

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF FORMATION

Let us begin the commentary on the beginning of the work of the Creation and on the Book of the Formation of the world that the Holy One—blessed be He—transmitted to our father Abraham—peace be upon him, as it is written: *The Lord created me at the beginning of His course as the first of His works of old. In the distant past I was fashioned, at the beginning, at the origin of the earth. There was still no deep when I was brought forth, no springs rich in water. Before [the foundation] of the mountains were sunk, before the hills I was born. He had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first clumps of clay. I was there when He set the heavens into place; when He fixed the horizon upon the deep* [Prov. 8:22–27]. *When He assigned the sea its limits, so that its waters never transgress His command, when He fixed the foundation of the earth, I was with Him as a confidant, a source of delight [sha'ashu'im] every day [yom yom]* [ibid. ibid. 29–30].

There are some sages who explain the word *sha'ashu'im* claiming that it means pampering [*pinnuq*],<sup>1</sup> as in the verse: *He that pampers [mefanneq] his slave* [ibid. 29:21]. This is not the right explanation but rather [the word has] the sense of those words that resemble it, as in: *the Lord paid heed [wa-yisha'] to Abel and his offering* [Gen. 4:4], and as in: *At that day, man shall turn [yish'eh] to his Maker* [Is. 17:7]; it is also written: *He shall not turn [yishe'h] to the altars* [ibid. ibid. 8].

Every person of understanding will realise that according to this principle,<sup>2</sup> *sha'ashu'im* means looking and observing. But while looking and

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<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to find such an interpretation in any Hebrew or Aramaic source which might have been available to Donnolo.

<sup>2</sup> Donnolo uses here the term שרש (*shoresh*), which in both Biblical and rabbinical Hebrew denotes root (of plants, teeth, etc.; see e.g. 2 Kings 19:30; Is. 11:1). In this passage, however, *shoresh* clearly departs from its primary meaning, but it is not clear whether Donnolo is referring by it to the stem of the word—a meaning first attested in the commentary on SY by the 10th-century North African scholar Dunash ibn Tamim, or to the meaning of “principle,” “reasoning” which the same term acquired in philosophical Jewish milieux during the same period. For the different meanings of *shoresh*, see Ben Yehudah, *A Complete Dictionary*, XV, 7477. It is important to note, however, that just

observing is said of a person who looks and observes momentarily, here and there, *sha'ashu'im* means looking intensely, with fully focused attention,<sup>3</sup> as if one was fond of something and gazed at it, looking and observing it intensely and with fully focused attention for a very long time, not taking his eyes off it even for a moment.

Because he holds his gaze in a fixed position, to observe and look intensely at the object of his love, his eyes fail on account of this prolonged observation, and the proof of this is, as Scripture says: *Dull that people's mind, stop their ears, and seal their eyes [hasha']* [Is. 6:10]; and is written: *Look away [she'u] from me, I will weep* [ibid. 22:4], and yet is written: *Look away [hasha'] from me, that I may recover* [Ps. 39:14].

These verses do not refer to blindness and cecity but to temporary dimness of sight caused by prolonged observation, for the verse says, *stop their ears* [Is. 6:10], not deafen *their ears*, that is to say: "Let them be deaf for a moment". From this we learn that *hasha'* refers to loss of sight caused by prolonged observation which immobilises the eyes.<sup>4</sup> This means that *seal their eyes* refers to fixing, setting and immobilising the eyes in order to observe and to look, and [the phrase] is used to explain that out of this prolonged observation one is not able to see.<sup>5</sup> For the word *sha'ashu'im* [delight] does not resemble the word *wa-yisha'* [paid heed] because it contains some additional letters. Moreover, it is usual for the Holy tongue to double a word, as in *ta'tu'im*,<sup>6</sup> or *qa'qa'*,<sup>7</sup> *meqarqar qir*,<sup>8</sup>

a few lines later, Donnolo explicitly refers to what he takes to be the (biliteral) stem of the word by the term יסוד [*yesod*], normally meaning foundation: "The stem [*yesod*] of these words and others like them consists of two letters"; see below 281. This supports the translation of *shoresh* adopted here. About the biliteral notion of the stem in SY and in Donnolo, see below n. 195. For יסוד in the sense of grammatical "root" or "stem", see Ben Yehudah, *ibid.*, IV, 2070–2071.

