

Abraham Abulafia – A Jewish Yogi

I first learned of Abraham Abulafia's mysticism when Prof. Moshe Idel gave a lecture at the Elul Beit Midrash sometime during the early 1990s. He noted that Abulafia integrated breathing and head movements into his instruction, and said that as far as he could see, these originated in yoga. This statement aroused my curiosity, but over twenty years passed until I opened Abulafia's books directly encountered the unique technique that he devised.

Abraham Abulafia was born in Spain in 1240. He wandered extensively. After a brief sojourn in Eretz Israel, he continued to Greece, where he married. Afterwards, he stayed for a time in Italy, where he studied and was deeply influenced by Maimonidean philosophy. On returning to Spain, he encountered the Kabbalah and embarked on a serious study of *Sefer Yetzira*. His writings are prolific and include in-depth references to many subjects including theology, poetry, prose and the philosophy of language. In his writings, he utilizes Maimonidean philosophical concepts and relies greatly on *Sefer Yetzira*, which claims that God created the world using ten *sefirot* and twenty-two letters.

In Abulafia's view, the goal of the most exalted life is attainment, and the best way to this attainment is to deeply focus on God by uttering the combination of consonants and vowels that comprise His name, since the divine name is God's essence: "The wisdom of the names is itself truth. It leads man to the ultimate completeness which is the grasping of the Divine" (*Hayey Ha'Olam Haba*, 60).

In keeping with this perspective, Abulafia adhered to a practice of uttering the name, some of the basis for which he seems to have learned from the Hasidic writings of Ashkenaz. He also deepened and instituted innovations in the method of letter combinations, but among his practical teachings, most outstanding is the technique of uttering the name that combines breathing, head movements, and sometimes, hand movements.

In his books, Abulafia teaches methods for uttering a number of permutations of the Divine name: the "Ayin-Bet" (ע"ב), the Tetragrammaton (יהו"ה) and others. A number of his many books are collections of correspondence with his students, through which he conveys to them the philosophical background and enumerates with thoroughness and patience the logic of this path, its causes and results. He also demonstrates in a thorough manner the methods of utterance and their different classifications. The uttering is performed when one is alone, at night, and after combining the letters in writing. The uttering leads to elevation and revelation, and therefore, it is called "prophetic Kabbalah."

Since I practice yoga techniques that combine meditation, breath and movement, I was intrigued to learn that in the Middle Ages there was a rabbi who integrated breathing exercises in a unique way into our tradition, and it prompted me to read his works carefully. I could not have predicted to what extent Abulafia would clarify in his teaching the importance of techniques I had learned in the Far East, and to what extent the integration of breathing with head movements in combination with the production of the sounds from the letters of God's name would echo vibrantly in my heart.

I began studying Abulafia with Avraham Leader following a chance meeting at a "shiva," (a mourning period) of a dear friend's mother. Avraham Leader has been lovingly studying Abulafia for 40 years, and reads and reflects on his books again and again. He generously guided me through opaque passages and led the readings into the labyrinth of Abulafia's books into places in the text to which he was uniquely privy. I thus became aware of the singular and tremendous importance of this sole Jewish mystic of the Middle Ages, who was, in my estimation, also a yogi sage*, who studied yoga techniques of breath, concentration and reflection*, and the wisdom yielded by their practice.

Worthy Practitioners

Abulafia did not only teach his unique way to his students, but also looked after his "grandchildren" and "great grandchildren," his kabbalistic successors. It was extremely important for him that the knowledge and method that he taught be passed down so that the individuals who learned the technique of uttering the names over which he labored and who would utter the name, would not do so in vain. He therefore explains in detail how to find suitable students and cultivate them. In his main work, *Ḥayey Ha'Olam HaBa*, Abulafia emphasizes the responsibility of one who has received the teachings of uttering the names to in turn pass on what he learned to those who desire to learn and are worthy of teaching: "And if he was tested by his rabbi and found faithful, his rabbi is obligated to transmit to him anything he asks of him to the farthest reaches of his knowledge, and to not conceal from him even the ultimate point of greatest depth if he is capable of receiving it." (*Ḥayey Ha'Olam HaBa*, 38-41). And yet, Abulafia emphasizes that the worthiness of the student must be verified: "But if his rabbi tested him and he was found unfaithful in all of his trials, he is categorically prohibited from revealing to him even a small aspect of this wisdom". (*Ibid.*, *ibid*). The rabbi thus tests the qualities of the student. Abulafia specifies that he should possess love and wisdom, compassion, patience and generosity: "Afterwards, the rabbi must test the student in the human sense known

as the qualities of human beings, such as strengthening of the heart and love of wisdom for its own sake, and scant anger and great patience, and compassion for every person, and even compassion for his enemies when they are not enemies of God, and generosity of spirit and unassuming presence and humility and joyfulness of heart, and suppression of the evil impulse (*yetzer*) in most matters over which he has power, and scorn for the false lust for power and honor, and scorn for the lust for bad and excessive foodstuffs and scorn for lusting after forbidden women” (Ibid., *ibid*). And when it is apparent that his qualities of character are good, the teacher verifies that he is emotionally strong and stable, and verifies that he has no intention of growing wealthy or famous by way of the Kabbalah, “and in addition to all this he must examine his knowledge [to ascertain] whether it is strong or weak, impoverished or plentiful. And if he is strong and great, it is necessary to also see whether the focus of his effort in most of his study is the pursuit of true wisdom that ensures the soul life in the world to come, or whether his intention in most of his study is not for the sake of Heaven, and if his intention is to study wisdom in order to grow wealthy” (Ibid., *ibid*).

If the student passes these tests, the rabbi must answer all of the questions that the student asks, since in Abulafia’s view, there is no essential difference between teacher and student. Both have the same intention and grasp: “But their intention is one and their knowledge is also a single knowledge in all that the student grasped, except that the knowledge of the rabbi is much broader than the knowledge of the student due to the extensive study of the rabbi” (Ibid., *ibid*).

