



Beha'alotekha

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

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ASPECTS OF MY FATHER'S PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH HISTORY

Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973) was a Yiddish poet and playwright who was born in Russia, but settled in New York shortly before World War II.

Translated by Daniel Kraft

Translator's Note: This essay, written in Yiddish by Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973), was first published in 1967. In it, Zeitlin—one of the twentieth century's great Yiddish poets and playwrights—introduces his father's philosophical and theological

understanding of Jewish history and of the Jewish people's unique national identity. His father, Hillel

Zeitlin (1872-1942), was a highly influential Yiddish and Hebrew writer and mystic. Hillel Zeitlin was raised in a Hasidic home in what is now Belarus, but left the traditional yeshiva world as a teenager, and became enamored with secular Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers like Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. After World War I, he returned to an Orthodox lifestyle, but with ideas enlivened by his secular studies. In his writing, he articulated a dynamic Jewish mystical theology animated by hasidic sources and by

contemporary philosophy. Zeitlin was murdered in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942; his sole surviving family member was his son Aaron, who was already a respected poet and playwright, and who worked to republish and to disseminate his father's ideas in New York, after the war. Here, Aaron Zeitlin both quotes extensively from, and paraphrases, his father's writings on the nature of Jewish history. The essay is divided into four parts. In the first, Aaron Zeitlin introduces his father's general philosophy of modern history and of anti-semitism. The second section consists of his father's retelling of the first chapter of Jonah, excerpted from a 1938 essay. Part three presents Hillel Zeitlin's understanding of Jonah as a parable for the relationship between the Jewish people and the broader world. In the concluding section, Aaron Zeitlin outlines his, and his father's, general thesis: that the fulfillment of the Jewish historical mission demands the synthesis of seemingly opposite ideas, the paradoxical unity of Jewish particularism, and Jewish universality.

My thanks to the Congress for Jewish Culture for granting me permission to translate this essay, which was taken from Aaron Zeitlin's posthumous collection of Literarische und Philosophische Essays (Literary and Philosophical Essays).

1. The Other Side of Anti-Semitism

In an essay titled "Jacob and Esau," published 56 years ago [in 1911], my father wrote that, alongside the terrible darkness and misfortune that anti-semitism has brought into being, anti-semitism has also had the effect of making "Europe begin to consider Jewry a global

problem." Through this, anti-semitism expressed, in hidden terms, "the concept of *Jews and gentiles*"; it emphasized Jewish particularity, although it did this, of course, with its own aims. Independent of anti-semitism's intentions, this differentiation of Jews, when considered through the philosophy of history, is a positive thing.

That essay by my father is based on the idea that the past is never past: "What once has been is brought to life countless times." If we understand this in the sense of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence," then the past returns "precisely as it was," and if we understand it in the sense of "typical," that is, Darwinian evolution, then the past, when it returns, is "improved, beautified, and deepened." Before I go further I will permit myself, as a digression, to remark that the concept of evolution is a bit misleading here. By "typical evolution," my father really had in mind something closer to the idea of *tikkun*, rectification.

I return to the argument in my father's essay. The eighteenth century either did not see the past, or avoided seeing it, or fought against it tooth and nail. The result was that "the earth became full of altars to the God of revolution; hundreds of thousands of human sacrifices were laid at its feet, and it was not satisfied. This God demanded seas of blood, in order to drown the past in them."

But, through this, the nineteenth century was born, and it was born "smiling at the past: with idealist philosophers on one side, romantics on the other, and learned, serious, non-partisan historical thinkers in the middle."

The future came to this new century with its own claims: "The newborn nineteenth century, however, conceived of the future as a child of the past." In truth, this century too, when it came of age, shattered and destroyed so much, with even "more strength and power than its predecessor." But it did not grow intoxicated by idolizing itself, and did not blind itself with rationalism as the eighteenth century had.

The main thing: that initial smile towards the past became, over time, much more than a passing smile. In its old age, the past that was at first glance shattered began to return to the nineteenth century completely in earnest. In the beginning, this return was chaotic and spectral, jumbled and confused, a wild dance of the dead. But, beginning around the 1890s, signs of continuity and recurrence appeared. Ur-Christendom returned, preached by Tolstoy; medieval Catholicism acquired a "neo"; modern pagans appeared; spirituality took on new forms; old philosophical systems returned to life, old beliefs, and ideas; Europe grew interested in the teachings of Buddha and in the world of Brahmanism. The past wanted to be experienced in a new way. The new pagan, for example, began to understand his own intentions. The same thing for the new Christian.

And the new Jew? He "also wants to know what to do with himself, what is the purpose of his history, what is the purpose of his suffering, what is he in his deepest essence, what is his God, what is his soul, what is his eternity?"

That old hatred of Israel, which was simply a specter from the past, was also reanimated (my father believed this then) with the pulse of an idea that hides, along with calamity and darkness, a will to truly recognize the Jew, if only in order to fight against him. This is, again, according to my father's understanding at that time. But this will forces the modern Jew to recognize himself ("with deep consideration of anti-semitism, there also comes consideration of Jewish thought"), and the honest non-Jewish scholar is compelled to seek the Jew's particular essence in order to arrive at the secret of the Jew's eternity.

These ideas were expressed almost sixty years ago, but the older the young twentieth century grew, the clearer it became that anti-semitism did not intend to recognize the Jew, even if only in order to fight him. The opposite was true: anti-semitism wanted precisely *not* to recognize the Jew, but rather to surround him with lies and false accusations in order to invent a pretext to physically exterminate him. "Intellectual" anti-semitism, again, although it had the pretense of "spirituality," in the final analysis only poured gasoline on the fire of anti-Jewish bloodlust and the ultra-Cainism of which Nazism was the terrible expression.

The truth is that my father, who had warned the masses and the intelligentsia, calling loudly for a new "Exodus from Egypt" years before he wrote the essay under discussion, was exceptionally far from illusions concerning the Jewish situation in the world, just as he had no illusions concerning

humanity in general. If he nevertheless sought, as we see, “a second side” to the gentile’s relationship to the Jews, beyond the biological, it was because such seeking was directly bound to his philosophy of the history of Judaism: aside from the empirical Jew, there is the archetypal Jew, who is the center of world history. All world-historical events revolve around the archetypal Jew and his passage through the generations. The *superior* gentile feels that there lies a secret, a secret he wants to understand. The extent to which he opposes Jews consists precisely in the hidden particularity of the historical Jewish manifestation, which the gentile is not capable of understanding.

Even as late as 1938, in an essay published in the Paris anthology *At the Crossroads*, my father returned to that other side of anti-semitism, which he mentioned in the short essay from 1911. The tone in 1938 is different than in “Jacob and Esau,” but again he points out the hatred towards Jews felt even by those who are “serious, thoughtful, courageous, and fair,” and he raises the question: what is the source of *their* hatred?