<sup>3</sup> Literally, "with the whole of one's heart and soul"—*contemplazione* ["contemplation"] according to Sermoneta, "Il neoplatonismo," 893.

<sup>4</sup> Donnolo is not referring to any specific pathology of the eye but to the commonly experienced phenomenon of remaining spellbound when gazing at something for a long time. This phenomenon is purely psychological and it cannot cause either permanent or temporary damage to the eyes. I am grateful to Dr. Piero De Giorgio for this observation.

<sup>5</sup> The syntax of להבין הוא נאמר ["and it (the phrase) is said to explain"] is somewhat awkward, but the phrase occurs in all the manuscripts of SH and its meaning is perfectly clear. In what was probably an attempt to clarify the passage, the scribe of ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. Add. 9 (f. 61b line 22) has added after נאמר the expression וכי תימא ["and if you should say"] which comes from the language of Talmudic argumentation, but which seems out of place here and only makes matters worse.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 10:15; 51:18.

<sup>7</sup> Lev. 19:28.

<sup>8</sup> Is. 22:5.

and many others.<sup>9</sup> The stem [*yesod*] of these words and others like them consists of two letters, which are *sh-<sup>ç</sup>*, *t-<sup>ç</sup>*, *q-<sup>ç</sup>*, *q-r*, [the latter] as in: *That everyone's right eye be gouged out* [*bi-n<sup>e</sup> qor*] [1 Sam. 11:2], where the letter *nun* is not part of the stem of the word, like the *nun* and the *waw* in *l-n-g-w-<sup>ç</sup>*,<sup>10</sup> whose root is *g-<sup>ç</sup>*. Similarly, [this occurs in the verse] *when deep sleep falls* [*bi-n<sup>e</sup> fol*] [Job 4:13], where the stem is *p-l*, and likewise in many other words.

We have now explained the meaning of *I was a source of delight* [*sha'ashu'im*], namely, I was as the [numerous] sights and observations that the Holy One—blessed be He—made with great love and much focused attention. *Every day* [*yom yom*]. What does *every day* mean? It means two thousand years, as it is written: *For in Your sight a thousand years are like yesterday* [*ke-yom etmol*] [Ps. 90:4].<sup>11</sup> What does *yesterday* mean? It means before, that is to say, the day [*yom*] that preceded the creation of the world, since we find it written that the Holy One—blessed be He—said to the first man: *For in the day* [*ba-yom*] *that you eat of it, you shall die* [Gen. 2:17]. In fact, he lived a thousand years minus seventy, to fulfil the verse *as soon as you eat of it*, during the day and not at the end of the day.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> From the examples given, it seems that like SY, Donnolo entertained a biliteral notion of the grammatical stem. See Mordell, “The Origin of Letters,” 561–563; Allony, “The anagramic orientation,” 63–99 and Séd, “Le Sefer Yeširā,” 513–528, particularly 526. See also Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 38 and idem, *Kabbalah*, 33; Liebes, “The Seven Double Letters,” 237–248. The idea of the trilateralism of the Hebrew stem was formulated for the first time by the 10th-century grammarian Yehudah Ḥayyuj, also known as Abu Zakariah Yahiah ben Daud (940–1010), following the studies made before him by Dunash ben Labrat ha-Levi and Menaḥem ben Saruk. See Munk, “Notice sur Abdul Walid Merwan ibn Djanah,” 28 and Zwiep, *Mother of Reason*, 14. Before the work of the Spanish grammarians who established the trilateral nature of the Hebrew verb, it is clear, as is implicit in the poetry of the time, that the Hebrew verb was viewed as being biliteral. See Mirsky, *Beginning of Poetry*, 96–97; Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, 270 and Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, VII, 32–61, particularly 40–42. See also Cowely, ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 99–103.

<sup>10</sup> Job 6:7.

<sup>11</sup> Donnolo here follows the midrashic interpretation (see Gen. Rabbah 8:2; Lev. Rabbah 19:1; Song Rabbah 5:10; Midrash Tehillim, 90:17–18) whereby the word *yom* [“day”] means a thousand years. The verse in Prov. 8:30, where the word *yom* is doubled idiomatically (*yom yom*) to indicate “every day,” is taken to mean literally “two days” from which two-thousand years are inferred. Hence Donnolo’s statement to the effect that God was gazing at the letters two-thousand years before the Creation.

