

PERITEXTUAL ENCODING FOR THE
METATRON / YAHUEL THEME IN THE
KABBALISTIC *SEFER HA-OT*, OR "BOOK OF
THE SIGN," BY R. ABRAHAM ABULAFIA
(1240–1292)

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The purpose of this paper is to present the peritextual encoding applied by the thirteenth-century kabbalist R. Abraham Abulafia in his prophetic treatise entitled Sefer ha-Ot, or "Book of the Sign." Each of the extant manuscripts of this work provide similar examples of such peritext values. Significantly, the majority of them were deliberately designed by the author to convey the esoteric notion of the angel Metatron, known in this Kabbalistic source by his alternative name, Yahuel. My aim is to present this sophisticated structure parallel to the plain narrative. Illustrative material to corroborate the analyses has been applied from one of the most representative manuscripts of Sefer ha-Ot, Munich 409, courtesy of Bayern City Library.

Kabbalistic manuscripts are often filled with peritextual values, diagrams, charts and sketches. Among the most well-known Kabbalists, R. Abraham Abulafia (1240–1292) was a dominant figure within the school of prophetic-ecstatic Kabbalah of the thirteenth century who notoriously used peritextual encoding connected to

numerical meanings (gematrias) to convey mystical messages.¹ One of his books, *Sefer ha-Ot*, or “Book of the Sign,” is special exactly because of the permanent usage of peritextual hints pointing at a parallel narrative.

The purpose of this paper is to present some of these cases from “Book of the Sign,” especially those related to the semantic field connected with the notion of the angel *Metatron*, known also as *Yahoel*. This mystical figure plays a singular role in the general system of R. Abulafia’s thought and is mentioned explicitly or implicitly throughout the text of *Sefer ha-Ot*.

The Kabbalistic work *Sefer ha-Ot* survives in eight manuscripts.² It is not a typical work of R. Abulafia; most of the content is related to apocalyptic visions regarding the redemption of the Jewish people from the bondage of Edom, represented by the pope and Rome. The main figure is Zecharyahu, R. Abulafia’s alter ego who experiences several mystical encounters with the angel Yahoel, or Metatron. Apart from the plain narrative, this theme is conveyed in several concealed modes of coding. Crucial for our discussion here is the fact that the text is filled with paratextual/peritextual values designed to encode specific esoteric meanings—mostly numerical (gematrical). The author’s clear intention was that the majority of such hints should relate to the name YHVH (gematrical value 26) and its multiples:

¹ The biography of this Kabbalist has been presented in a plethora of publications. See, for example, Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985). More recently, see Aryeh Krawczyk, *Krew, orchidea, atrament : endofazja i heautoskopia w “Sefer ha-Ot”, “Księżę Znaku” R. Abrahama Abulafii (1240-1292) : edycja krytyczna, tłumaczenie tekstu* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, 2018).

² Presented illustrations are taken from Ms. Munich 409, Bayern City Library, provided here with permission of the owner. A detailed overview of the manuscripts and a summary of the book has been discussed in one of my previous publications: A. Krawczyk,

“*Sefer ha-Ot*: Preliminary Insights on a Critical Edition,” *Jewish History Quarterly* 2 (2015) (254): 281–314. Some of the data from that paper have been incorporated here in a revised version.

- 1) $52 = 2 \times 26$: the value for Yahoel, an angel identified with Metatron
- 2) $78 = 3 \times 26$: value of Ana YHVH and/or Ani VHV – names read during Hallel and Hoshana Rabah
- 3) $91 = 3.5 \times 26 = 7 \times 13$ = value for *yichud* of the names YHVH (26) and Adonai (65), which combined gives the name YAHVDNHY (91).