Of course, the great majority of anti-semites hate Jews because of an innate cruelty. We have known from time immemorial that the human heart contains tremendous cruelty, “since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth.” This cruelty is not impeded or moderated by the will to do good, as much as it is by the fear that the weak have of the strong, and the strong of those who are even stronger. This cruelty, this malignant energy, that accumulates both in individuals and in nations, seeks an outlet.

Without any other mode of expression, it is unloaded on the weakest of the weak, on the Jews.

In addition to this cruel majority is a minority that hates us not because of cruelty but because of inherited prejudices and ignorance. A portion of this minority consists of those people who could better understand the archetypal Jew’s world historical role, if not for an error. What is that error?

We have come here to a second aspect that is, in order of importance, in fact the first: the national-universal mission of the Jewish people that consists, or must consist, in a synthesis of two things – “a covenant people” and “a light of nations.” But before we come to this synthesis, we need to dwell on a parable with which the essay in *At the Crossroads* opens, and around which it is built. It is an analogy comparing the people Israel, which neglects to pursue the “light of the nations” component of its mission, with the prophet Jonah, who did not want to travel to Nineveh (the world), and because of his flight a storm erupted that should have sunk the ship (humanity).

Given that a paraphrase in my own words would be no more than a shadow of the original source, I quote here (with minor abridgements and, occasionally, small word changes) the text itself.

2. The Parable

A ship swims over the sea. All is peaceful and calm. The sky above: cloudless. The song of the waves below: a hymn to the creator, and a hymn

to the sailor, and a hymn to the captain who steers the ship.

Where does this ship go? To Tarshish. It goes there, where the hustle and bustle of global commerce takes place. The ship overflows with travelers from various nations and lands, with various gods.

A gentle wind escorts the ship. The sun's rays shine on the flat sea. The ship's captain bursts into song, and the travelers join in.

There is only one among these travelers for whom the sun does not shine, for whom the waves do not rhythmically murmur, for whom the angel of the sea does not sing to the creator, for whom the captain does not burst into song, for whom there is no joy in this journey.

They are traveling to Tarshish. There they will buy gold, silver, iron, tin, lead. They will bring it to Tzur and Sidon and every nearby nation. They will acquire treasures and bring them home. Oh, the wives, the children! They wait for their gifts. Before the eyes of their wives there appear: strings of pearls, earrings, nose rings, necklaces, bracelets, shawls, headscarves, spices, and jewels that will gleam in the dark and embellish their eastern beauty. The children imagine: boats with seafaring captains, with bells, with banners, with ponies, with swords, with soldiers, with coral, with driftwood, with toys brought from across the world.

Ah, how happy the fathers will be with the mothers! How happy the beloveds will be; they

imagine their lovers, who will return from Tarshish to throw every treasure at their feet. Each heart is filled with joy and sweet hope.

But the one who knows no joy has nothing to find in Tarshish. He has nothing at all to do there, nothing to buy or to sell. He is a fugitive. He came to Yaffo, found a ship to Tarshish, and climbed on board.

What drives him? What hurries him? He cannot remain in his Hebrew land. There he received a divine commandment: "Go to the great city Nineveh, and call on it, that their wickedness has arisen before me." *Nineveh*? What are Nineveh and its inhabitants to him? Why should he run to some distant land, to people he does not know, and cry out before them that their wickedness overflows every measure, and God's wrath will soon pour over them? Will they hear him, will they understand? Will they throw stones at him? Won't their children run after him, shouting, "lunatic, lunatic!" Won't the jokers in the street spit in his face, grab him, throw him around, put a crown of thorns on his head, set him on a horse, and shout, "Long live this prophet!"

But he cannot remain in his Hebrew land. The divine voice orders him with wind and storm and fire and a still small voice: To Nineveh! Go to Nineveh!

He flees from that land of prophecy. There, in the Hebrew land, the One who created heaven and earth, dry land and sea, is so near, so near. He will travel somewhere foreign, where the divine voice is not so powerfully heard and does not appear so clearly. Perhaps his spirit will find peace.

The Hebrew is lost in his heavy thoughts. Suddenly – boom! Out of nowhere, a vicious storm spreads over the sea. The waves threaten to split the ship to splinters.

Sailors! Where are you? Captain! Where are you? Every traveler cries out to his own god. They throw all their luggage overboard, in order to lighten the ship. Only one of them does not tremble. While all the sailors run, screaming and throwing their belongings into the sea, he lowers himself into a corner of the ship – and falls asleep.

The ship's captain comes: What is the matter with you? How are you sleeping? Go, call upon your God, because *He* will have pity on us; perhaps *He* will help us, and save us from drowning. The desperate travelers wring their hands and raise their eyes to heaven: A sinner is among us! A sinner! Let us cast lots. Who among us is the sinner?

The lot falls on him. *Jonah Ben Amittai*.

And everybody asks him: Tell us, how has this catastrophe befallen us because of *you*? What do you do? Where are you from? What is your homeland? Who are your people?

I am a Hebrew and I serve the God of the heavens, who created the sea and the dry land.

And why does He persecute you?

Because I wanted to flee from Him.

And a dread falls upon these men, and they say to the fugitive: what have you done?

And the storm rages, rages, and is not calm for a single moment. And the men say to the fugitive messenger: what should we do to you in order to calm the sea?

Throw me overboard, into the sea, and the sea will grow calm.

They try to fight their way back to land, and cannot, because the sea rages.

And they call to God: We beg you, Hashem, do not let us drown on account of this man, and do not punish us, please, Hashem. What You have wanted—You have done.

And they take the prophet Jonah and throw him into the sea.

And the raging of the sea is stilled.

3. The Parable's Meaning

From this parable the essay goes, little by little, to the parable's meaning. Let us imagine that this story takes place in our era of air travel. A traveler by air, above the ocean, has an apparatus that allows him to see everything occurring on the ship and on the sea, so that the smallest detail is not lost, although he cannot grasp the essence of the whole. What would someone like this think when he looks down from above at the events around Jonah the prophet? I quote further:

“He sees: a ship is sailing peacefully and calmly. He sees clearly that in the calm atmosphere is not the slightest omen of a coming storm. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a terrible tempest over part of the sea. He sees further, how everybody on the ship, the sailors, the captain, and the passengers, run frantically, in terror. He sees how one man separates himself from the group, and in the moment of the greatest danger lies down to sleep in a corner. What kind of man is this? How can a man go to sleep when death hovers before his eyes? And even more, he sees: everything on the ship is being thrown overboard.

“He sees later how a group of sailors, together with the captain and with the passengers, surround the strange man. They have a conversation with him. And afterwards they take him and throw him into the sea.

“‘Murderers! What are you doing?!’ our air passenger will call out.