<sup>12</sup> See Gen. Rabbah 19:8 and Midrash Tehillim 90:17–18. This is the earliest extant quotation of the midrash on the Psalms. See “Donnolo,” *JE*, IV, 640. According to Zunz, *Ha-derashot*, 131, 176, this midrash was composed around the 9th century in southern

*I was by Him a source of delight* [Prov. 8:30]. In my opinion this is to be explained as in the verse: *As a nurse [ha-omen] carries an infant* [Num. 11:12].<sup>13</sup> And it is [also] to be explained as “faithful” [*ne’eman*], since the *nun* is not part of the stem. From this we learn that two thousand years before the Creation of the world the Holy One—blessed be He—was gazing at [*mesha’shea*] the twenty-two letters of the Torah,<sup>14</sup> combining, turning and making out of them a single word, then turning it forwards and backwards, with all the twenty-two letters, and further making out of them [both] integrated and distinct words.<sup>15</sup>

A full word, half a word, a third of a word, a double word, one connected to the other, one integrated in the other, one distinct from the other. He turned them forward and backward, consonants and vowels, and calculated their total number.<sup>16</sup>

The Holy One—blessed be He—was doing all this since He wanted to create the world by His utterance and by the articulation of [His] great Name. For this reason He turned the letters to bring out His great, awesome and wondrous Name, strong and vigorous by [virtue of its] power and might, since through the very articulation of that holy and venerable Name, all the work of the Creation was accomplished swiftly [*be-rega’ qatan*], in a fleeting moment,<sup>17</sup> with no weariness and toil but rather by His word, His utterance and His command, as it is written: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, by the breath of His mouth, all their hosts* [Ps. 33:6].<sup>18</sup>

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Italy. His hypothesis was dismissed by Buber and more recently by Braude, according to whom the midrash was composed in Palestine during a period ranging from the 3rd to the 13th century. See Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, xxv–xxx and Rabinowitz, “Midrash Tehillim.”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. Gen. Rabbah 1:1; Ex. Rabbah 30:9.

<sup>14</sup> See Gen. Rabbah 1:1 as in the interpretation of Prov. 8:30.

<sup>15</sup> As observed by Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being*, 217–287, Donnolo combines in this passage the midrashic motif of the Godhead rotating and combining the letters of the alphabet with the alphabetical praxis of the SY.

<sup>16</sup> This is apparently the first time in the exegesis of SY that the vowels are introduced into the process of combining the letters. The tradition found further development in the commentary of El’azar of Worms on SY, particularly in connection with the creation of the *golem*. See Idel, *Golem*, 60, 75 n. 35; see also Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 137 and idem, *Language, Eros, Being*, 276.

<sup>17</sup> Literally, “in a wink of an eye,” an expression which in rabbinic literature (e.g. *bShabbat* 34b; *yBerakhot* 2b–c, etc.) indicates the shortest period of time, an instant, equivalent to *rega’*. See Stern, *Time and Process*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> See Gen. Rabbah 3:2.

It is written in the Book of Genesis which the Holy One—blessed be He—transmitted to our father Abraham<sup>19</sup> and to Moses our Master on Mount Sinai: *God said: "Let there be the light"* [Gen. 1:3]. God said: "Let it be so," and at that moment it was so. It is written: *For he spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it endured* [Ps. 33:9]. The Holy One—blessed be He—further turned the letters in order to bring out of them the words of all the languages in the world. After He completed the combination of the letters and the turning of the words, their computation, their count and enumeration, He began to calculate the computation of the planets and constellations, the computation of the equinoxes<sup>20</sup> and cycles of the planets, the Dragon and the constellations that He was to arrange and create. He then laid out the entire computation in front of Him, in order to see and know all the generations that were to be created, from beginning to end, as it is written: *Who has wrought and achieved this? He who announced the generations from the start* [Is. 41:4], before the creation of the world and in order to know every man's deeds—his righteousness and his wickedness—and to decree on everyone according to his future deeds, for better or for worse.

Thus He set out and assigned [to everyone] his constellation and his planet, that would rise at the time of his own rising and birth,<sup>21</sup> for better or for worse. All this God did with His wisdom and His intelligence before He created the world, as it is written: *The Lord founded the earth by wisdom; He established the heavens by understanding* [Prov. 3:19].