Paratextual values³ found in the manuscripts are designed to lead towards polysemantic gematrical patterns inherent in the text, where the key matrix is comprised of the numbers 26, 52, 78 and 91. We may propose, therefore, that what unifies *Sefer ha-Ot* throughout all of its complex strata consequently builds up to the coding chain for Yahoel and YAHVDNHY, a semantic field that is submerged in the literal text and plotted even deeper on a gematrical level.⁴

The peritextual values in *Sefer ha-Ot* are:

- Dots indicating that the gematrical meaning is to precede the literal meaning of the verse
- Dots above letters indicating a special meaning assigned to them
- Notes about *kri u-ktiv*
- Enlarged/diminished letters
- Marginal notes

In the following three sections of this paper, I would like to present the paratextual values related to the gematria of 26/52, 78 and 91, respectively. These are three representative, though not exhaustive, examples regarding the leading Metatron/Yahoel theme.

³ Followed by D. Abrams's insights on textological methodology to be applied to Hebrew manuscript analysis. See Daniel Abrams, "Kabbalistic Paratext," *Kabbalah* 26 (2012): pp. 7–24, and the monumental Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010).

⁴ These paratextual values are best visible in the Hebrew edition, from which excerpts are provided here.

GEMATRIA OF 26 AND 52

Meaz or Mehaz? How is Yahoel hidden in the first verse of Sefer ha-Ot?

PARATEXT CASE: a word annotated with a dot above a *he* that was written in place of an *alef*. This paratext conveys the following encoded messages:

- Encoding of gematria 52 for *Yahoel*, *Eliyahu*, *Ben*, YHVH YHVH, etc.
- Allusion to the biblical verse concerning Moshe's staff, a famous *kri* and *ktiv* case in the Torah text. In the passage, *m-b-ḥ* is to be read as *m-ḥ-b*. As per the Masoretic note, this is to be pronounced as *ma-ḥe* ("what is it"): "YHVH spoke to him: what is it in your hand? He said: a staff."⁵

Quote from Sefer ha-Ot

"I have separated⁶ the speech of YHVH⁷ from then—from the day I got the knowledge of His Name until today. Still I will make my-

⁵ Ex. 4:2.

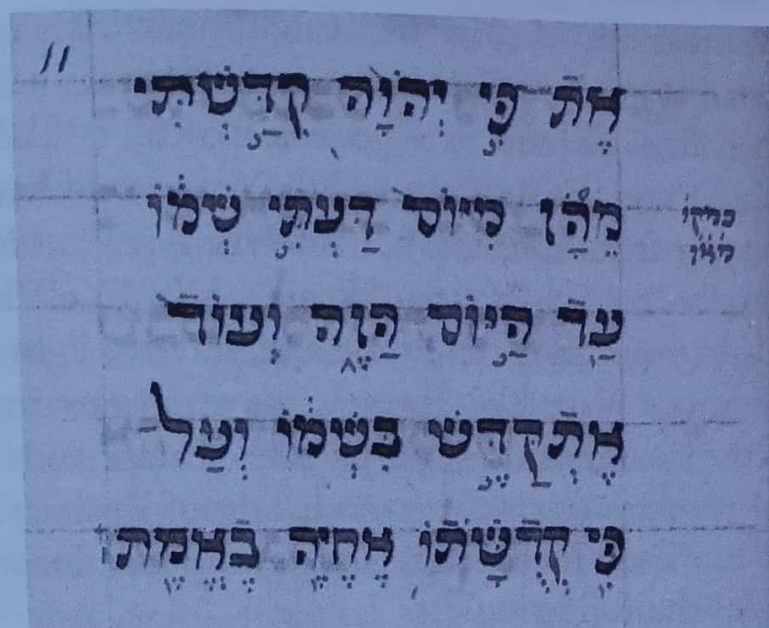
⁶ I follow the view of T. Sikora, who proposes translating *kadosh* and its derivatives not using theologically biased terms like "saint, sanctified" but using more precise meanings of "separation and discernment, uniqueness"; this is well supported by logic provided in Rashi's commentary on Lev. 19:1–2: *kedoshim tihyu*, "you shall be separated." Methodologically, such an application is also corroborated in Oskar Goldberg, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* (Berlin: David Verlag, 1925; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005); see this source for the most well-known scholarly approach.