“But afterwards he sees that the sea grows still as soon as this strange man is cast away. He thinks: ‘What can this be? The man was probably a terrible sinner. And those who threw him into the sea are pure and upright men.’

“Let us consider how much truth and how much falsehood there is in the judgment of this clear-sighted, clear-thinking observer.

“It is true that the man who was thrown overboard had committed a transgression. It is true that because of him the sea had grown stormy. And it is true that, afterwards, when he

was cast into the sea, it grew calm. But the verdict is *not* true that the man thrown overboard was a sinner and that those who threw him were upright and pure. In truth they were typical creatures of flesh and blood: the sea did not seethe, and was not calmed, because of them. Only the one who was thrown in the water was a holy prophet. He bore the sole transgression: he wanted to flee from God’s mission.

“The air passenger clearly saw everything that occurred, and made logical deductions, but he could not see that which was *invisible to the physical eye*. He could not see the holy life of the one who was thrown into the sea like a sinner, and he could not know that *God was revealed precisely to him*, that precisely through *him* was God’s word to the sinner expressed, that precisely because he was *God’s messenger* was he punished: from those to whom much is given, much is demanded.”

No more. We are already near the parable’s meaning. The prophet, who does not go on his mission to Nineveh, is the Jewish people. The airplane passenger is even more symbolic. What does he mean? He is that non-Jewish minority, the best of the non-Jews, those who, despite their thoughtfulness and virtue, do not know the truth about Jews and Judaism. The people from this group

see the entire Jewish people just as this flier sees the catastrophe on the ship carrying the prophet...

This observer would be distraught to see how the ship totters, and almost sinks, because of one person... This is also what this category of anti-semites remarks, that many great events take place around the Jewish people. But just as this observer from above, who sees only the surface and not the essence, judges falsely that Jonah is the sinner before those who throw him into the sea, while the truth is that Jonah is higher and holier than these people, so too does this category of anti-semites judge falsely in regard to the sinfulness or sinlessness of the Jewish people. They see only the fact that in almost every generation, in almost every land, Jews are persecuted, and they do not grasp that, precisely because the Jewish people is – in its deepest being – holier than other people, it is chosen by supernal providence to carry out a great mission in the world, and because it always has enough strength and will to carry its mission out, the Jewish people suffers more than others.

The key to the essence of the Jewish people is found in Tanakh. Everything we need to know about this people's role is expressed there. In my father's essay, "*Have We Accomplished Our Mission?*" he analyzes the biblical passages that

make clear the link between the Jewish people's essence and its history.

Tanakh, especially in the prophets, outlines the ultimate goal of the Jewish path. "The sense of a journey can be recognized in its culmination... When we find, then, in Tanakh, the *final* point on Israel's path, its end goal, it becomes clear that Israel needs to aspire to *that* point in every epoch of its history."

This raises the question: what does that ultimate goal consist of? My father's answer: a synthesis of universalism and particularity.

4. The Path to the Synthesis

When one learns Tanakh with a clear head and an open heart, free of the exegesis and interpretations that have been constructed over countless generations, and all the more so free of the various stupidities, distortions, and complications of the so-called "bible critics," one sees that Israel is chosen to be a distinct nation, distinct and distinguished, a sacred people, different from all other peoples on the earth. And one sees that, at the exact same time, this people has an explicit role: a mission to the *world*.

Israel, the nation, needs to be – if I may use my own terminology here – both closed and open. Those who preach closedness are only half correct, just as are those who preach openness *alone*.

When the prophet (Isaiah 42:6) says: "I God, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you

a covenant people, a light of nations,” this is addressed (just like many other sayings of the prophets are) to the entire nation of Israel, with whom the prophet identifies himself during the act of prophecy. If these words were intended to the prophet alone, the expression “covenant people” would be entirely incomprehensible. How can the individual, a prophet, become a “covenant people?”

In both this passage, and elsewhere in Tanakh, it is clear that Israel was created to bring about the synthesis of “covenant people” and “light of nations,”¹ of total particularity and total universalism. We could say that Israel must be distinct in order to be universal, or, to use the earlier metaphor, that this is a nation that must be closed off in order to be open.

We must not flee from our, so to speak, Nineveh mission. But in order not to flee from precisely this mission, in order to fulfill it, we must accept the command which only a prophetic nation can do, a holy people, not a people like all others.

If we consider Jewish history, we see that for various reasons (my father’s essay lists them) we have not yet arrived at this synthesis, either because we were forced to lock ourselves away within the borders of an enclosed “covenant people,” or because we went (in Eastern Europe – from the Emancipation on) “to Nineveh,” and thereby lost our particularity, our prophetic essence, our national covenant.

Both the idea of a global Jewish mission and the idea of a particular Jewish nationalism rooted in national holiness draw, or must draw, spiritual nourishment from each other. But they have been incorrectly understood, and this hinders the progress towards the Jewish people’s world-historical, ultimate goal.

Assimilation took people “to Nineveh,” but *without* being a “covenant people,” they did not and could not have access to “Nineveh.” Likewise, every form of Jewish nationalism that inscribed secularism on its banners did not understand how close it was to the very assimilation against which it struggled.

The culminating prophecy of Isaiah, “And I appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations,” will never be fulfilled as long as we do not understand that, in the historical existence of the Jewish people, there cannot and must not be a distinction between separateness and world-mission, between particularity and universalism. These two apparent antitheses need to fulfill each other. Jonah the prophet was not permitted to say: what does Nineveh have to do with me? The Jewish people must go to the world, but not in order to be like the world, not for the sake of becoming equivalent, not in order to spiritually sink and disappear. We must go to the world as a holy nation, as a people that purifies itself in order to have both the right and the possibility to purify others. Only then can the tempest that threatens to drown both the ship and the prophet be stilled.

¹ I do not accept “light unto the nations” as it is commonly expressed, but “light of nations,” because in the text the lamed is connected not to “light,” but to “nations.”

OUR TORAH—ILLUSTRATED?

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In the ancient text of the Torah found on scrolls in synagogues around the world, few textual anomalies or irregularities exist. The most common of these unique characteristics are some dotted letters in the Torah and some larger or smaller letters.² Perhaps the most unique phenomenon is one of a different kind: the bracket-shaped markings which surround [Numbers 10:35-36](#). These markings are known throughout rabbinic literature as the “inverted nuns,”³ so-called for more than 1000 years. In virtually all scrolls across the planet, they are found only at this place in the scroll’s text.

Tradition has it that the Torah text does not change and has not changed. From the first millennium, the *masorah* system has prevented changes to the consonantal text. The transmission of the Torah text is extremely accurate; our scrolls are virtually the same as scrolls found in the Judean Desert which are dated from the first centuries BCE. Even the odd textual anomaly is

usually found to be the same from modern scroll to modern scroll. But the design and position of the markings at [Numbers 10:35-36](#) have been evolving and changing throughout the last 2000 years—and, as a result, so have interpretations of their meaning. Every generation has added layers to this phenomenon.