Although He had set out and assigned every individual's planet and constellation before the creation of the world and according to his future

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *mQiddushin* 4:14; *bYoma* 28b.

<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew has *tequfot*, a term commonly used in Jewish astrological texts to indicate either the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (in Hebrew *tequfat Nisan* and *tequfat Tishre*), corresponding to the time when the day and night are of equal length and the sun enters the constellations of Aries and Libra, or the summer and winter solstices (in Hebrew *tequfat Tammuz* and *tequfat Tevet*), which are the points in the ecliptic when the sun, at its greatest distance from the north or south of the equator, enters the constellation of Cancer and Capricorn. See *EJ*, V, 46–47 and Gettings, *The Arkana Dictionary*, 179, 478. See also *Barayta di-Sh'e mu'el*, Eisenstein, ed., 543 and *Sefer ha-mazzalot* (Luzzatto, "Mikhtav gimel," 63–64).

<sup>21</sup> The degree of the rising zodiacal sign (i.e. the ascendant or *horoscopus*) and position of the rising planet over the horizon at the time and in the place of one's birth provide the essential information on the birth chart. See Gettings, *The Arkana Dictionary*, 42, 239.

deeds, the Holy One—blessed be He—did not permit the planets and the constellations to act either malignly or benignly, for He saw that man, who was about to be created, would not be able to exist without the [evil] impulse, as it is written: *Since the impulse of man is evil from his youth* [Gen. 8:21].

For this reason, God, who is gracious and merciful, patient, abundant in kindness and compassionate,<sup>22</sup> set out and established repentance [*teshuvah*] since before the Creation of the world, as it is written: *Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity You are God. You return man to dust; You decreed, "Return [shuvu] you mortals"* [Ps. 90:2–3].<sup>23</sup>

If the evil impulse leads man to sin, so long as he repents before his Creator and forsakes his evil deeds, asking for forgiveness and pardon from his Creator, and following the upright path, to do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord, then the Holy One—blessed be He—will have compassion over him,<sup>24</sup> and his evil constellation will turn good.

After God saw to the proper order<sup>25</sup> of the world and all its creatures two thousand years before the creation of the world, He immediately embarked on the creation of the world with His great might, as is written in the Book of Formation, which the Holy One—blessed be He—transmitted to our father Abraham on the day on which He made the covenant with him. As Scripture says: *On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land* [Gen. 15:18]. Thus it is written in the Book of Formation.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jer. 8:6, 42:10.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Gen. Rabbah 1:4, *Pirque de-rabbi Eli'ezer*, III and also Urbach, "Seride Tanhuma," 1–54, particularly p. 9. About the role of repentance in Donnolo's commentary, see above, Donnolo's *Sefer Hakhmoni*, 77–79.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Ex. Rabbah 45:1.

<sup>25</sup> The Hebrew text reads *תקנה* which is somewhat ambiguous. Since it occurs here immediately after a reference to the establishment of repentance, it may mean the capacity for restoring the world and its creatures to their proper, wholesome state, in anticipation of their built-in capacity for corruption and sin.

Book One<sup>26</sup>

[SY § 1, pp. 59–64] By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom, Y-h—Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, Almighty God, High and Exalted, Dwelling for ever, Holy is His name—carved out His universe [*‘olamo*]. He created His universe with three groups of letters [*sefarim*],<sup>27</sup> with *s-p-r*, *s-p-r* and *s-p-w-r*.<sup>28</sup>

These are the thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom [by which] Y-h—God of Hosts—carved out His world.<sup>29</sup> [SY § 2, pp. 64–66] ten *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah*, and twenty-two letters of the Torah, which are the foundation of the world.

[SY § 3, pp. 67–69] The ten *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah* and the covenant is in the middle corresponding [literally, “resemble”] to the number of the ten fingers of the hands and the ten toes of the feet, and the One God is exactly in the middle of the ten *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah*. Likewise, the covenant of the Unique One is exactly in the middle of the ten fingers of the hand, which are five against five and in the tongue and the mouth, so as to declare the unity of God. Similarly, the covenant of the Unique One is exactly in the middle of the ten toes of the feet, which are five against five, in the circumcision of the foreskin, which is the sexual organ [literally: “nakedness”], as it is written: *In order to gaze upon their nakedness* [Hab. 2:15].