⁷ *Et pi* YHVH is a fixed Tanachic phrase. See: Num. 14:41; 20:24; 22:18; 22:28; 24:13, Deut. 1:26; 1:43; 9:23, 1 Sam. 12:14; 12:15; 15:24, 1 Krl. 1:13. Although it would literally mean "the mouth of YHVH", we follow the Onkelos indication to render it like *memra da-Hashem* and *gzerat memra da-Hashem*. Thus, there are three options for translation:

- I have separated the speech of YHVH
- I have separated the mouth of YHVH
- With my lips I have separated YHVH

I would like to thank Ewa Gordon for hinting at the aforementioned biblical data.

self unique in His Name and through His uniqueness I will revive in truth.”



f. 11a

The first stanza is immediately striking for its extraordinary spelling of the term *mehaz*, which is supposed to be read as *meaz* “from now.” H. Hames states: “Given the importance of letter notation for Abulafia, and taking into account the possibility of scribal error, the fact that this same spelling appears in the first two stanzas of the work, would seem to suggest that it is meaningful. Given Abulafia’s preponderance⁸ for playing with letters, it is possible that there is a double entendre here (or perhaps a *qri’* and *ktiv*) – read ‘then’, but understand ‘from *heb zayin*’ referring to year 5007 (1247) or when permutated ‘from the year *zeh*’ in other words from the twelfth year (*zayin* = 7, *heb* = 5). This could possibly be a reference to his childhood implying that at the age of 12, in 1252, he began studying with his father, or perhaps refer to the visions in late 1270 when he was first awakened to the potential of the divine names, really closer to eleven rather than twelve years after his first awakening in 1260.”⁹

⁸ I assume H. Hames meant here “propensity.”

⁹ Harvey Hames, “Three in One or One That is Three: On the Dating of Abraham Abulafia’s *Sefer ha-Ot*,” *Revue des études juives* 165, no. 1–2 (2006), 182.

I agree with Hames that the case under discussion is an obvious instance of *kri* and *ktiv*; a claim of scribal error is unsubstantiated, as all manuscripts follow this intentional writing. However, we disagree on the proposed meanings, as such a spelling is most certainly placed here to hint at a gematria of 52 (=Yahoel, 2 x 26, Ben, Eliyahu, etc.) and, more importantly, to yet another classic *kri* and *ktiv* stemming from the Torah, namely *m-b-z*. Per the Masoretic note, this is to be read as *ma-ze* ("what is it"): "YHVH spoke to him: what is it in your hand? He said: a staff."¹⁰ In light of this observation, the most plausible, appropriate strategies for decoding are through the juxtaposition of parallel Torah and *Sefer ha-Ot* meanings and through tracing the modelling of Zecharyahu on the figure of Moses. When these strategies are applied, decoding of the passage includes the following:

- In the Torah, Moses speaks with the Name (26; anagrammatic relationship between *Moshe* and *Hashem*: משה השם). In *Sefer ha-Ot*, Zecharyahu speaks with Yahoel (52 = 2 x 26) in his prophetic vision.

- Moses embarks on his mission to free the people of Israel from Egypt and the Pharaoh. In *Sefer ha-Ot*, Zecharyahu sets off on a similar enterprise to free the Jews from the bondage of Rome/Edom and the Pope.

- The gematria for *mateh* ("staff") is 54 (52+2); in line with R. Abulafia's methods, one could perform experimental substitution of this word and instead insert *be-Yahoel*¹¹ ("in/through/with the

¹⁰ Ex. 4:2.

¹¹ Obviously, one could insert here Ben, Eliyahu, Libecha etc., but this is not the place to build up some elaborated exegesis. Rather, I am following a plausible method of revealing the hidden data through experiential understanding, as likely intended by the author of *Sefer ha-Ot*. However, other variants are likewise justified. Also, notions of Yahoel and "the staff" resembling the shape of the sign of his forehead are of importance. This interpretation is corroborated by other sources, too. For example, see chapter 5 in Agata Paluch, *Megalleh 'Amuqot: The Enoch-Metatron Tradition in the Kabbalah of Nathan Neṭa Shapira of Kraków (1585–1633)* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014), esp. pp. 179–188 and the literature cited therein (mainly M. Idel, as noted on p. 33 and on) in which the

assistance of *Yahoel*") or *be-YHVH YHVH* ("in/through/with the assistance of YHVH YHVH"). Let us apply this substitution and translate Ex. 4:2 in a Kabbalistic vein, as follows: "YHVH (26) spoke to him: Yahoel (52) in your might.¹² He said: through Yahoel (52)" or "YHVH (26) spoke to him: YHVH YHVH (52) in your might. He said: through YHVH YHVH (52)."¹³