Abulafia presented his students with a method that is systematic but not frozen and capable of developing. From his perspective, the teacher is not at the center, and his knowledge is neither absolute nor exclusive. God, to whom the utterances are directed, and the method of utterance itself are at the center of this mysticism. Abulafia makes this position clear in a communication to one of his students: “I have no doubt that the glory [of God] will reveal itself to you, and will appear before you in a manner through which you will be able to recognize its strength.....And what can I teach you, I or a thousand like me, which (the glory) may teach you in one brief moment of wonderful wisdom that we have never ever heard” (*Sefer HaHesheq*).

The Ayin Bet (Name of 72 Letters) – Tantra and Deconstruction

In his books, Abulafia presents a number of manners of uttering the names are based on the technique of mystical utterances known among the Hasidim of Ashkenaz, and expands it greatly, adding head movements and breathing, and transferring its use to a pure spiritual dimension.

The Ayin-Bet is a name of God that is itself made up of 72 names. It is so called since according to the numerological system known as “gematriya,” whereby each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is

assigned a number, the value of the letter “ayin” (ע) is 70, and “bet” (ב) is 2, totaling 72. The name is created, according to Abulafia’s instructions in *Hayey Ha’Olam Haba*, by a particular way of restringing the words of three verses from the Book of Numbers, chapter 14 (19-21). Each of these verses has 72 letters. Seventy-two names result when the first letter of the first verse is joined with the last of the second verse, and the first of the third verse, followed by the same process with the next letter in (the second of the first verse, the next-to-last of the second verse, and the second of the first verse. For example, verse 19 begins with the letter "ו", verse 20 ends with the letter "ה", and verse 21 begins with the letter "ו", so that the first of the 72 combinations in the Ayin-Bet name is ו-ה-ו, while the second is ו-ל-י, the third is ט-י-ט and so on. The verses are as follows. The English translation (Alter, 2004) is provided to convey the context, though the Ayin-Bet name can of course be constructed only from the Hebrew text:

י.ט. וַיִּסַּע מִלְאֲכָה הַאֲלֹהִים הַהֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם; וַיִּסַּע עַמּוּד הָעָנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם.
 כ. וַיָּבֵא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעָנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּאָר אֶת-הַלַּיְלָה; וְלֹא-קָרַב זֶה אֶל-זֶה כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה.
 כ"א. וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַיָּם וַיִּזְלַף הַיָּם אֶת-הַיָּם בְּרִיחַ קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לְחִרְבָּה; וַיִּבְדְּקֵוּ הַפְּיִים.

19: And the messenger of God that was going before the camp of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them. 20 And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and there was the cloud and the dark, and it lit up the night, and they did not draw near each other all night. 21 And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD led the sea with a mighty east wind all night, and he made the sea dry ground, and the waters were split apart.

After presenting the Ayin-Bet, Abulafia supplies his students with nine additional names that derive from this name, but are formed in a different order. Abulafia describes a number of different practices with the Ayin-Bet and the nine additional combinations. In *Hayey Ha’Olam Haba*, devoted mostly to utterances of this name, he presents two methods, one a simple utterance, and the second involving placing the letters inside the body in nine different places. In both, the utterance is executed in combination with breathing techniques and head movements. In *Sefer HaHesheq*, Abulafia adds certain hand movements. Both placing the letters inside the body and hand movements are known techniques in the Hindu-Buddhist world of Tantra. In Tantra, there is a refined body within a physical body, comprised of a number of chakras. The word chakra means “wheel,” and it denotes an energetic center with a round shape. Each chakra has a letter and pronunciation, a “bija mantra,” and the practice comprises repeating the letter while concentrating on that chakra. The chakras are arrayed vertically along the spinal column.

And yet, Abulafia’s practice of utterances includes characteristics that do not exist in Tantric practice. In the various Tantra traditions, there are seven to nine chakras: the lowermost chakra

is located at the base of the spinal column in the area of the anus, and the uppermost chakra is at the base of the head, or above it. In Abulafia's teachings, the body divides into three central parts: **head** – the head cavity, **innards** – the chest cavity, and **end** – the stomach cavity. Each cavity divides into three additional parts: **front, middle and dorsal**. Each of Abulafia's nine cavities is thus organized both vertically and horizontally. An additional difference is the manner in which the letters are placed. In Hindu or Buddhist Tantra, to the best of my knowledge, each chakra has its own bija mantra, and there is a particular order for pronouncing the letter, usually from bottom to top. In contrast to this fixed order, in Abulafia's practice of placing the letters there is no set order in which the letter is placed and pronounced, and there is also not a designated letter for one cavity or another. Everything is ever-changing. For example, the practitioner states the area of placement out loud– for example, top of the head, and then, he utters the letter while focusing and placing the letter's image and the sound in the front part of the head. He focuses his thought on the letter in its place, until he decides to pronounce the next letter. As stated, since there are many sequences of the letters of the name, there is no fixed order of letters or set location where they are placed in the body and therefore, the process of utterance is intense and activating.

The combination of breathing, head movements, placing the letter and focusing on it while pronouncing it, deconstructs the ordinary meaning of language, and as a result, the practitioner's ordinary perception of reality. The word breaks down into sounds, and sometimes is reassembled into an unanticipated word. The continuous changing of the various combinations neutralizes our everyday perception of reality. Since our thought has nothing to hold on to, carrying out the head-hand movements with breathing intensifies the consciousness of intentionality and our various unspoken thoughts. Although this practice emerged in the Middle Ages, it strongly resembles the deconstructionist insights of Derrida: the uttering catalyzes habits of thinking and enables us to see differently.