One of the most intriguing iterations in this evolution of both design and interpretation is found in the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* presents the so-called markings found surrounding [Numbers 10:35-36](#) as illustrations representing the *Shekhinah*’s posture during the travels of the people of Israel through the desert. The *Zohar*’s comments demonstrate that several designs for the markings were already known and in use in the 13th century (when the *Zohar* appeared on the scene) and that the designs used for the markings in scrolls reflect an existing fluidity and ongoing evolutionary process still active today. The discourse related to the markings that the *Zohar* presents is distinct and reflective of the mystical lens through which the *Zohar* presents the content of the Torah.

Background

The appearance of the unique and curious

² Emanuel Tov, [Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible](#), 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 55.

³ This is the most popular and familiar name for the phenomena of bracket-shaped markings appearing surrounding the text of [Numbers 10:35-36](#). I will use it as such, though it is really a misnomer. My research clearly demonstrates that

the rabbinic term for the markings at [Numbers 10:35-36](#) (ie., “*nunin hafukhin*”) should better have been understood as “reversed *nuns*,” as this is truly closer to the meaning at the source of this phenomenon. The term “inverted” is most common, but the term “*menuzeret*” (segregated) does appear. Some correctly use or translate *hafukh* as “backward” or “reversed.”

markings in the text surrounding the 85 letters of [Numbers 10:35-36](#) (see Figure 1) have, in every generation, shouted, “*Darsheni!*” (explain me!). As a result, there exists an expansive record of interpretation about the markings as well as their form and their location. Spanning several thousand years, this history reveals a dynamic scribal evolution of the markings and a rich library of interpretation. Generation after generation of scholars and scribes inherited traditions and, in turn, modified the markings and developed new interpretations. That transmission has left us a significant legacy of character forms implemented by scribes, editors, and publishers to fulfill the requirement that these markings appear in the Torah scroll. Paralleling these models is a significant amount of lore which interprets the markings and explains their purpose. A quick Google search demonstrates that this process continues in vibrant ways today.

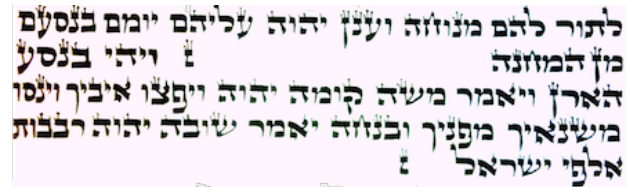


Figure 1: The markings as they often appear in contemporary Torah scrolls. These appear to be in the style of both inverted and reversed *nuns* with “jots and tittles” or *tagin*, filigree markings found on certain letters of the Torah text.

Scanning several dozen scrolls, one can see that markings were usually inserted into the text preceding and following [Numbers 10:35-36](#). Sometimes, scribes replaced one, two, or more *nuns* of the actual text with a modified character, as shown in Figure 2 (note the Z shape of the *nun* of “*binsoa*” and “*u-ve-nuhoh*”); this kind of replacement occurred in many places over many centuries. I have discovered few sources which object to either inserting markings or modifying characters.⁴ This lends credence to the idea that all the creative modifications which are documented here were approved by rabbinic authorities. Some scribes just copied what they saw in already approved texts, but others must have received rabbinic approval or directions for the often surprising, significant, and creative textual innovations.⁵ The modifications to the

⁴ Solomon Luria (known as Maharshal, 16th-century Prague) did write a short [gloss](#) on this issue in which he proclaimed that any scroll found to contain inverted *nuns* should be considered unfit for ritual use. See *Hokhmat Shlomo to Shabbat* 115b-116a. He reversed his position in later writings. See Sholom Eisenstat, “The Maharshal and Two Inverted Nuns,” in [To Fix Torah in Their Heart: Essays on Biblical](#)

[Interpretation and Jewish Studies in Honor of B. Barry Levy](#), eds. Jacqueline S. Du Toit et al. (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2018). De Lonzano wrote vociferously in opposition to the configuration found in Bomberg’s 1524 Second Rabbinic Bible.

⁵ Physical evidence reveals that some Torah scrolls and codices do not have inverted *nuns*, but

markings and their locations which I have documented, though seemingly minor and not changing the Torah's meaning, are nevertheless changes to a text held to be of divine origin and believed to be fixed.

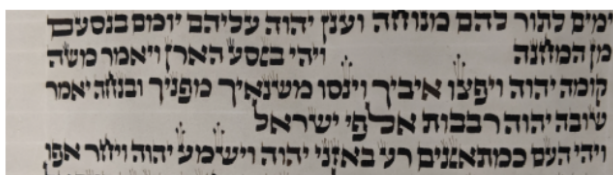
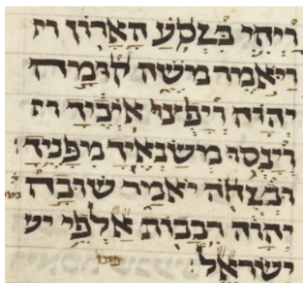


Figure 2: Backwards nuns as part of the text. Top image: Xanten Bible, late 13th-century Germany. Bottom image: SCR.000266 Museum of the Bible

a plethora of references in rabbinic literature from the Mishnah onward—as well as extant scrolls, manuscripts, and codices—show that the insertion of markings is the norm. No other markings like these inverted *nuns* appear anywhere else in the Torah. Similar markings appear in [Psalm 107](#) but are rarely included in the rabbinic or scholarly discussion.

⁶ In the Talmud, the two markings are said to be placed before and after the text, but that is not the only location (or quantity) where they are subsequently found in extant sources. Maharshah describes 12 diverse configurations, many of which are not found in our extant sources. Available manuscripts and codices document dozens of varied designs and locations for the

Early Rabbinic Texts

Rabbinic texts throughout the millennia include many attempts to establish the purpose and/or meaning of the markings near [Numbers 10:35-36](#), the intent of surrounding this text with such markings, the placement of that text in the Torah in this location, as well as the proper location⁶ of the inverted *nuns* in the text and their design. All of these issues are relevant to the interpretation of the purpose and meaning of these unique characters.

The earliest mention of the distinct status of this text is in the Mishnah ([m. Yadayim 3:5](#)), where [Numbers 10:35-36](#) is established as the paradigm for the minimum length (85 letters) of a text to be considered sacred, *kodesh*.⁷ If there are no coincidences, we have to determine how the text of [Numbers 10:35-36](#) connects to the *mishnah* which uses it as a paradigm for classifying texts as sacred or not. I suggest that the *mishnah* is self-

markings.

⁷ The Mishnah's status of "defiling the hands" (*me-tame et ha-yadayim*) equates to having a provenance of sanctity. See Shnayer Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976).