- As Moses is given the Torah on Sinai, so, too, Zecharyahu receives the call to write the "Book of the Sign," which he receives by inspiration in, among other places, Messina: *mi-Sinai*.¹⁴

- The notion of "staff/sceptre" is central in *Sefer ha-Ot*, as the sign itself is described as "resembling the staff." However, the terms used throughout the book are *makel* and *sharbit*, as if to stress even more within the Rambam's mode of "revelation through concealment"¹⁵ that *mateh* is hinted at by a peritextual and gematrical

relationship of Metatron to Moses's staff (or rod) is discussed (pp. 179–182, n. 86). R. Natan Nata Spira (or Shapiro) utilizes notions stemming from the *chasidei ashkenaz* tradition that is the common source of R. Abulafia's ideas. However, an explicit connection between the gematria of 54 (*mateh*) and 2+52 (*be-Yahoel*) within the context of Ex. 4:2 is not indicated in Paluch's study.

¹² A translation of *be-yadeicha*, lit. "in your hand," as "in your might" is corroborated by the Rambam's proposals, as presented in *Moreh Nevuchim*.

¹³ Let us keep in mind that in the preceding verse, Ex. 3:14, Moses encounters for the first time *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, the Name that is itself dual in its inherent dynamics. See also Paluch, *Megalleh 'Amuqot*, 85–88, where the reference to the gematria of 52 in the context of the early *chasidei ashkenaz* tradition of *Commentary on the 70 Names of Metatron* is discussed. Again, as this source must have impacted R. Abulafia greatly, it further corroborates the present analysis pertaining specifically to *Sefer ha-Ot*.

¹⁴ Themes pointing directly to an analogy for R. Abulafia-Moses with reference to the very act of prophesying have been discussed in Aryeh Krawczyk, "Zdejmovanie zasłony języka. Tora prorocka Mojżesza i prorokowanie Torą Abulafii," *Hermaion* 2 (2013): 28–38.

¹⁵ Adopted aptly by R. Abulafia in many places in his theoretical works: for example, *Sitrei Torah*. See Elliot Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*—

level of coding and points to an even more important figure: Metatron.¹⁶

GEMATRIA OF 78

Ani va-Hu or *Ani Vaho*? The secret of *Hallel* on *Sukkot* and the unification of Name 72 with YHVH

PARATEXT CASE: enlarged font in the word *ko* (=25), immediately followed by *Ani VHV*. Both expressions hint at Metatron/Yahoel/Naar.

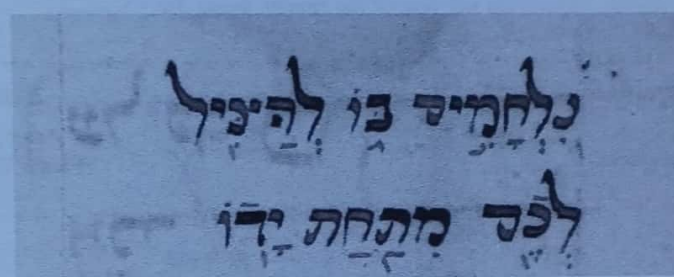
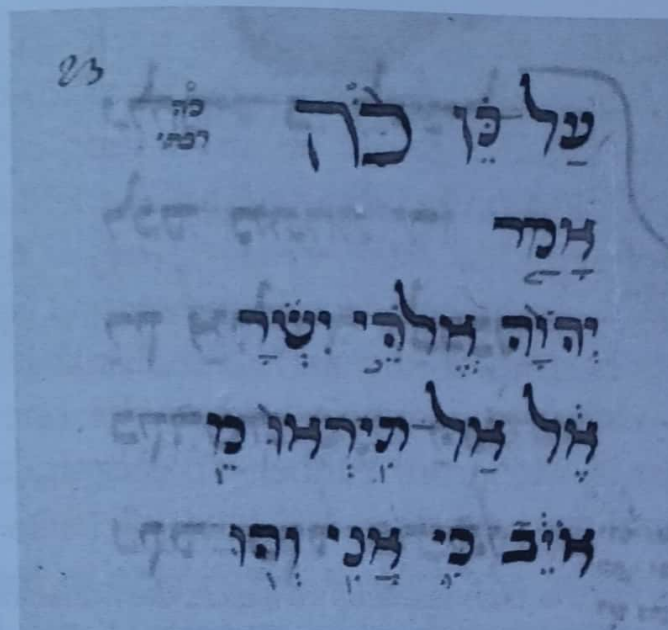
Quote from Sefer ha-Ot