The Name יהו"ה – Uttering the Ineffable Name (Tetragrammaton)

Abulafia also describes various methods for invoking the ineffable name. The essence of the technique is described in the book *Or Ha-Sekhel*, whose two sections describe two different methods. The first form is uttering the letters א, י, ה, ו, which Abulafia considers to be the letters of God, since they comprise the two names אהיה and יהו"ה. Pronunciation involves combining letters, for example, אה, או, אה, אה, while varying the vocalization. In addition, Abulafia teaches the technique of the "enriched circle" that will be explained below. These techniques of

pronouncing the Tetragrammaton employ the same combination of head movements, breathing and pronunciation used to pronounce the “Ayin Bet,” but in contrast to the variations in the “Ayin-Bet” name, when uttering the name יהוה the order is fixed, and can be easily memorized. Therefore, concentration is always unidirectional, becoming increasingly strong and intensified. Abulafia suggests preliminary preparations for uttering the Tetragrammaton, and in *Or Ha-Sekhel*, he speaks of writing down letter combinations. However, in *Sefer HaHesheq* he raises the additional possibility of silent meditation, when he writes: “You must prepare yourself to be in a special place that is set apart and to recall the secret of the singular name and your distinctness and separateness from every speaking creature, and also from all the vanities of companions, so that none of your earlier human, natural, necessary and involuntary thoughts remain in your heart” (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 16)

Even a traditional person who fears uttering the Tetragrammaton has nothing to fear from Abulafia’s technique of utterance. One of the ways of overcoming the prohibition against pronouncing the Name in vain is to both say it and not say it. If one pauses the breath and then resumes breathing after the letter *yod*, the name is not pronounced in a single breath, but rather, in disjointed syllables. In such a manner, the name is uttered and not uttered. An additional issue is how the name יהוה is vocalized, since in the Torah, there is no vocalization. Abulafia responds to this dilemma with the technique of “enriched rounding,” according to which the first letter of the Name, י, is pronounced with five different vowels – *holam*, *qamatz*, *tseire*, *hiriq* and *shuruq*; the letter ה is always pronounced with a *holam*, and the letter ו is pronounced with a *segol* or *qamatz*. In addition, Abulafia scatters clues here and there regarding the complete vocalization of יהוה, as in his book *Otsar Eden Ganuz*.

Pranayama Exercises that Include Head Movements and Pronunciation of Sounds

When we first read about the uttering techniques in the book *Or Ha-Sekhel* I remembered that many years ago I learned a similar technique in India, I met a couple in north India who were students of Swami Gitananda from Pondicherry. They told me about special breathing practices that they had learned from him a few years earlier. After they described the main aspects of the technique, I asked to learn the exercises from them. They generously opened their notebook and dictated the various exercises to me, among them a brief series that combines breathing, neck movements, and pronunciation of sounds. I wrote in my notebook as follows:

First one must sit with the back straight and legs crossed. The sitting [position] must be comfortable and stable. Afterwards, the neck must be turned to the right. Breath into the stomach, and in the exhale, pronounce the sound *alef* with [the vowel] *qamatz*, and while pronouncing it, turn the head back towards the center. Afterwards, the practitioner turns the neck left, breathes into the stomach and exhales and pronounces the sound “oo,” *alef* with a *shuruq*, and turns his head back to the center. On the third time, the practitioner turns his head upwards, breathes into the stomach, and in the exhale produces the sound “ee” with a *hiriq*, while bending the head down towards the chest. And finally, when the head is leaning down, the practitioner inhales while producing the sound mmmm. When he brings his head back, he returns to the center. This sequence is to be repeated nine times.

Although I performed this series a number of times, I did not find it interesting or useful, and forgot about it completely. Now, however, I am struck by its similarity to Abulafia’s utterance practice. Moreover, I was surprised that the same technique I learned from Swami Gitananda’s students was not mentioned in any book on yoga that I read, and was also not taught in any of the many places I visited in India. To the best of my knowledge, only Swami Gitananda taught this technique, and he transmitted it to his student, who learned it from a teacher in the Himalayas. Avraham Leader encouraged me to research possible connections between the methods, and suggested that when I practice the utterances, I integrate into my practice the knowledge that I accumulated in my breathing practice. Thanks to his advice, the worlds connected. I performed the utterances while maintaining proper posture, and when the breath softened, I allowed it, when it reached its end, to stop, as I learned in yoga breathing techniques. As I proceeded in this manner, some of Abulafia’s instructions became clear. In what follows, I will quote directly from Rabbi Abulafia’s instructions, as well as Indian commentators who write about working with the breath, in order to explain the precise manner of breathing and pronunciation in the practice of utterances.

Description of the Technique

From *Hayey Ha’Olam Haba*, 70-71, and *Or Ha-Sekhel*, 84-85

The technique Abulafia proposes for pronouncing the letters and the vowels is important, particularly in uttering the Tetragrammaton and the Ayin-Bet name. I will write about the physical basis of the uttering practice – the way the head movements are carried out, the breath,

and the formation of the mouth for each vowel: the manner in which the body is held, how the movements are carried out, and the method for breathing and producing the sound.

But before launching into the body, let us consider for a moment the “intention” that the rabbi speaks about before describing the manner of utterance. In *Sefer HaHesheq*, Abulafia says that “There are many names for desire, and each of them denotes interest, such as will and intention and choice and love and lust etc.” Will and intention are prerequisites to any physical activity. And indeed, Abulafia himself begins with intention to describe the praxis in the next world – “and focus with elevated intention.” This can be understood as a directive to maintain focus while practicing the utterances, but it is possible to delve deeper into the desire and also the intentionality of the practice about to be executed. It is possible even to imagine it for a moment prior to carrying it out. All of these together are intention. After the directive to “focus with elevated intention,” the physical practice begins:

The breath should be such that with every letter you take an elongated breath after the vowel with which [the letter] it is sounded. And all of the sounds are only five in number, and they are an acronym*... and this is their order א ה ו ש י . And in all of the places utter the single letter according to way [that the *name* of] the letter is vocalized as well as the [other] letters with the same vocalization, breathe within them in a single, even breath.

