

THE PATH OF LETTERS

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA

The Hebrew letter meditations presented here are derived from the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, an unconventional thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist whose practice was based on the premise that nothing was more important than the immediate experience of union with God in the shortest time possible. An ascetic who himself spent many years meditating, fasting, and often not sleeping for weeks at a time, the tolerant Abulafia did not impose these disciplines or any other restrictions on his disciples. And since he taught Moslems and Christians, as well as women, Jewish orthodoxy was not a prerequisite for joining his circle of Kabbalists.

Perhaps the most radical of all Jewish mystics, Abulafia believed that he had a prophetic mission. Indeed, his daring public pronouncements indicate that he might have thought of himself as the Messiah. On one occasion, declaring his “messianic mission” in defiance of both the rabbinic authorities and the Catholic Church almost cost him his life. Following the prediction of Kabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Nahman in 1260 that the end of days would see the Messiah commanded by God to confront the Pope and ask for the liberation of the Jewish people, in 1280, Abulafia claimed to have received the call to travel to Rome and “confer with [the Pope] in the name of Jewry.”¹ Predicting that the notoriously anti-Semitic Pope Nicholas III would have him arrested and burnt at the stake but that he would emerge alive and free twenty-eight days later, Abulafia embarked on

the journey to Rome. As soon as he arrived, the Pope ordered his arrest and subsequent execution at the stake. It was the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and start of the High Holy Day season, and Abulafia sat meditating in his prison cell. As morning dawned, a guard entered to inform him that the Pope had died during the night, resulting in a stay of execution and a transfer of the prisoner to a Franciscan jail outside of Rome. Convinced that his meditations had influenced the course of events, Abulafia was released twenty-eight days later—exactly as he had predicted. In writing of his ordeal, Abulafia attributed to the Shekhinah the heavenly voice that had called him to his messianic mission and saved his life.

Born in Saragossa, Spain, in 1240, Abulafia was guided in the study of the Torah by his father, who died when Abraham was eighteen. His mother moved the family to Toledo, but impelled by tales of ten lost tribes living in the Holy Land on the banks of the mythical river “Sambatyon” the restless young scholar left home soon after to begin a life of spiritual searching. Prevented from moving any further than the coast of Palestine by fierce battles between Christian Crusaders and Moslem holy warriors, Abulafia traveled on to Greece, where he married and settled for the next ten years. However, his ongoing search for a “true Kabbalah master” led him to abandon Greece for Italy, where he studied with physician-scholar Hillel ben Samuel of Verona before returning again to Spain.

In his autobiography, Abulafia writes of his dissatisfaction with the first group of disciples that gathered around him in Barcelona. Accused by his rabbinic critics of teaching Trinitarian doctrines and turning young Jews to Christianity, the thirty-one-year-old Kabbalist again took to the road in search of spiritual guidance—this time inspired by the first in a series of the “prophetic calls” that were to recur at critical phases throughout his career. Impressed by the writings of Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, Abulafia—who had already established his own reputation—sought out the older man and became his student.

It did not take long for the charismatic young Kabbalist to gather a second, more satisfactory group of disciples, and within a few short years, Abulafia was writing his own meditation manuals and had published his spiritual autobiography, *Hidden Treasure*

Garden, under a pseudonym. But establishing his reputation as a master of Hebrew letter meditation was not enough for the irrepresible Abulafia, and he continued provoking the Jewish authorities with his “prophetic” proclamations. In addition to condemning the traditional rabbis for undermining the “true” Jewish practice of cleaving to God with their dry speculations on the Torah and Talmud, Abulafia also alienated his fellow Kabbalists by declaring the superiority of his own school of Hebrew letter meditation over the Tree of Life techniques found in the *Zohar* of his esteemed Spanish contemporary, Rabbi Moses de Leon. Claiming that contemplation of the *sefirot* (divine emanations) along the Cosmic Tree was only a prelude to meditation on the Sacred Names embedded in the Hebrew letters YHVH, Abulafia boasted of being the only Kabbalist to have fully mastered both techniques. He described his manipulation of the power inherent in the Sacred Name of God as a twofold process: it was physical in that it combined recitation and manipulation of the breath, and it was spiritual because it was linked to the realm of the *ruach hakodesh* (divine breath) present in each letter. Known as *tzeruf* (permutation) the exercise consisted of mentally juggling and transposing the Hebrew letters of God’s Sacred Name YHVH and chanting the resulting phrases until they were no longer recognizable.