"Thus spoke about this¹⁷ YHVH, *Elohei* Israel: Do not fear the enemy, because 'I, VHV' we will fight him to save you from his hand."

Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 23 and 83–86.

¹⁶ See also Robert Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life: The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Response to Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 212–216 and especially p. 214, where exactly the same passage from Ex. 4:3 about "the staff" is discussed by R. Abulafia in his *Sitrei Torah*, p. 33: "And it was said (Ex. 4:3), 'Put your hand out and seize it by the tail.' And he put out his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand (בכפו). [This should be read] 'In twenty-six (בכ"ף ו"ו),' because with six in his hand (בו"ו בכפ"ו) are, 'In his hand are six (בכ"ף ו"ו).'" Note that "six" is representative of Metatron in many Kabbalistic and midrashic traditions.

¹⁷ Note the enlarged font in the word *ko* (=25). Following the *im ha-kollel* rule, it has a gematria of 26. See also R. Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Yashar*, where *ko* is also presented in a special manner, in a similar, revelatory context. Yet again, this is corroborated by the common strata of *chasidei ashkenaz*, as interpreted by R. Natan Spira: see Paluch, *Megalleh 'Amuqot*, 182, in the same vein. From our perspective, the evident source in the Torah to connect all these ideas (*ko*, Metatron, dual-subjectivity, teleological aspect of YHVH, etc.) is Gen. 22:5 from *Akedah*, read during each daily *shachrit*: *Vaani ve-banaar nelcha ad ko* ("I and the youth will go towards *ko* [there].") Yet another epithet for Metatron/Yahoel is *Naar*, "The Youth."