Here, Abulafia explains that all of the letters will be divided into five vocalizations - א ה ו ש י . Each of the 22 letters begins with one of them – For example, the first syllable of the letter *alef* (א) is vocalized with a *qamatz*, the letter *beyt* (ב) with a *tseire*, the letter *shin* (ש) with a *hiriq*, the letter *nun* (נ) with a *shuruq*, the letter *yod* (י) with a *holam*, etc. In uttering the *Ayin-Bet* name, each letter is pronounced with the vowel found in the letter’s name. In other words, א or ל will be pronounced with the vowel *qamatz*, letters such as מ and כ are pronounced with a *tseire*, etc.

Only at the end does he mention the breath, in the instruction to “make the breaths even.” In stating this, we understand that the breath is not sporadic, but must be controlled in order to achieve quiet breaths of equal length.” And also, the sound produced must be made calmly: “Do not lengthen [it] with any inflection, but say it calmly and with presence of mind” (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 17).

When uttering the letter, there are also movements. Here, we must pay attention to two movements that take place simultaneously. One movement is physical and external – the head movement, but in our imagination, we must even move the heart, which is internal. “And after you begin uttering the letter, start moving your heart and head, your heart in its [imagined]

shape because it's internal, and your head itself because it is external. And move your head in the shape of the vowel that is in the letter you are uttering."

After he explains the principle, he teaches the head movement for each of the five vowels, which is tied, in each case, to the location and shape of the vowel.

"Holam: And this is how the movement should be drawn. Know that the dot that is above is called the *holam*. And this is the only dot that is above, while the four remaining points are beneath the letter."

Since the dot in the *holam* is above, the head movement is to be directed upwards as we will read in what follows: "First, do not lean your head right or left or up or down at all, but straighten your head evenly as if it is in the weighing pan of a balance scale, in the manner you speak with a person at your height, face to face." Here Abulafia states the origin point of the *holam* movement – the head facing straight forward. "And afterwards, draw the movements of the letter while uttering, and propel your head to the side upwards towards the sky, and close your eyes and open your mouth, and your words will generate light." The head faces upwards during the exhalation and pronunciation of the letter, and the sound "o" [יֹ] is produced when the mouth closes finally into a small circle like the letter "o" in English.

"Qamatz: The vowel known as *qamatz* such as אָ, like a kind of staff with a dot below it [...] Intonate the letter and move your head from left to right lengthwise like the shape of a straight line, like it was drawn by the scribe. Afterwards, again return your head to the east where you are facing, in which direction you utter the Name. Since you must be facing east as one who is praying there. Then bow down slowly and complete everything at once [breath and head movement] as I directed you with the first letter." It is readily apparent that the movement is also related to the shape of the *qamatz*. There is a straight, horizontal line, and therefore the movement is from right to left, as if, with our head movement, we are creating that line. Afterwards, there is the straight line that goes downwards, and this is the movement of the head facing downwards when the vowel is pronounced. The question is whether there is any importance to the fact that the head movement is from left to right. A partial answer is provided when we examine the parallel instructions given in *Or HaSekhel* where Abulafia wrote: "And with the *tseire* your head continues from left to right, while with the *qamatz*, from right to left." Why is there a reversal of directions here – here the *tseire* is from left to right and *qamatz* is from right to left, unlike the explanation of the Ayin-Bet name. And why isn't the lowering of the head in the *qamatz* mentioned here? To the best of my knowledge, in Abulafia's writing, this change is not explained, but we see that Abulafia exhibits an openness and flexibility regarding the manner of utterance. He probably intended the movement when uttering the

tetragrammaton be from right to left, without lowering the head, while for the Ayin-Bet, the prescription was from left to right. In all likelihood, one of the books was written before the other, and the author's view of the head movements underwent a transformation over the years. An additional question is how to pronounce the *qamatz*. According to the Ashkenazic and Yemenite pronunciation, as a long "o"? Or the Sephardic pronunciation, as in "ah"? According to Avraham Leader, the correct sound here is a long "o." His opinion corresponds to the view of voice experts with whom I spoke, who claimed that in pronouncing the "ah" sound the lower jaw must relax and drop down from the upper. When this is done, the sound is different from the *patach* and sounds rounder, similar to the Ashkenazic and Yemenite *qamatz* - a kind of open "o."

"Tseire. There is also a vowel whose name is *tseire*, as the ם which is two points situated one to the right and one to the left. When you utter it with one of the seven letters that I wrote, begin by uttering the letter, and in its movement, nod your head from right to left, opposite from the *qamatz*." Here, the explanation is patently clear. The head moves in the reverse direction of the *qamatz* along the horizontal line. The *tseire*, in contrast to the *segol*, is a fuller movement of the mouth, like the difference between the letter "a" in "care" (*segol*) and "ai" in "air" (*tseire*), and corresponds to this shape of the mouth (closure and expansion).

"Hiriq. After you complete this, again perform the utterance in the place where the letter *shin* is in the shape of a *hiriq* such as "ח" and move your head down in the manner of one bowing before Hashem when you speak with Him, when He is standing before you." Here the logic of the head movement is according to the shape of the vowel. Since the vowel is located beneath the letter, we lower our head downwards, as in the *holam* where the vowel is above the letter, and we moved the head upwards. In addition, in the statement "in the manner of one bowing before Hashem when you speak with him," there is a suggestion of a movement of the heart, expressing bowing or subservience. And as with the *qamatz*, here as well, the lower jaw is somewhat released, and the sound is rounder. That is the correct way of pronouncing the *hiriq*.