Martin Goodman, "Sacred Scripture and 'Defiling the Hands,'" *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (1990): 99-107.

Timothy H Lim, "The Defilement of the Hands as a Principle Determining the Holiness of Scriptures," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 2 (2010): 501-15.

referential. This short text had once been an independent fragment of a scroll, perhaps part of a worn or unusable text or a remnant from a fire.⁸ Perhaps this fragment comes from one of the 24 books mentioned by name in the *Tanakh* which are not extant. Because of its provenance, this text needed to be preserved. We see from our Torah scrolls that it was preserved by including it in the greater body of the Torah text.⁹

The divine origin of the markings themselves, though not their design, is attested to in [Shabbat 115b-116a](#), where two *tannaim* discuss the meaning of these markings. In response to the anonymous statement that “the Holy One, Blessed be He, made signs for this portion, above and below,”¹⁰ Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel attests that the markings signify that this text will be moved to another place at some future date. Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi disagrees, stating that the markings denote that this text is an independent book.

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel is of the opinion that the markings denote a text which is misplaced (i.e., inserted in the wrong place), which will be

⁸ Saving scrolls from a fire is part of the Talmudic discussion on [Shabbat 115b](#), which is the context for the discussion of the inverted *nuns*.

⁹ Insertion of this text in the Torah scroll in order to preserve it is similar to the compilation of multiple scrolls into a single text which we now call “*Trei Asar*” (the Twelve Minor Prophets), which consists of 12 independent texts considered as having sacred provenance compiled into one volume.

moved to its proper place in a later edition of the Torah. Rabbi Yehudah says that the markings tell us that the 85 letters of [Numbers 10:35-36](#) are an “independent text.”¹¹ There, the markings are called “*simaniyot*” (“*siman*” being the Hebrew for “mark”). The markings’ shape and form are not mentioned. Post-Talmudic texts call them “*nunin hafukhin*” or “inverted/reversed *nuns*.”

The ideas of Rabbis Yehudah Ha-Nasi and Shimon ben Gamaliel, while agreeing closely with the historical evidence, are generally misunderstood through the centuries. Proper understanding of their respective traditions depends on a better awareness and understanding of ancient scribal practices and the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible. The relevant information about the formation of the text was already forgotten in the first century. The sages didn’t acknowledge the ramifications of the ancient textual traditions about the text which Rabbis Yehudah Ha-Nasi and Shimon ben Gamaliel remembered and taught. The original intent of these markings had been lost.

The evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and

¹⁰ Meaning “before and after.” [Rashi](#) cites this as the appropriate position of the markings. We have no extant evidence that Rashi had a text which had markings above and below. Solomon Luria cites a scroll with markings above each letter of [Numbers 10:35-36](#).

¹¹ Saul Lieberman, [Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs, and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E. - IV Century C.E.](#), 2nd ed. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), 38-43.

Hellenistic texts demonstrates that these markings were not originally *nun* characters from the Hebrew alphabet, inverted or reversed or otherwise. [Masekhet Soferim \(6:1\)](#) describes them as “shofar”-shaped.¹² Before the end of the Talmudic era, rabbinic sages no longer associated the shape of the markings they saw in their scrolls with the original lunate Sigma shape C, sometimes dotted, which was a Hellenistic editorial marking. The Greek lunate Sigma and anti-Sigma characters were used in Alexandrian scribal schools of the third and fourth centuries BCE to mark a “misplaced text,”¹³ which is what Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel ([Shabbat 115b-116a](#)) says is their purpose in [Numbers 10](#). The description of the markings as “shofar-shaped” in *Sifrei* most aptly resembles a reversed *nun* or lunate Sigma, thus “*nun hafukh*” or “reversed-*nun*”—and mistakenly, “inverted *nun*.” The inability to differentiate the meaning of “*hafukh*” between “inverted” and “reversed” is the source of many of the designs of the markings seen throughout the ages.

Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi’s opinion that this was an “independent text” does not contradict Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel’s opinion. He is making a distinct point that the markings tell us that these 85 letters are different from the rest of the Torah in that their origin is in another sacred text—“an

¹² Manuscripts of [Masekhet Soferim 6:1](#) reflect various readings, all containing variations of the root *sh-p-r*, but “shofar” is the most logical. See Michael Higger’s edition of *Masekhet Soferim*.

¹³ Lieberman, [Hellenism in Jewish Palestine](#), 41; Tov, [Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible](#), 54-55.

independent text” as Rabbi Yehudah says—which, as per Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel’s tradition, was inserted into this place in the Torah.¹⁴ Rabbi Yehudah’s opinion also agrees with the opinion of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman, also in [Shabbat 116a](#), that [Numbers 10:35-36](#) is to be considered “independent” (i.e., an equal) fifth book of a seven-book Torah, for which he brings support from [Proverbs 9:1](#): “With wisdom she built her house; she carved its seven pillars.” The location of the markings is also clearly established as “before and after.”

Medieval Interpretations

The Talmudic opinions notwithstanding, the sages continued adding layers of interpretation and opinion about the configuration and design of the markings. As demonstrated by the following extant interpretations from the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, with so little information about the curious nature and purpose of the markings, they were able to be inventive in many ways. Some comments are purely technical, speaking to the form of the markings, while others are moralistic or consolatory messages to the community.

“*Ginzei Mitsrayim*,”¹⁵ a text brought to light by Elkan Adler and now thought to be from the late

¹⁴ Some traditions say that its proper location is in the flags section following [Numbers 2:17](#).

¹⁵ Judah ben Barzillai and Elkan Nathan Adler (ed.), *Ginze Mitsrayim, Hilkhote Sefer Torah: An Eleventh Century Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, Being a Fragment from the Sepher Ha-Ittim* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1969).

11th century, can be characterized as a medieval introduction to the Hebrew Bible. It tells us that the design of the markings should be “similar to (that with which) ‘they who go down to the sea do their work in the great waters.’” This oblique reference to [Psalm 107:23](#) poetically references “fishhooks,” the tools of fishermen. This very creative connection to the verse of [Psalm 107](#) is noteworthy for two reasons: it is a midrashic proof text using the only other place in the *Tanakh* where inverted-*nun* markings appear, and the aramaic for “fish” is “*nun*”—a brilliant, multi-lingual rabbinic pun, if there ever was one!¹⁶

A graphic representation of the “proper” form for the markings is included in *Ginzei Mitzrayim* (see Figure 3). This image is reminiscent of a fishhook.¹⁷ It is a dotted character like those which we find in several medieval representations and thus is aligned with the tradition expressed in [Sifrei Bamidbar \(Numbers 84:1\)](#)—that the text is *nakud*, which should best be understood as “marked” rather than “dotted.”¹⁸

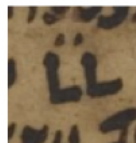


Figure 3: Fishhook in *Ginzei Mitzrayim*

After a moralistic comment further linking the Numbers text to the Psalms text, *Ginzei Mitzrayim* continues to explain:

In a few *midrashim*, another explanation is given, saying: “Why did the sages see a need to insert inverted *nuns* on ‘the people were as murmurers’? The sages said: ‘The whole Torah is specifically the prophecy of Moses, except for these two verses, which are from the prophecy of Eldad and Medad.’ Therefore, they were surrounded by curved (*kafuf*) *nuns*, and they were included in the Torah.”