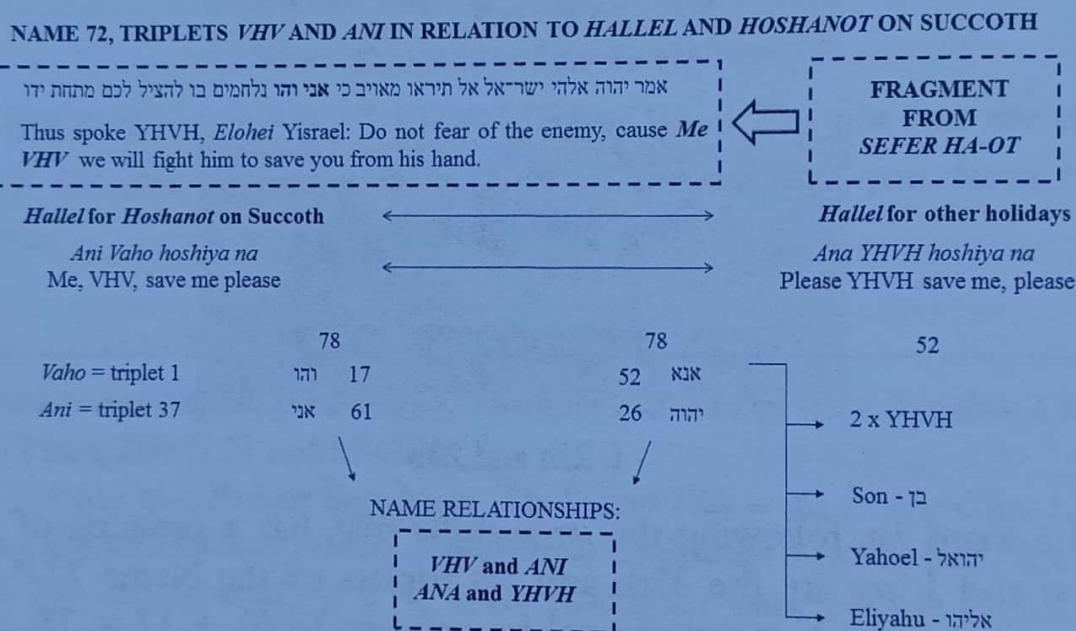
f. 23a and 23b

The word *ko*, following the *im ha-kollel* rule, has a gematria of 26. *Ani* and *Vabo* are the 37th and 1st triplets of the Name 72,¹⁸ respectively, which together total in gematria to $61 + 17 = 78$. According to Rashi, the gematrical equivalence of these triplets to the expression *Ana YHVH* ($52 + 26$) enabled the substitution of the latter in the ritual of *Hoshanot* during *Hallel* on *Sukkot*.¹⁹ Thus, instead of standard version of *Hallel*, where the version *Ana YHVH hoshiya na* is recited, one might say during the *Hallel* on *Sukkot*: *Ani Vabo hoshiya na*. “Me-VHV” or *Ani Vabo* clearly indicates the unification of the subject, chanting the *Hoshanot* together with the Name

¹⁸ Name 72 is derived from three verses of Ex. 14:19–21, each of them consisting of 72 letters. Combining each of 216 (72×3) letters according to the method described by Rashi brings forth the mystical Name 72.

¹⁹ See: *Machzor for Sukot*, Artscroll, New York, 2013 pp. 118–119 and p. 364. See also: TB, Mishnah *Sukkah* 4:5.

72. Furthermore, this connection repeats itself on a higher level: the structure of gematria for *Ana YHVH* (52 + 26) shows that *Ana* is a substitute for *Yahoel* (=52) in his unification relationship with *YHVH* (=26). Also, the order of the triplet invoked is not deprived of significant meaning. *Ani* = 37, which in *mispar katan* gematrical method refers to *chochmah* ("wisdom"), the second *sefirah*; and *Vaho* = 1, which refers both to the mystic/Kabbalist that gains this particular wisdom related to prophecy and to the one that provides this wisdom, that is, Metatron/Yahoel. To recapitulate, this idea is best presented in the chart below:



GEMATRIA OF 91

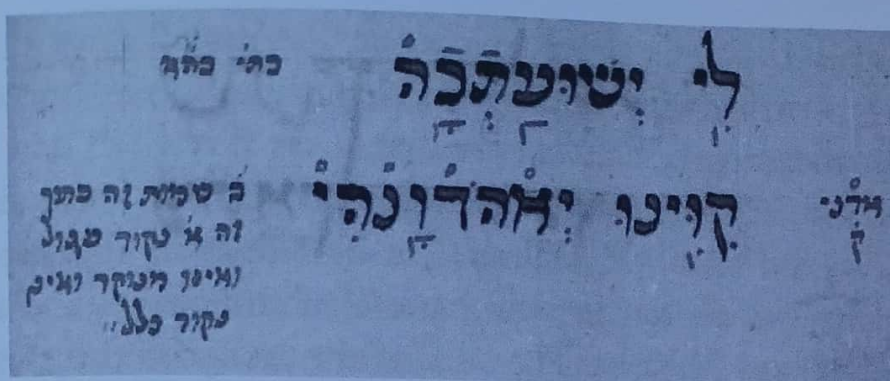
Unification of Written (26) and Spoken (65) Name

PARATEXT CASE: dots over letters forming the name *Adonai*, interwoven into the name *YHVH*.

Quote from Sefer ha-Ot

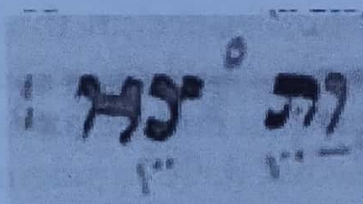
“For²⁰ your salvation we hope, YAH²⁰VDVNHY”

²⁰ Note that *li-yeshuatchah* is split: a double *yud* appears and a final *he* is added with a mark of *nekudah meal ot*. Such intentional script points also to the Name *YaH*.



f. 31b

This gematria of 91 is also hinted at in a paratextual, special division of the word *va-tetze*, where *tze* gives the value of 91; this is one among several other instances of hidden encoding of this value in *Sefer ha-Ot*.