"Know that these movements constitute the coronation of Hashem from four directions of the heavens." Up, down, right and left. In other words, in the very head movements together with the pronunciation of the letters of the Name, we are crowning Hashem across the entire expanse of our world, since the world comprises place and time. Time is measured in the length of the breath and the sound. The place is set in space through the head movements.

"Shuruq: And again, in uttering [the letter] *nun*, coronate Hashem, originating in yourself [from yourself outwards] straight ahead, until your neck is stretched straight, as far as you can. Do not raise your head and do not lower it; rather, everything along the straight path [forward] in the shape of a *shuruq*, like this – ן – which is three straight points considered as one in a [single]

letter when there is a *vav* (ו) with it, such as “וּכּ,” and it all refers to the same thing.” Here as well we can see that the technique of the head movement mimics the shape of the points that make up the shape of the *shuruq*, three points placed along a diagonal. Here, the forward and backward movement completes the two last directions of up-down and right-left.

The Heart, the Seer and the Seen

“And the heart gives rise to a moving life spirit and propels the force of desire and binds in its movements all of the spirits of the body and all of its powers. . . . And when the heart prepares itself to understand the speech that reaches it not through the ears, the soul bends its ears to it and the ears of the heart grow stronger.” (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 69)

Now we will consider the movements of the heart and their essence. From the practice of the utterances themselves and remaining in the bodily experience created through the head movements and the vowel sounds, the internal stance that is germane to each of the five vowels can be extricated.

In Abulafia’s explanation regarding uttering the Ayin-Bet name, we find subtle clues regarding the position of the heart. For example, “Intonate the *alef*, as well as every letter you utter with horror, awe and fear, until the soul takes great joy in its attainment.” Beyond the technique, this is the beginning of a discourse on the internal stance that must be cultivated when beginning an utterance. In *Sefer HaHesheq*, the process becomes clear through the creation of a “seer” and a “seen” within the practitioner. Abulafia writes:

And after you do so, direct your face to Hashem, and imagine that He is a person standing before you awaiting you to speak. And he is thus prepared to answer anything you ask Him. You make an utterance and he responds [...] Therefore, straighten your heart immediately and prostrate yourself to the form contemplated in your heart, which is before you, and which has a movement, i.e. the movement caused by the form (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 16).

When Abulafia writes “direct your face to Hashem, and imagine that He is a person standing before you awaiting you to speak,” we understand that the utterance is not between a person and himself. He is not alone. He is sitting before someone, who stands across from him attentively looking at him – someone who sees his head movements, who is listening to the tones as he sounds out the letter. Abulafia commands us to imagine this, both the One who stands before us and the fact that He is looking at us, hearing us and also responding, as he says: “And he is thus prepared to answer anything you ask Him. You make an utterance and he responds.”

Regarding the question and answer, this is one of the manners of uttering the Ayin-Bet. According to this method (one of several), the practitioner first states the place in the body

where one of the letters of the Ayin-Bet name has been placed – for example, the top of the head – and only then does he pronounce the letter. “And then begin uttering and first say ‘top of the head’ with a long breath and great calm, and afterwards, imagine that the One is standing and answering you, and you answer yourself in an altered voice, so that the answer will not resemble the question. Also, do not elongate the response at all, but say it calmly and with centeredness.”

Deleted:

Here, the practitioner plays two roles – he both utters, and the One standing opposite him listens to him and gazes at him. In other words, the “utterer” contains two positions within himself, taking on the two leading roles in the play. In one role he sits and prepares to utter the letter, and carries out all the actions that will lead to uttering the letter. He is in an isolated place, sitting with head erect, taking elongated, relaxed breaths. But at the same time, he is aware that someone is standing opposite him, attentive to him and observing him. At the moment that the practitioner expands his consciousness to embrace the entity standing opposite himself, he is rewarded with seeing himself sitting, breathing, moving his head and pronouncing the letter out loud. He is both the “seer” and the “seen.” He both gazes and utters. In so doing, he can observe and understand his own uttering and sense his heart.

“Straighten your heart immediately and prostrate yourself to the form contemplated in your heart which is before you, and which has a vowel- which motivated the sound that you made, whose nature is imprinted on the divine throne, and its name is the angel of Adonai, who is midway between you and your Creator, which is His Honorable Exaltedness.” Here he implies that the figure with whom we identify and who is the essentially the cause of our motion is an angel of God. We are carrying out a communication with a supreme entity, a kind of telepathic simulation.

I would like, however, to consider not the angel, but the practitioner who looks at himself and hears himself through the eyes and ears of the angel who placed him before himself. What does he understand-receive when he sees his head making the five movements and hears himself intoning-singing the five vowels? He sees and hears the movements-positions of his heart, as they are manifested in the sounds produced and in the head movements. The person looking and uttering and listening to him rests his gaze and directs his listening not only on the intonation and movement, but also their completion, and after their completion, on the pause. He gazes at the neck that moves the head, and the face – the movements as well as the pause, and he rests his gaze there. He listens carefully to the sound of the letter, measures its sound tone and shade, and its flow, as well as the quiet that follows it. “And the sound together with the air that exits the mouth with the speech is like the melodies, which make themselves heard with much variety, and in movements that are alternately rising and falling, and leaning and

increasing and warming the instrument of hearing, to receive and draw imaginatings of the voice (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 69).

From attentiveness and this resting gaze, the significance of the various movements of the heart becomes apparent, grows clear, and increases for the seer, who is ostensibly the angel standing opposite the practitioner, but also the person himself making the utterance.