This notion—that the text of [Numbers 10:35-36](#) is marked because it originally was from a book which was not part of the Sinai revelation of the rest of the Torah and was inserted here—is quite astounding.¹⁹ Of course, the abovementioned

¹⁶ It is not clear that this pun is part of the proof text brought to explain or describe the shape of the markings or brought in purely for its humor value.

¹⁷ There is a good resemblance to medieval fishhooks. See John M. Steane and Martin Foreman, “The Archaeology of Medieval Fishing Tackle,” in *Waterfront Archaeology: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Waterfront Archaeology Held at Bristol, 23-26*

September 1988, eds. George L. Good, Robert H. Jones, and Michael W. Ponsford (*CBA Research Report 74: 1991*).

¹⁸ See Lieberman, [Hellenism in Jewish Palestine](#).

¹⁹ This work is from an era before Maimonides’s eighth principle. See Louis Jacobs, [Principles of the Jewish Faith: An Analytical Study](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

mishnah reference to [Numbers 10:35-36](#) enables us to assume that it was a sacred text needing preservation. This reference to the Book of Eldad and Medad also appears in *Midrash Haserot Ve-Yiterot*.²⁰

Rashi, in his 11th-century commentaries, also comments on the markings. His comments in both his Bible commentary and his [glosses](#) on *Shabbat* 115b-116a are paradigmatic of his creative use of inherited traditions and his character as a leader and teacher of his community.

Rashi reiterates several ideas brought previously in Tractate *Shabbat*. One of these ideas explains homiletically that the text of [Numbers 10:35-36](#) was inserted into the Torah at this specific place to separate two tales of calamities, most likely the story of the departure of Yitro ([Numbers 10:29-32](#)) and the story of the complainers ([Numbers 11:1](#)).

Rashi does not provide any information regarding the design of the markings but does instruct that the markings appear before and after the text. Rashi's clear statement about the markings offsetting the text "before and after" is not long considered authoritative by many scribes and

scholars in the ensuing centuries, as is evidenced by the fact that many later scrolls and codices do not follow this style of markings.

The Zohar

The *Zohar* is the fundamental text of the mystical tradition in Judaism. Though it may not have been the first mystical text, its traditions likely originated in the southern French district of Provence in the 12th century. Its appearance on the scene in the late 13th century, at the hand of Moses de Leon, sparks the rise and development of a deeply engaging, esoteric tradition of interpretation that thrives still today. It has spawned a vast literature and many sophisticated schools of thought.²¹

The Aramaic/Hebrew of the *Zohar* is difficult, its teachings obfuscated by its language, style, and plethora of esoteric imagery and sometimes inexplicable and enigmatic concepts. In the introduction to Dr. Daniel C. Matt's monumental translation of the *Zohar*, Rabbi Arthur Green describes the contents of the *Zohar* as "sacred fantasy"²²: "All theological elaborations, insofar as they are allowed to become pictorial, are fantasy... They depict realities that have not been seen except by the inner eye of those who

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim: Be-Aspaklaryah Shel Ha-Dorot* (London: Defus Šontsin, 1962), 416-424; Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews III: 4*.

²¹ Yaacob Dweck, [The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017);

Arthur Green, [A Guide to the Zohar](#) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Arthur Green, "Introduction," in [The Zohar: Pritzker Edition](#), trans. Daniel C. Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

²² Green, [A Guide to the Zohar](#), 3.

describe them, or by their sacred sources.”²³ Non-rational interpretations are such a fruitful area of interpretation because of the insight of the “eyes” of the interpreter who creatively “sees” the symbol in the concept expressed in the text. “Everything in the Torah, be it a tale of Abraham, a poetic verse, or an obscure point of law, hints at a reality beyond that which you can obtain by the ordinary dialectics of either Talmudic or philosophical thinking.”²⁴ The *nun* markings are just such “sacred fantasy.”

In the *Zohar*, the markings became attached to the concept of the *Shekhinah*, the feminine aspect of the divine presence.²⁵ The interpretation of the *nuns* surrounding [Numbers 10:35-36](#) in the *Zohar* (*Beha'alotekha*, Chapter 22)²⁶ reads as follows:

Rabbi Elazar said, “Here one should examine: ן (*nun*) that is inverted, facing backward—why in two places here?

If you say, ‘A bent ן (*nun*)’—well, it is known that a bent *nun* is female;

and a straight one, totality of male and female. They have already established, regarding this place: ‘As the ark journeyed.’ But why is it turned afterward like this ן ?

Come and see: No ן (*nun*) is mentioned in [the Psalm] *Ashrei* (‘Happy are those who dwell in Your house’ [[Psalms 84:5](#)]), because She is in exile. This has been established by the Companions, for it is written, ‘נפלה (*nafelah*), Fallen, not to rise again, is Virgin Israel’ ([Amos 5:2](#)). But what is written previously? ‘The Ark of YHVH’s Covenant journeyed before them a three days’ distance to scout out a resting place for them’ ([Numbers 10:33](#)). As soon as the ark journeyed, *nun* journeyed above it—surely, *Shekhinah* rests upon the ark.”

The *Zohar* begins its comments about the

ahra; then God and the righteous below must join forces in order to liberate Her. The great drama of religious life, according to the kabbalists, is that of protecting *Shekhinah* from the forces of evil and joining Her to the holy Bridegroom who ever awaits Her. Here one can see how medieval Jews adapted the values of chivalry—the rescue of the maiden from the clutches of evil—to fit their own spiritual context.”

²³ Green, [A Guide to the Zohar](#), 18.

²⁴ Arthur Green’s introduction to [The Zohar: Pritzker Edition](#), 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39:

“The Kabbalists identify this *Shekhinah* as the spouse or divine consort of the blessed Holy One. She is the tenth *sefirah*, therefore a part of God included within the divine ten-in-one unity. But She is tragically exiled, distanced from Her divine Spouse. Sometimes She is seen to be either seduced or taken captive by the evil hosts of *sitra*

²⁶ Daniel C. Matt, [The Zohar: Pritzker Edition](#), vol. 8 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 535-538.

markings with a reference to another *nun* phenomenon that is well known. [Psalm 145](#) is an alphabetic, acrostic psalm which is missing a verse beginning with the letter *nun*. The Talmud ([Berakhot 4b](#)) suggests that that line would have been a verse from [Amos 5:2](#): “Fallen, not to rise again, is Maiden/Virgin Israel, abandoned on her soil with none to lift her up.” This focus on the abandonment of the people of Israel sets the stage for the *Zohar’s* statement that the “hidden” *nun* represents the “hidden” (i.e., exiled) *Shekhinah*. Just like in [Psalm 145](#),²⁷ the *nun*-shaped markings at [Numbers 10:35-36](#) are designated as representing the *Shekhinah*.