Additionally, paratextual value is visible in how the word *li-yeshuatchab* is split: a double *yud* appears and a final *he* is added with a mark of *nekudab meal ot*. Such intentional script points also to the Name *YaH*.

YAHDVNHY is the unification of names *Adonai* and *YHVH*, the former being the *kri* of the latter's *ktiv*. It is present nowadays in almost every Sephardic *siddur* based on *kavvanot* and *yichudim*.²¹ Its gematria, 91, is the ratio of 7 x 13 or 3.5 x 26 and is identical with *SaEl* ("El saves"), *Amen* (the conclusion for each of the *brachot*), and the *rashei tevot* of the key verse of *Ashrei* (Ps. 145:16), relating to the letters *Peh* ("mouth"), *Alef* (initial for *Adonai*), *Yud* (initial for *YHVH*): *Poteach Et Yadeicha*. In order to relate this data to the en-dophatic theme permeating *Sefer ha-Ot*, one should recall the opening words of the *ouvre: et pi* "the mouth." Association between the gematria 91 for the Name *YAHDVNHY* and *Peh* ("mouth") is corroborated by the significant fragment from the *Zohar*. Though we obviously cannot assume any direct and mutual influence of the

²¹ For example, *Siddur Avodat ha-Shem*, Yerushalaim 5758.

Zohar (or the traditions preceding it) on R. Abulafia's work, nevertheless it is worth to quoting here at length an interesting elaboration on the meaning of this very name:

"The sword of the Holy One Blessed Be He - the sword of judgment in the spiritual realms - is hinted at in the very name YHVH. The *Yud* represents the handle of the sword and also the *sefirot* of *Keter* and *Malchut*. The *Vav* is the body of the sword, the six directions of the world, *Tiferet*, combining judgment with mercy. The two letters *He* symbolize the two sharp cutting edges (*pipiyot*),²² of the sword, two mouths (*peh* and *peh*) - the higher mouth, *Malchut*, and the mouth of the judge in this world. It is written regarding these two mouths: 'Pursue justice, true justice, in order that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your G-d gives you'²³. The repetition of the word 'justice' in the text refers to the two decisions involved in justice: the decision of the court in the spiritual realms and the concurrent decision of the court in the physical realm. From this we see that there is judgment involved in everything, no matter how small the matter, as we have learnt 'No-one bruises their finger in this world unless it was so decreed against him in heaven'.²⁴ The sheath of the sword of justice is the name *Adonai*, representing *Malchut*, when combined with the merciful holy name YHVH. The unity of these is the meditative state of union with the infinite symbolized by the names when spelled together: YAHDEVNHY."²⁵

Elliot Wolfson aptly highlights the relationship of the Name YAHDEVNHY discussed in the *Zohar* with the contemplative teachings of R. Abulafia, where the emphasis on auditory and verbal experiences relates his actions directly to the realm of Names

²² See the analogical context of *pipiyot* in Ps. 149:6, which is read on daily and Shabbat *shachrit* in *pesukei dezimra* section.

²³ Deut. 16:20.

²⁴ TB *Chulin* 7b.

²⁵ *Zohar*, *Shoftim* 274b. Based on translation by R. Simcha Shmuel Treister, http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380122/jewish/The-Sword-of-Judgment.htm [accessed January 13, 2019].

and their recombinations.²⁶ Referring to the Name, the text comments:²⁷

“When the lower splendor, *Adonai* [i.e. the tenth gradation or *Shechinah*] joins with the supernal splendor, YHVH [i.e., the sixth gradation or *Tiferet*] the hidden name [i.e. YAHDEVNHY, the combination of the two names]²⁸ is produced, which the true prophets know and [by means of which] they [visually] contemplate the supernal splendor.”