In the movie *Late Spring* by Japanese director Yasujirō Ozu, there is a several-moment long segment where one sees neck movements and facial expressions of a widowed father and his daughter who together are watching Noh Theater. From watching the head movements, the neck and the facial expressions of father and daughter, we witness the intensity of feelings of the characters without a word being said. Father and daughter look attentively at the stage, when suddenly, the father turns his head aside and nods with his head to a woman sitting on the other side of the theater. The daughter looks at her father and turns her head, thereby seeing the woman, and also bows her head towards her. She again turns her head and gazes at her father, whose attention has returned to the stage, his face shining. She looks again at the woman, suspicious of the relationship between them. Her face falls and her head begins to bend downwards, until her chin is touching her chest. Afterwards, she straightens her head, looks again at her father, and her face becomes agitated. The body and the face express the movement of the heart with great precision.

Movements of the Heart and Their Position

Ongoing, daily practice of the head movements, combined with breaths and sounding the letters slowly lead to a clarity of the meanings of each of the heart movements. “Begin moving your heart and head, your heart in concept, because it is internal” (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 69). When we carry out the movements, breathing and intonation, we end up pronouncing and fine-tuning various movements of heart in a disciplined manner, cultivating the uniqueness of each and every movement. Due to the many repetitions as well as the involuntary pauses in each of the movements, their quality and essence becomes clear. It is reasonable to assume, then, that when the practitioner views himself through the angel’s eyes, he begins to identify the salient features of each movement and its significance. As a result, through the utterance itself, the inner meaning of the various heart movements becomes clear.

Holam – longing. The gaze is directed and rests on the arched neck, the movement of the mouth, the “clogged” eyes that are closed and looking upward, with the head thrown back.

Qamatz – becoming stronger, devotion. When uttering the Ayin-Bet, at first, the head turns right and therefore, during the movement, the focus is on the left side of the face, the slightly-dropped jaw, and the mouth. The head is facing all the way down, the focus is the neck and the area between the eyes. (When uttering the tetragrammaton – the head faces left, and therefore the focus is on the neck, the mouth, and the right side of the face).

Tseire – experience of adventure and the intensification of joy. The focus is the smiling mouth, the face, and the left side of the neck.

Hiriq – lowering/bowing, strengthening. Focus is on the form of the mouth, the back of the neck, the back of the head, and the front of the body.

Shuruq – strengthening and equilibrating. Focus on straightening the head and back – not downwards, not upwards, not to the left, not to the right, and in its forward motion, in the face and shape of the mouth.

The very practice of these exercises reinforces the ways of meeting, the internal stance towards the addressee. When the practitioner gazes at himself, he realizes that when his head is facing upwards, the movement of his heart is yearning, longing, and when the head is facing downwards, that is a physical expression of his submission, like a subject who lowers his gaze downwards when encountering his master, and therefore, the heart movement is one of bowing.

The *tseire* comprises two points on a plane. The *tseire* is also the impulse (*yetzer*) subordinated to the worship of God, and the movement of the mouth when pronouncing the sound is like a smile of joy, of power. It is the power of the impulse (*yetzer*) and joy that we send as we stand facing whoever stands before us.

The *shuruq* is three points, one beneath the other, and the movement of the head is forward as if drawing nearer, and backwards as if distancing. The entire movement is carried out along the same plane, suggestive of moderation or a balanced position.

Regarding the *qamatz* I have thought long and hard – a movement that includes side-to-side and then downwards motion, in combination with the wide open mouth, perhaps is suggestive of our entire lives, the desire to crown God over all of our life and our deeds, and to bow our heads in God's presence. The head movements with the *qamatz*, then, express devotion.

Abulafia relates to the matter of the head movements and their significance when he says that we coronate God in each direction in which we move our head – north, south, east and west, up and down. Does God really need for humans to crown him? His rule is complete and eternal . Perhaps one can understand the totality of our head movements when performing the utterances as an expression of recognizing God's dominion everywhere and forever. In this case, the longing, devotion, joy, submission and balance are different expressions of love directed towards the ruler of the world. The head movement, the breath and the sound produced are an expression of the various positions of the heart, which this practice of utterance cultivates and strengthens.

Pranayama – Stopping: A way of Establishing Wonder

There are two ways in which the movements of the heart grow more potent and clear. One is the acts themselves – breathing, uttering a sound, and movement. The second involves non-doing, at the endpoint of all of these, stopping, and pausing at the end of the exhalation prior to the next inhalation. At this point, the pranayama that I have been practicing diligently for many years met Rabbi Abulafia's practice of utterance. Since in pranayama we practice non-breathing, for example at the end of the exhalation, I found myself pausing naturally at the end of the head movement and pronunciation of the sound. Gradually, the nature of this practice became clear. The pauses are very attentive, and the desire to draw closer to the divine by turning to God through the letters of the divine name, through head movements and utterances, grows more powerful when one pauses and ceases to "do" and to breathe. Then the natural desire to breathe

connects with the position of the heart, which takes shape through the movements of the heart and head.

If we are careful not to create a disturbance where we desperately crave breath, the pause will arouse the desire for air precisely at that moment when we desire God in one of the five positions of the heart, thereby intensifying and clarifying that position. It is important to draw in air in a controlled and pleasant manner, and to breathe without urgency or crisis. Afterwards, we can move on to utter the next letter.

We find insinuations to this effect in Abulafia's text:

Clean any mucous from your throat, so that the mucous will not obstruct the utterance of the letter from your mouth. The upwards ascending movement should be as long as your breath, until the breath stops together with the head movement. And if you still have a moment during the utterance to complete the breath, do not lower your head until you complete everything.

Beyond cleaning the mucous prior to the utterance, there is a description here of adjusting the length of the sound uttered with the breath and the head movement in the *holam* vowel. The desire is to move slowly, while exhaling and pronouncing the sound, so that at the end of the exhalation the head will complete its upward movement as the sound ends. And in any case, the head must be left facing upwards until the exhalation is complete. This, too, is a clue for those who engage in breathing practice. Since if we our exhale is relaxed to the end as Abulafia instructs us, there is a spontaneous stopping of the breath at the end of the exhale, and this pause can be lengthened, since it is possible during this time to pronounce the letter and its sound, to envision it, to concentrate on it and on the position of the heart that is revealed. An additional clue that there indeed is a pause at the end of the utterances is the subsequent sentence, in which Abulafia grants the practitioner permission to "recalibrate himself and to take three breaths between each letter: "And between each letter you are permitted to wait, to correct yourself and to breathe to the extent of three breaths after the breath of an utterance."

