שִׁיר לַיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת טוֹב לַהֲדוֹת** **וְגוֹמֵר** **לְשִׁמְךָ עֲלִיּוֹן** And whence that even Adam HaRishon opened his mouth in song? As it is said, “A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day; it is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing praise to Your name, Most High” (Tehillim 92:1-2). The Sages teach that Adam HaRishon composed this psalm, and the Midrash reads it as evidence that from the very beginning both men and angels sing before the Lord. **טוֹב לַהֲדוֹת לָהּ - בְּאֶרֶץ, מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי אָדָם, וְלִזְמֹר לְשִׁמְךָ** **וְגוֹמֵר** **לְשִׁמְךָ עֲלִיּוֹן** - **בְּשָׁמַיִם מְרוֹם, בְּתוֹךְ מַלְאָכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת** “It is good to give thanks to the Lord” — on the earth, from among human beings; “and to sing praise to Your name, Most High” — in the heavens above, among the ministering angels. The Biur observes that here too the human praise on earth is mentioned before the angelic praise above, in keeping with the principle that human beings precede the angels in song. **דָּבָר אַחֵר אֶפְתַּח לְשׁוֹן פֶּה וּפֶה לְשׁוֹן אֶפְתַּח, שְׂאִינִי נֶאֱדָה בְּמִאֲתָיִם** Another interpretation: “I shall open the tongue of the mouth, and the mouth — its tongue I shall open,” for none is fit, among the two hundred [and forty-eight...] The sample breaks off here mid-sentence. As the continuation makes clear, the Midrash goes on to teach that among all the two hundred and forty-eight limbs of a person, only the mouth and tongue are fit to utter song before the Creator, likening the mouth to the sea and its waves.⁵

⁵ Continuation in the *Midrash HaItamari* and *Avraham Azkor*. On the whole chain of Creation’s song, cf. Perek Shirah; on Adam HaRishon’s authorship of Tehillim 92, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 19, Bereishis Rabbah 22:13, Shocher Tov 92, Pesikta DeRav Kahana (*Shuvah*), and Avos DeRabbi Nasan. The doubling of the *Davar Acher* is present in the manuscript as well, though with some scribal corruption in the margin (Zichron Aharon ed., notes (יד)–(יז)).

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Kesser Shem Tov

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