The *Zohar* describes the *nuns* surrounding the text as depicting the *Shekhinah* travelling through the desert riding on top of the *mishkan*, the portable tabernacle, scouting the route and protecting the people of Israel ([Numbers 10:33](#)). This relationship demonstrates Her love for the people of Israel.

Come and see: The love of the blessed Holy One is toward Israel; for even though they stray from the straight path, the blessed Holy One does not wish to abandon them, and He constantly turns His face toward them. Otherwise, they could not endure in the world.

Go and see: the ark journeyed

before them a distance of three days, and *nun* remained inseparable from it, accompanying it. Due to the love of Israel, it turned its face toward them, turning away from the ark—like a gazelle who, when going, turns its face back to the place it has left. So, as the ark journeyed, *nun* turned its face toward Israel and its shoulders toward the ark.

Therefore, when it journeyed, Moses said, “Arise, O YHVH!” ([Numbers 10:35](#))—“Do not abandon us, turn Your face toward us!” Then *nun* turned back toward them, like this: ך—like someone turning his face toward his beloved. And when the ark and Israel began to rest, *nun* turned its face from Israel and turned back toward the ark, turning completely.

The posture of the *Shekhinah* vis-a-vis the people is the focus of the *Zohar’s* comments. According to the discourse here, the *Shekhinah* changed Her posture depending on whether the people were moving or resting; She either faced the people or She faced toward the ark, turning Her back on the people. The *Zohar* then discusses some of the ramifications of the posture of the *Shekhinah*:

²⁷ This is a common theme in Zoharic literature. The *Shekhinah* is last, the tenth of the *sefirot* representing the divine presence. She is the spouse or consort of the Holy One, but She has

been tragically exiled from Her divine Spouse (see n. 23 above). The *Shekhinah* suffers with the people of Israel in their exile. See [Megillah 29a](#); see Green, [A Guide to the Zohar](#), 62-63.

would it be appropriate comportment on the part of the *Shekhinah* to turn Her back toward the people?

Rabbi Shimon said, “Elazar, my son, certainly so! But here, it did not turn its face away from Israel. For if so, the *nun* would have to be the opposite of the other one, above; that one inverted, and this one straight, facing the ark. But surely, it did not turn its face away from them. What did it do? As the ark rested, Moses said, ‘Return, O YHVH’ ([Numbers 10:36](#)). Then the ark rested, and *Shekhinah* stood on the other side, with Her face toward Israel and toward the ark. So then She encompassed both the ark and Israel. But afterward Israel ruined this, as is written: ‘The people were *ke-mit’onenim*, complaining’” ([Numbers 11:1](#)).

The discussion continues with an additional opinion suggesting an additional design. Though not wholly clear, it seems to describe Z-shaped markings both before and after [Numbers 10:35-36](#).

Rabbi Elazar said, “What I said comes from the Book of Rav Yeisa Sava, who said that on both this

side and that side it turned back.”

He replied, “He spoke well; but what I said you will find in the Book of Rav Hamnuna Sava, and it is certainly so!”

Further to the discussion, various proofs for the differing opinions about the posture of the *Shekhinah* are presented, each of which comes from evidence seen in scrolls owned by the various grandfathers of the discussants, Rav Yeisa (Sava) and Rav Hamnuna (Sava).

In this interpretation of the markings, the *Zohar* utilizes a popular wildlife simile for the *Shekhinah* borrowed from [Song of Songs 2:9](#), a common source of the *Zohar*’s imagery: “My beloved is like a gazelle.”²⁸ The gazelle represents the “beloved” of God, the *Shekhinah* being sought by the people of Israel. To many, this is the basis of the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs. The use of this imagery in the *Zohar*’s interpretation of the *nuns* is premised on knowing the shape of a gazelle in its various postures, as seen in the wildlife imagery in Figure 4. The gazelle pictured in the first image is turning to look backwards; it “turns its face back to the place it has left” as described in the *Zohar*’s text. It resembles a reversed *nun* (i.e., a regular *nun*), reversed, head turned around the vertical axis so that its posture is facing backwards from its normal orientation.

²⁸ see Matt, *Zohar* 2:14a (MhN), 138b



Figure 4: Images of gazelles. First image: a gazelle turning to look backwards. Second image: gazelle where feet are to the right but head faces left.

While the gazelle/lover image is readily understood and is a lovely simile for this *derashah*, I believe that what is really under discussion is the appropriate design for the markings surrounding [Numbers 10:35-36](#). Either it should simply be reversed (as pictured above), or a Z-shaped marking is to be used, where the foot stroke is reversed backwards but the head stroke faces left, as depicted by the gazelle in the second image in Figure 4.

My conclusion is that what is actually discussed here is the long-standing, ongoing question about the proper design of the markings at [Numbers 10:35-36](#).²⁹

We find the design and configuration discussed here appear in the Leipzig 1 manuscript of the Pentateuch, a 13th-century Franco-German creation (see Figure 5). It is most famous for being the earliest complete copy of Rashi's commentary on the Torah. While the designs of the markings

in this manuscript might not represent a perfect reading of the confusing *Zohar* text, this manuscript does demonstrate that designs similar to the *Zohar's* description are to be found in contemporary witnesses. Such Germanic scrolls found their way into early *Zohar*-focused communities. Other examples of Z-shaped markings from the 13th century are extant.

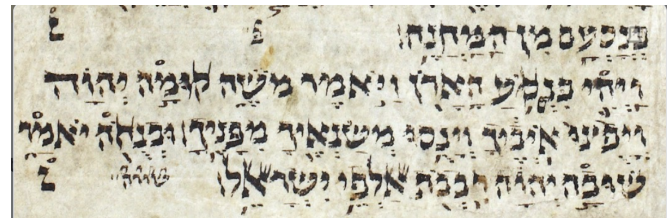


Figure 5: Leipzig 1 manuscript of the Pentateuch

The *Zohar* presents a fascinating and unique interpretation of the inverted *nuns* as illustrations of the *Shekhinah*. Moving beyond this basic understanding, it shows that the tradents of this tradition appear to be open to a fluidity of design for these markings, notwithstanding the tradition that God Himself placed them there. That tradition would, as well, belie the fundamental of a Sinaitic immutable text, at least as far as these markings are concerned. The constant evolution of the markings through so many generations leaves documentary evidence that scholars, rabbis, and scribes were regularly troubled as to the proper configurations. The record also demonstrates that they were willing to modify both the design and position of the *nun* markings inside the text of the Torah scroll based on their awareness and understanding of the traditions of

shaped markings, both before and after the text as well as inside the text.