[SY § 7, pp. 76–77] Ten *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah*. Their measure is ten but they have no end. Depth of beginning—that is before the Creation of the

<sup>26</sup> The division of the commentary on SY into three “books” as such is not attested in the manuscripts of SH. Donnolo divided the commentary on SY into three sections, each corresponding to one of the three “*sefarim*” into which SY divided the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Although Donnolo clearly uses *sefer* in the sense of letters, (see note 196 directly below), the heading adopted here for each section of his commentary follows the more conventional meaning of the term—“book”.

<sup>27</sup> The usual meaning of *sefarim* is “books,” but this is clearly inadequate here. According to Donnolo, these are the three groups into which SY divides the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (“Then the Holy One ... made of it the twenty-two letters of foundation, which God divided into three groups of letters [*sefarim*]: the three letters called “mothers” are the first group [*sefer*]; the seven double letters are the second group; and the twelve simple letters are the third group.” See below pp. 362–363) and Sharf, *The Universe*, 67–68. The translation follows Hayman, *Sefer Yešira*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> I do not vocalise these three words, whose meaning is uncertain. They are traditionally read as *sefer*, *s<sup>e</sup> far* and *sippur* and accordingly translated as “writing, number and speech.” See Gruenwald, “A Preliminary Critical Edition,” 140 n. 4. None of the manuscripts of SH offer a vocalised version of the three terms which appear with no variations in all the extant sources, with the exception of ms. 44.14 of the Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana in Florence (F) which has **בספר וספור וספור**.

<sup>29</sup> Hayman, *Sefer Yešira*, 65, describes this passage as a gloss by Donnolo who

world, and depth of end, after the final end of the world; depth of good and depth of evil; depth of above and depth of below; depth of east and depth of west; depth of north and depth of south. A sole Master, God, Faithful King, governing them all from His Holy abode, forever and ever. The fact that it is written that they have no end teaches you that there is no sage in the world who can know, understand and delve into the mind of God, to reach the end and know these ten profound *sefirot*. If a sage pursues them and seeks to understand them with his mind [even] for the entire duration of the world's existence, it will come to nothing, as Solomon wisely observed: *I realised too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him* [Eccl. 3:14]. For man should not delve into these ten things to pursue them with his mind, [since] they are deep beyond any investigation or measure, and he cannot understand the depth of the beginning which preceded the Creation of the world, or the depth of the end which will follow the final end of the world.

**Depth of good and depth of evil; depth of above and depth of below; depth of east and depth of west; depth of north and depth of south.** Rather, man should say to himself, why should I pursue with my mind an understanding and knowledge of something that is very deep, while no sage in the world can fathom the things that I pursue and seek to know? As Solomon said: *What is occurring occurred long since and what is to occur occurred long since: and God seeks the pursued* [ibid. ibid. 15], that is to say, only He can seek this thing that is pursued by the minds of men seeking to know.

As regards this, Solomon—peace be upon him—said: *All this I tested with wisdom. I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me. The secret of what happens is elusive and deep, deep down; who can discover it?* [ibid. 7:23–24], that is to say, this thing is far too deep to be fathomed. And Solomon further said: *All such things are wearisome: no man can ever state them; the eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing* [ibid. 1:8], that is to say, all such things are difficult to fathom and no man can speak [about them], or satiate his eyes with seeing and fill his ears with hearing them.

And he further said: *I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries*

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paraphrases rather than quotes the text of SY. This, according to Hayman, shows how § 2 of SY may have arisen as a gloss on § 1.



*strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them* [ibid. 8:17].

This is the infinitesimally small degree to which we are allowed to expose and explain, by means of the knowledge and understanding we have been granted, something of the meaning of the riddles of the Torah, and something of the recondite meanings of the Book of Formation that the Holy One—blessed be He—had transmitted to our father Abraham out of His love for him, to let him and his sons after him know His divinity, His unity, His greatness, His might and the power of His works, as it is written: *He revealed to His people His powerful works* [Ps. 111:6]. For otherwise, who would have been allowed to ponder, to think to himself or to grasp even the slightest of all these things?

[SY § 8, pp. 77–78] **Ten sefirot of b' limah. Observing them is like seeing a flash of lightning, their end is without limit. His word is in them running and returning.**<sup>30</sup> To His order they hasten like a whirlwind, and before His throne they bow down.