Additionally, linkage of YHVH to the sixth *sefirah* points to Metatron and the letter *Vav* that represents him,²⁹ which is also initial to the Name 72.³⁰ In order to summarize, the paratextual notions indicating the gematria of 26, 78 and 91 and the mystical

²⁶ However, we also find in R. Abulafia's output descriptions of teachings on visualization of the letters of the name YAHDEVNHY and their anthropomorphic representations—for example, the vision of 22 thousand letters/warriors accompanying Yahoel from the final section of *Sefer ha-Ot*.

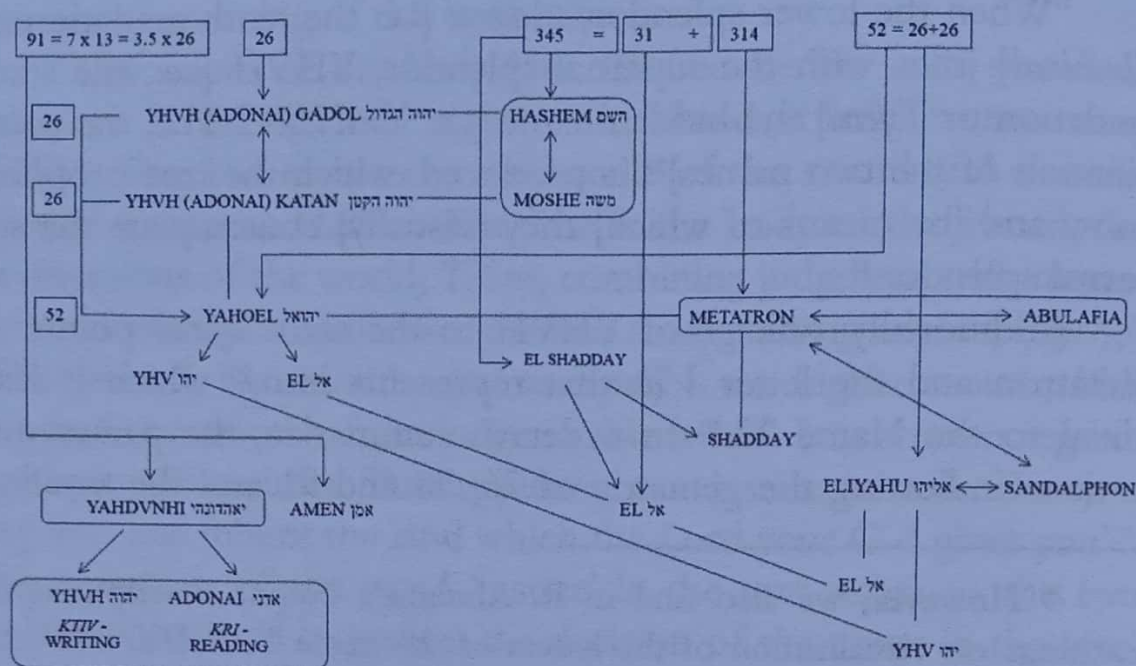
²⁷ *Zohar* 1:110b.

²⁸ See Mark Verman, “The Development of Yihudim in Spanish Kabbalah,” in “Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: The Age of the Zohar,” ed. J. Dan. Special Issue, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989): 25–41, where one can find further analysis of *yibud* appearing in R. Yosef Gikatilla's *Ginnat Egoz* and the corpus of *Tikkunei Zohar*. Further gematria 91 examples, like *sukkah* and *malach*, are presented there in connection to Metatron.

²⁹ Note the description of the sign on the forehead of Yahoel, resembling “the staff” or “scepter” and “separating between blood and ink” that appears in the last section of *Sefer ha-Ot*.

³⁰ More on the sources of these relations in Elliot Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 150. Regarding the linkage of the sixfold and dual-triangle symbol of Magen David and the Name 72 with the Metatron theme, see: Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974), 366. On the connection of Magen David and YHVH with the reference to the gematria for barach 222 (2 x 111), see Aryeh Krawczyk, “Uwagi o błogosławieństwie, czyli zasada 222,” *Ex nihilo* 2, no. 6 (2011): 47–56.

meanings conveyed in R. Abulafia's *opus* are best exposed via the following scheme:



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