Here, in his own words, are Abulafia’s *tzeruf* instructions for attaining what he called “prophetic consciousness”:

Take each letter . . . and vocalize it with a long breath. Do not breathe between the two letters, only hold the breath for as long as you can, and then rest for one breath. Do this with each and every letter. There must be two breaths with each letter, one to hold it in during the utterance which *moves* every letter. . . . Each single breath . . . [comprises an inhalation and an exhalation. Do not pronounce the word with the lips between the exhalation and inhalation, but allow the breath and] vocalization to emerge while you are exhaling.²

Bypassing the lengthy preparations for Hebrew letter meditation demanded by his fellow Kabbalists, Abulafia invited all spiritual seekers to accompany him on the “short path” to God because he believed that the divine breath embodied in language connected all human beings—regardless of religion, gender, race, or

ethnicity—to their sacred origin. In this pursuit, all language became for him one language. Divesting words and phrases of meaning, he taught anyone willing to learn how to permute individual letters, spinning them out of recognition until breath and sound merged with their divine source. That was enough to set him apart from his peers. But Abulafia didn't stop there. In addition to opening the practice to women and gentiles without demanding lengthy preparations, he also alienated the rabbinic authorities by predicting that the Jewish Messianic Year would arrive in 1290, causing many Jews to sell their belongings and move to Palestine to await the end of days. When the "Messianic Year" came and went without incident the rabbis publicly denounced Abulafia as a charlatan and he died, disgraced in the eyes of all but a few loyal followers.

Jewish mystics were (and still are) regarded as "aberrant" by the religious mainstream; but none seem to have been so vilified as Abraham Abulafia. He was undoubtedly the most innovative master of Hebrew letter meditation, yet he is rarely named even among his fellow Kabbalists. Still, Abulafia continues to fascinate students of Jewish mysticism. Perhaps it is his defiance of religious authority that makes him so attractive to contemporary spiritual seekers in pursuit of a radical new direction. Though tinged by patriarchal attitudes toward the body, his liberal ecumenism certainly provides a healthy foundation for a more "woman-friendly" Kabbalah. His practical, detailed instructions on combining breath and vocalization of the letters (a happy departure from most impenetrable Kabbalistic meditation manuals) invite even novices to practice—or so I thought when I tried experimenting with Abulafia's Hebrew letter meditation on my own.

JUGGLING LETTERS

Since I was already familiar with more complicated yoga breathing techniques, Abulafia's instructions seemed simple enough when I sat down on a floor cushion in a corner of the dining alcove in my Greenwich Village apartment, my legs crossed in lotus position and my right hand in my left palm, and began visualizing the transposed Hebrew letters of the *Tetragrammaton* (YHVH) on the

white wall in front of me while reciting the Divine Name. Within a few minutes I lost consciousness of everything but my breathing, which seemed to be coming from the wall opposite. The color of the room around me had changed, and I, like the dining table and chairs, was infused by a blazing light that alternated between blue and green. It had been a sunny spring day when I started, but the sun disappeared suddenly and a flash of lightning crashed through the open window into the room only a few inches from where I sat reciting the Name. The distinct scent of some flower or spice was the last thing I noticed before I heard my neighbor banging on the door.

"There's a burning smell coming from your apartment!" she shouted. "Are you all right? Did you hear that incredible clap of thunder?"

Blinking my eyes, I looked at her, still uncertain about how I had gotten up and opened the door without knowing where, and who, I was. The sun was shining and the birds were singing outside as if nothing had happened. All that remained of the spooky event was the strong scent of flowers.

"I was just meditating," I said.

"Were you burning incense?"

"No."

"Well, you'd better stop whatever you're doing or you'll burn the house down," she said.

Taking her advice, I stopped meditating and made myself a cup of tea. An hour later, I left the house to mail a letter. The only lingering aftereffect of my meditation was that the sun felt too bright and hurt my eyes. An uptown Madison Avenue bus was barreling along at top speed. Though I hadn't planned to go further than the corner mailbox, I suddenly felt impelled to get on the bus and go—where, I didn't know. Though I was standing on a corner two blocks from the bus stop, the driver pulled up alongside me, opened the doors and said, "Get in." I paid the fare and was about to sit down when he stopped at a mailbox a few blocks away and, nodding his head, said, "Go ahead and mail your letter. I'll wait." Never thinking to ask how he knew I was carrying a letter in my bag, I got off, mailed the letter, and got back on the bus. It seemed exactly right that the bus driver would know exactly what I wanted to do and comply with it.

At 42nd Street I got off and walked to the public library certain that there was something in the building that I had to see. Entering the front hall, I saw a sign announcing an exhibition of etchings by William Blake. Instantly, I knew why I had come. In a trance I walked from room to room staring into the glass cases at the now familiar electric blues and burning greens of Blake's visions. It was as if I were still sitting in meditation on the floor of my apartment perspiring and my heart pounding. My mind seemed to have separated itself from my body. Yet at the same time I was alert, even mildly euphoric at knowing that I had the power to make things happen. Unfortunately, my high was short-lived.