Why should there be such a need? It is likely that uttering each letter requires an effort since the activity includes intention, breath, head and heart movement and the pronunciation of a sound. Only when we take into account the possibility that there had been powerful focus of intention and pronunciation and the exhalation extended until it stopped do we understand the logic underlying the statement granting permission to wait for three breaths between each letter.



In the study of pranayama (breathing exercises) in the yoga tradition originating in India, there is also much interest in precise pronunciation and pausing. In the following paragraphs I would

like to explain a number of matters regarding the breathing practice, clarify the concept of pausing and touch on the ancient connection in the yoga tradition between breathing and pronouncing holy sounds. First, I will focus on breathing and stopping breathing. In the canonic work *The Patanjali*, considered the source of classical yoga, written, as far as we know, in the first century CE, approximately four sentences appear on breathing technique. In one of them it says: "When there is stabilization in the movement], pranayama is the cutting off of the process of inhaling and exhaling." (Ch. 2, sutra 49). Thus does Patanjali describe that pranayama is essentially a stopping or a pause of the breath. This perception is explained in a methodical and detailed form in the later literature of Hatha yoga, where various breathing techniques are referred to as "*kumbaka*." The meaning of the word "*kumbaka*" is the protrusion in an elephants head, a pitcher, and the stopping of breath. "*Prana*" means breath, and when the expression "pranayama" is interpreted, some claim that the term "*yama*," which means "fence" or "bridle," does not refer to taking control of or reining in the *prana*, but stopping and holding the breath. Initially, the thought that it is possible and desirable to stop breathing is most strange, since without breath there is no life. But the yogis did not want to stop the breath in a total manner. And in any case, in the yoga tradition the command to stop applies not only to the breath. In the asanas (postures) as well, there is an emphasis on a pleasant body posture, and in meditation there is the stopping of thoughts. In the yoga perspective, the goal of stopping is generally to stabilize and attain precision in the vitality of the posture, the breath and the attention. The stopping was a kind of punctuation that made the rest of the sentence clear, and created order and rhythm in the infinite space of movement, breath and thought.

If so, the pause is important, but it is important to know when to end it. In writings that deal with pranayama there are two main perspectives regarding this issue. According to one, the pace is dictated and learned, and the student must slowly practice the various rhythms and take control of them, lengthening the inhalation, exhalation and pauses. In the ancient period, various means were found for maintaining the rhythm. It was possible to repeat a mantra or a single letter several times, and to create a uniform rhythm of saying the mantra. It was possible to feel one's pulse with the hand, and pause at the inhalation, pause and then inhale according to the beats of the pulse. And of course today, it is possible to use a metronome or a timer, which signals the passage of time at a fixed pace. A timer that rings every ten seconds can guide the length of inhalation, pause, exhalation and the pause that follows.

However, there is another approach that emphasizes attentiveness to the pace that the body dictates and not an external pre-determined rhythm. In the *Shiva Samhita*, one of the classic yoga books, we read: "He must be in kumbaka as long as his strength allows" (22.III, p. 27). Use

of the word “strength” appears in Abulafia’s writing as well: “Lengthen that special breath as long your strength for elongating your single breath holds out, for as long as you can.” One might understand this as an instruction to hold one’s breath forcibly, until one is compelled to breathe.

Many commentators considered this issue: What is the meaning of “as long as his strength allows”? In one of the fascinating interpretations of the *Yoga Sutra*, Vijnana wrote, “Seek out the inhalation after the stopping .” In order to support his version, he quotes a sentence from the first chapter of the *Yoga Sutra*, “Or through the meditation that you desire” (*Yoga Sutra*, 39.1). He claims that the right time to inhale after pausing is tied to being attentive to the possibility of inhaling at the moment that the desire to do so is aroused, yet while there is still a sense of comfort. He insinuates as to when it is desirable to breathe: “Not too early and not too late.” Every practitioner knows that practice improves through deep attentiveness to the body – attention to the soles of the feet touching the ground, attention to the quiet, long and wide back, attention to the connection between the extremities of the body to the center. Here, however, the attention is entrenched in the timing, since it is attentive to the right moment, the moment when the desire to breathe is aroused and intensifies. At that time one must breathe before the desire becomes urgent and leads to discomfort, disquiet. From such attentiveness, we learn a number of things. We learn, for example, to know our desire. The desire to swallow air is perhaps our most basic desire, taking precedence even over thirst or hunger. We also learn when to respond to this desire – the moment when the desire is clear but involves no sense of crisis.

When we draw air inwards, the commentator asks us to be attentive to the sense of the internal space, in the area of the heart, “directing our consciousness to internal places and practicing breaths with a sense of internal contact” (Patanjali, 236). Attention to the qualities of contact will afford the practitioner a clear sense of the essence, beauty and strength of the pause.

Improving the Breath as a Way of Achieving Precision and Purity of Intentions and Sound

The bodily posture during utterances is important, in terms of the precise ways in which we hold our chest cavity. These are tools through which we produce sound, and the manner and quality of the sound express intention. The way in which the breath is stopped, and the length of the pause between the pronunciation of each letter, has a great influence on attention and mood, and as a result, on the intentions of the “utterer.” For this reason, control of posture, breath and pronunciation become central in Abulafia’s practice of utterances. We see that Abulafia deals

with breaths, their length and timing . “Do not lengthen it except according to the measure of a single breath, and do not stop the breath in any way until you complete it.” In the yoga tradition, the production of holy sounds in a precise manner is the heart of the mantra. Originally, mantras were the spiritual practice of repeating the names of God, or praise of God. In its most compact form, the mantra comprised a single sound of a vocalized letter, *bija*, the repetition of and focus on which simultaneously strengthens and softens consciousness. One might say that in Hindu tradition, the mantra is the central prayer, the verbal communication between man and his god or goddess. Already in ancient times, it was important to pronounce the mantra with precision so that the attending god would receive it.