Since it is written that **observing them is like seeing a flash of lightning**, man is not allowed to think about them, not even for a fleeting moment, because there is nothing in all the Host of heaven that runs and returns as swiftly as a flash of lightning. This flash of lightning is of a type comparable to the types of lightning referred to in the Book of Wisdom.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Ezek. 1:14.

<sup>31</sup> This is a reference to the apocryphal book of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, written in Greek by a Hellenised Jew, probably between the 2nd and the 1st century BCE. The passage referred to here is 5:21 in the Septuagint: πορεύσονται εὐστοχοὶ βολίδες ἀστραπῶν καὶ ὡς ἀπὸ εὐκύνου τόξου τῶν νεφῶν ἐπὶ σκοπὸν ἀλοῦνται, or 5:22 of the Vetus Latina and Vulgata: *Ibunt directae emissions fulgorum et tamquam a bene curvato arcu nubium exterminabuntur et ad certum locum insilient* [*Shaft of lightning will fly with true aim, and will leap from the clouds to the target, as from a well-drawn bow*]. The interest of Donnolo in this apocryphal text might have arisen from a verse wherein the knowledge and understanding of natural processes are said to be part of the divine wisdom that man was given by God: *For it is he who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of time; the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals, the power of spirits and the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots, Wisdom of Solomon, 7, 17–21*. About the composition and redaction of *Wisdom of Solomon*, see Soggin, *Introduzione*, 599–605; Scarpata, ed., *Libro della Sapienza*, I, 316–317, 410; III, 310–311; 344, Kahana, *Apocryphal Books*, I, ii, 464, 468–470 and Zeitlin, “Jewish Apocryphal,” 222–223. The book was known also to the author of *Sefer Josippon*. See Flusser, ed., *The Josippon*, I, 144; II, 13, idem, “Der latinische Josephus,” 122–132 and Neuman, “Josippon and the Apocrypha.” About the role of this text in the Jewish context, see Gilbert, “The Book of Ben Sira,” 81–91 and Wright, “B Sanhedrin 100b,” 41–50.

It descends from the sky on a rainy day, seeming like a cord spun out of fiery metal or a metallic cord smelted by fire, cast and descending to the earth as a cord which twists in all directions like a live flame that the eye can catch sight of only for a fleeting moment. It is in reference to this that they [the *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah*] were said to be “running and returning,” rushing to His order like a whirlwind.

By His word He commanded that man should be forbidden to speculate and to ponder them even for a fleeting moment, and if his spirit entices him to speculate, he should have it “running and returning,” so as to desist from speculating, for by His order they hasten like a whirlwind, like a whirlwind that suddenly blows for a fleeting moment, and before His throne they bow down. For this reason, man should make his spirit behave like a whirlwind at the time when he speculates, so as to quickly “return” from speculation and refocus his mind on the fear of God, to acknowledge His unity and bow down before Him, with wholehearted fear and trembling.<sup>32</sup>

**Ten *sefirot of b<sup>e</sup> limah*.** What is the explanation of *b<sup>e</sup> limah*? [It means] without [*b<sup>e</sup> li*] anything [*mah*], to teach you that any craftsman who wishes to put up a building, if he has no stones, no sand, no wood, no water and no tools, he cannot put up a building. And if he wants to make an object out of wood, glass, iron, brass, silver, gold or any other material, he will not be able to make it without wood, glass, iron, brass, silver, gold, or any other material from which he wants to make that object. Yet the Great, the Mighty and Awesome God created the world without anything by means of His great power.

Proof of this is in the following verse: *He it is who stretched out Zaphon over chaos, who suspended earth over emptiness [b<sup>e</sup> limah] [Job 26:7]. Chaos: this is nothing but darkness that has no substance, as it is written: He shall measure it with a line of chaos and with weights of emptiness [Is. 34:11], to teach you that God does not act like man, [for] he who wishes to put up a building with a ceiling will be able to construct neither building nor ceiling without any material substance.<sup>33</sup> Yet God suspended all the world over emptiness [*be-b<sup>e</sup> limah*] with His great might.*

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<sup>32</sup> See Ps. 55:6.

<sup>33</sup> The Hebrew text here reads יסוד (*yesod*), which usually means “foundation” or “basis,” and which would seem to fit well in the context of the “building” and “ceiling” referred to here. However, Donnolo seems concerned to underline the difference between the human capacity for creation, which depends on the availability of raw materials,