²⁹ Evidence from scrolls and codices originating in the 13th century until contemporary scrolls depict both Z-shaped markings as well as reverse Z-

the markings. But decisions *were* made by scribes and their rabbis to alter the design or position of markings.

Surely, it is necessary to consider which is the chicken and which is the egg in this tale. Did designs found in a community's scroll(s) drive the iterations of generational scribal modifications? Did new and innovative interpretations drive the design and position of the *nun* markings? In any event, amongst scribes and rabbis, there is an awareness and an acceptance of the existence and possibility of several designs for the markings in Torah scrolls and an apparent freedom to choose which design should be used for a ritually fit scroll. Such fluidity is apparent throughout the centuries. The *Zohar's* textual interpretation of the markings is not repeated in later sources, but on the other hand, Z-shaped marking forms described in the *Zohar* are found in scrolls throughout subsequent centuries in various configurations. This demonstrates that it was the distinctive and different designs found in several scrolls, as well as the images from Song of Songs, which sparked the creative connections to the *Shekhinah* found here, implemented in the design of the markings. The designs preceded the *Zohar* and lived on, while the interpretive rationales did not.

The origin of the Z-shaped marking is not clear. Graphic evidence from scrolls and manuscripts since the early tenth- and 11th-century codices

reveals that it seems likely that the left-facing Z shape originates in sub-standard calligraphy. While we don't have the markings from the Aleppo Codex from [Numbers 10:35-36](#), we do have the series of seven markings, also inverted *nuns*, which appear in [Psalm 107](#) as shown in Figure 6.³⁰



Figure 6: Top row: Leningrad Codex Psalm 107. Middle row: Leningrad Codex Numbers 10:35-36. Bottom row: Aleppo Codex Psalm 107

It seems clear from the Leningrad Codex that what was an attempt to add a "crown" or top stroke to the body of the character resulted in a left-facing stroke creating a Z-shaped character. These characters have a messy inconsistency. Likely, the scribe was not well practiced in making this character, since it only appears a total of nine times in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible. The inconsistency of the crowned markings in the Leningrad Codex's Psalm 107 shows a greater discrepancy amongst the seven instances than other instances of more common letters. The two codices clearly show the origins of the various families of design traditions for the *nun* markings.

³⁰ The dot is likely related to the reference to the markings from *Sifra* that the markings are above and below ([Sifrei Bamidbar 84:1](#)). It is not unique

to this manuscript but is only found in the oldest examples of the markings. The Leipzig Manuscript mentioned does have a dotted marking.

The Z-shape marking is markedly visible in other early scrolls and codices from the tenth and 11th centuries, as shown here. Similar designs, as well as permutations and variations of this Z-shaped design, can be found in scrolls through the subsequent centuries as well as in scrolls in ritual use today as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Top left: Leningrad Codex—early 11th century. Top middle: Washington Bible—circa 1000. Top right: Sassoon Ms. 1053: Oldest complete *Tanakh*—early tenth century. Bottom left: Bodleian MS Marshall Or. 1—13th-century Ashkenaz. Bottom right: Cod. Guelf. 148 Noviss. 2°—16th century

The Sassoon complete *Tanakh* codex also shows relatively Z-shaped markings, similar to the other early documents, but it more clearly projects the upper “stroke” as a crown.

Scrolls and codices with Z-shaped markings both left- and right-facing are somewhat rare but are still in use today. See Figure 8.

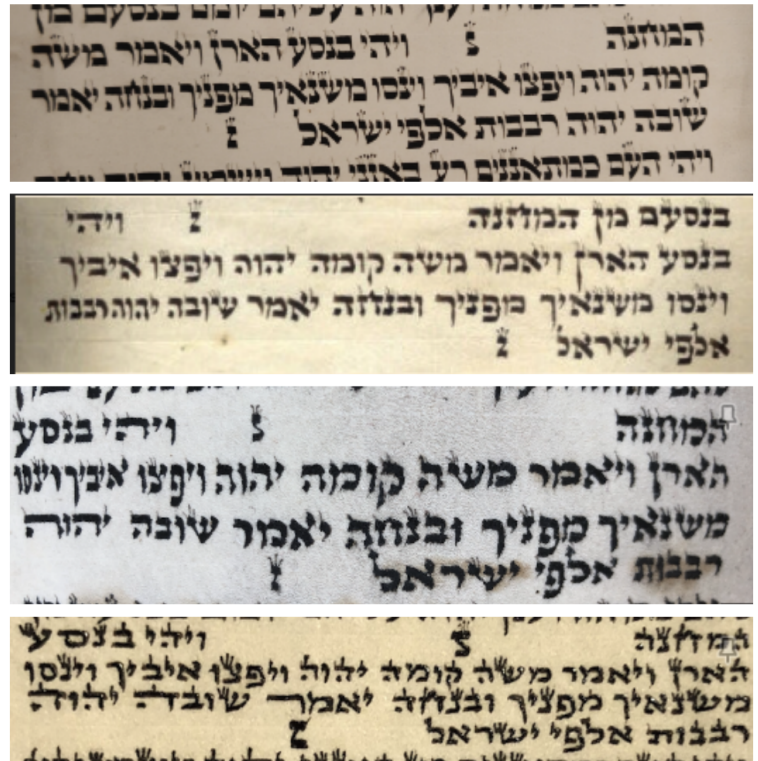


Figure 8: Top row: A scroll of unknown provenance in use in a Toronto synagogue today. Note the backwards Z shape preceding the text. Second row: A scroll of unknown provenance implementing two Z-shaped markings. Third row: A scroll of unknown provenance in a Toronto synagogue displaying two different Z-shaped markings. Bottom row: A scroll of unknown provenance in a private collection in Toronto similar to the one above.

The *Zohar*'s presentation of the *nun* markings as illustrations of the *Shekhinah* is unique but not surprising for an esoteric, mystically oriented text. It aptly shows a hidden meaning behind the

simple, curious marking. Following Rabbi Arthur Green's thesis, in these curious markings, the mystic saw the text as illustrating the *Shekhinah's* protection of the people of Israel.

The Zoharic interpretation of the markings is a paradigm for cultural influence upon text interpretation, scribal arts, and the text of the Torah scroll. The markings are perfect source materials for reading in fantasy interpretations which imbue the shapes with deep covenantal meaning. The markings proved to be a perfect vehicle for a mystical teaching stemming from a misunderstood, ancient editorial mark. At another level, this is powerful evidence that the interpretation of the symbols drove the scribes to create and implement new designs.

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