Leaving the library, I felt myself growing increasingly uncomfortable. My body yearned to curl up in a dark corner and let my mind fly off on its own. Struggling not to give way to the impulse, I forced myself to walk to the Lexington Avenue subway station, stopping for black coffee when I felt myself drifting off. Somehow, I managed to get on the train and arrive home in one piece. But I couldn't sleep that night; every time I closed my eyes, I would see the electric blue and green colors. Numbed and exhausted, I dragged myself through the next two days before the trance wore off.

My experience with Abulafia's Hebrew letter meditation taught me that his techniques were useful only if they were not aimed at inducing prophecy or visions but at concentrated self-awareness. And even then, they had to be approached with caution. Grounded in the everyday experience of women, my feminist version of Hebrew letter meditation would have to surrender the fugitive "high" of Abulafia's prophetic consciousness and be brought back down to earth. With that in mind, I went back to explore what Kabbalists consider the basic building blocks of life—the Hebrew "Mother Letters" *Alef, Mem, Shin* (אמנ)—with the intention of seeing how they could be practically applied by women meditators.

FIRST MEDITATION: THE "MOTHER LETTERS"

Comprising the elements of air, water, and fire inherent in the breath, the "Mother Letters" are agents of transformation synony-

mous with the cycles of creation and change. Shorn of their esoteric meaning, they not only represent the physical components of the breath—they *are* the breath. In other words, instead of using them to manipulate the breath, all a woman has to do is *just breathe naturally* letting the "Mother Letters" do their work. To emphasize their uniquely "feminine" quality, she can see them as a simple meditative device for evoking the power residing in every woman to create and transform herself.

(To ensure that this and all the other meditations in this book will effectively bring about this transformation, I recommend setting aside a practice period of 25 minutes, preferably at the same time every day.)

INSTRUCTIONS

Begin by seating yourself comfortably either on a floor cushion or a straight-back chair with your spine, head, and neck aligned. With eyes partly open, follow the rhythm of your breath, experiencing it as the distinctly feminine life force flowing through your body. Gradually, as your breathing slows down, you may begin your inhalation as the inaudible sound "AH," followed by the inaudible sound "MESH." Continue breathing this way, opening yourself entirely to the sensations around you and allowing them to become one with your breath. Do not shut out any sound, smell, or tactile sensation as it arises. Do not try to control your breathing. If your mind wanders or you are distracted, simply return to letting the Mother Letters "breathe" as you.

At the end of the twenty-five minute meditation period, open your eyes fully and sit quietly for a few seconds before getting up.

SECOND MEDITATION: "LADY WISDOM"

The earliest reference to the Shekhinah as *Chokhmah* (Wisdom) appears in the Book of Proverbs: "I am Wisdom . . . understanding and power are mine. . . . Before the mountains were settled in their place, long before the hills, I was born" (8:12–30). Much has been written about the many guises of Lady Wisdom in both Jewish and

Christian traditions.³ But for purposes of meditation, it is essential to recognize that *Chokhmah* is more than a metaphor for the Shekhinah, revealing herself as the sustainer of life only to those women who meditate and actually experience themselves as her dwelling place. To avoid speculation on the meaning of *Chokhmah* this meditation focuses attention solely on the letters comprising her name.

Transposing the Hebrew letters of the word *Chokhmah* results in the formation of the question *Coakh-Mah?*—"The Strength of What?" (*Coakh*—Strength—is identified with the Shekhinah as the divine emanation of *Gevurah*—Judgment.) But the question resulting from transposing the letters is not an intellectual conundrum to be solved by logical means. It is not a mantra. Neither is it a riddle. Similar to meditation on the "Mother Letters" in its approach, meditating on the question "*Coakh-Mah?*" is a more advanced way of focusing the mind on a single point. See it as a vehicle for concentration, to be inwardly repeated with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

INSTRUCTIONS

Seated comfortably with back, neck, and head aligned and eyes partly open, begin by following your inhalations and exhalations. As you did in meditating on the Mother Letters *Aleph*, *Mem*, *Shin*, identify the life force flowing through your body as the "feminine" attribute of Wisdom as *strength* or *power*. When you have established a comfortable breathing pattern and your mind is quiet, allow the question "The strength of what?" to arise from the depths of your belly. Merely let it float up on the breath on its own, without thinking about it. Do not look for a rational answer to the question. Do not mentally repeat or chant it as you would a *mantra*. When you have reached the point where breath, mind, and body are indistinguishable, the answer to the question will come of itself.

As in all meditation, do not get up immediately after twenty-five minutes, but remain seated with your eyes fully open for a few seconds before resuming activities.