Since the sound and its quality are created in the encounter between the air and the vocal chords, we can conclude that pranayama, the practice of breathing, prior to becoming an independent branch, arose, among other things, from the need to produce sounds that were pleasant and precise, much like singers who study voice work with breath. I tried to find out whether in the tradition of Jewish prayer there was a similar emphasis on breathing technique prior to Rabbi Abulafia, but I found no such indication. What is clear is that he was well aware of it: “The voice that joins with the air exiting the mouth in speech is like wordless melodies whose sound is varied, in ascending and descending movements that alternate and tend and intensify and warm the organs of hearing” (*Sefer HaHesheq*, 69). From all of the above, one can conclude that intention and attentive breathing, coupled with the production of a sound and attentiveness to it, elevate the practitioner “until the heart takes note and enjoys and desires to hear, and the soul is aroused and desires and its joy is increased” (Ibid., *ibid.*)

Ecstasy or Samhadi?

When Abulafia says: "The soul will be uplifted and will be happy and desire and its joy will increase," he is describing the situation that leads to elevation of the spirit. Elevation of the spirit occurs as a result of faith, increasing desire and intensifying the movements of the heart. But since this happens gradually and through daily practice, this ecstasy is contained and does not lead to loss of control and sanity.

In *Hayey Ha'Olam Haba*, Abulafia describes the entire process, beginning with gradually building the technique that leads to elevation of the spirit or to joy. In the next step of the process, he describes the intensification of the waves of happiness to the point that they are almost intolerable, ending with a descent from the peak. First, he writes, a person must find an isolated place and prepare himself: "Choose for yourself a special place where your voice will not be heard by any person in the world. And be solitary and set apart and alone without anyone else, and sit in a room or in an attic and reveal not your secret to anyone. And if you can, do so in a slightly dark house. And cleanse yourself and your clothing [...] because all of it is greatly beneficial to the intention of awe and love" (*Hayey Ha'Olam Haba*, 65).

Afterwards, he focuses himself and begins joining letters in preparation for the utterance itself: "And afterwards take ink and pen and a board into your hand. That will be the witness for you that you are coming to worship the Lord your God in joy and good will. Then begin joining letters [...] and you will already be prepared to receive the abundance [...] And you will have all this after you release the board and quill from your fingers or after they fall of their own accord due to your many thoughts and great joy" (*Hayey Ha'Olam Haba*, 67-68).

Abulafia then describes an extreme situation of elevated consciousness "Know, then, that as the considerable intellectual bounty grows strong in you, your external and internal limbs will grow weak, and your entire body will begin to tremble in a mighty storm. To the point where you think that in any case you will die at that time, because your soul will depart from your body from so much joy in attaining it and in realizing that which you have realized."

The intensity of the elevation of spirit reaches a pinnacle of joy that cannot be contained, and it seems for a moment that there is no return from the heights that the person performing the letter combinations and utterances has ascended. But Abulafia takes the trouble to also teach his students the way back. Almost immediately after this peak of consciousness, the rabbi writes: "Then return to corporeal matters and arise from there and eat a bit and drink a bit and inhale a pleasant odor and restore your spirit to move till another time. And your heart shall rejoice in your portion" (*Hayey Ha'Olam Haba*, 68).

Abulafia does not write in a blatantly ecstatic tone. His writing is characterized by control, developing philosophical ideas and substantiating them gradually and with restraint. Since the word ecstasy expresses “departing from the self,” a kind of inebriation of consciousness, it is probably preferable to call this elevated state of awareness that the practitioner reaches, “*samhadi*,” an expression known in the yogic and Hindu writings, as well as in Buddhist scripture. The main difference between ecstasy and *samhadi* is in the degree of the practitioner’s control and restraint. In *samhadi*, it is likely that the practitioner reaches high levels and extraordinary clarity of consciousness as well as elevation of the spirit, *ananda*, but he does not lose his mind. He can contain this intensity, and hold it. He continues sitting with a straight back and quiet consciousness. In the Bhakti traditions as in the Hasidic traditions, one aims for ecstasy, and the heightening of excitement is encouraged through dance and prayer. *Samhadi* is a different path. The consciousness and heart are focused on the selected object in a calm manner, they are emboldened and experience elevation of the spirit, but at the same time, they are restrained.

Abulafia is aware of the peak he wishes to reach, and to which he wishes to lead his students. He is also aware of the need to be alert and in control. Therefore, he creates brakes and suggests pauses when the soul has become tired or reached a peak of one kind or another: “And if you experience a great fear that you cannot withstand, and even [if this happens] in the middle of the utterance, immediately bow, and if you neither see nor hear, leave the matter for the duration of the week” (*Or HaSekhel*, 105).

When Abulafia teaches his students to practice the utterances, he is not only teaching them a path to attainment and elevation. He is leading them step by step towards these peaks. And as in every respectable spiritual path, walking it has great significance, independent of the place where it leads. The very utterance of the various vowel pronunciations purifies the breathing and clarifies the voice, that is, it is healthy for our bodies. But beyond this, it also trains the heart in its internal movements. In practicing these again and again, movements become clear and formed, growing stronger and more stable within us. They are accessible to us not only through the dialogue with God, but also in the encounter with our world. The heart is a muscle and practice strengthens it and makes it more flexible, and it will eventually extract abilities and qualities from us, voices and forms of expression we did not know existed in us. And then, “your heart shall rejoice in your portion.”