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Is There an Indian Connection to *Sefer yeşirah*?

Was the linguistic theology of *Sefer yeşirah* (*SY*) influenced by theories of language formalized in northwest India in the last centuries before the Common Era? Yehuda Liebes advances such a hypothesis, cautiously worded and graced by question marks, at several points in his magisterial study of *SY*. He even includes, among the factors influencing his suggestion, the idea that the text may have been composed in northern Mesopotamia and the possible existence there of channels of cultural transmission from India (with Greek mediation): “This eastern region was a logical place for a meeting with Indian thought, such as that which influenced *SY*.”¹ We know, in fact, of such channels in a later period (early Islamic Baghdad), when Sanskrit grammatical and poetic materials began to filter into Arabic.² But it is also well known that Hellenistic Alexandria, among other centers, had some familiarity with certain Indian philosophical notions, which are reported (second- or third-hand) in sources from the first and second

¹ Y. Liebes, *Toraḥ ha-yeşirah šel Sefer yeşirah* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2000), p. 239.

² See I. Yu. Krachkovsky, “Fragment indiiskoi retoriki v arabskoi peredache,” *Izbraniye sochineniya* (Moscow, 1956), 2: 309–316.

centuries CE.³ It is at least possible that Indian ideas circulated in adapted forms in northern Mesopotamia, too, during this period.

I can express no opinion about the date of *SY* or the meaning of its metaphysical system. Whatever little I know about the text comes directly from Liebes himself or from Moshe Idel, with whom I taught a course, some years ago, on linguistic mysticism. But I may be able to point to certain elements in Sanskrit linguistic thought that run parallel to passages in *SY* and could conceivably indicate a historical connection. At the same time, there are critical distinctions to be made. The mere existence of strong resemblances is not, in itself, an argument for direct influence.

I focus on four related issues: (1) the primary metaphysical frame of creation as a linguistic act or process; (2) the specific question of scientific phonetic analysis and its traces in *SY*; (3) problems relating to semanticity and to the powers and function of individual phonemes; (4) and a more general observation on the notion of *belimah* and its derivatives in relation to Śaiva themes.

1. That creation is a matter of sound and vibration and hence of language, broadly conceived, is axiomatic already in the *R̥g Veda* (e.g., hymn 10.70). Three-quarters of language is hidden and potentially generative of reality; only the final quarter is manifest in human speech (1.164.45). Throughout the first millennium BCE, we find elaborations of the basic idea of creation as an intra-linguistic process, with precise cosmological and epistemic correlations, along with the beginnings of scientific linguistics. The latter includes a highly developed phonology (*śikṣā*), etymology (*nirukta*), morphology and syntax (*vyākaraṇa*), and metrics (*chandas*). Pāṇinian grammar, one of the great achievements of ancient India, offers a comprehensive and sophisticated empirical analysis of Sanskrit as spoken in approximately the fifth century BCE (also of the Vedic dialect); but this rich analytical corpus eventually culminated in a linguistic metaphysics in which subtle, inaudible sounds emerge from a divine substratum as audible words (*pada*), which, in

turn, generate the external “objects” (*padārtha*) that these words “mean.” Language, in short, is primarily neither representational nor symbolic. It is the very fabric of reality and, as such, the deepest level of godhead (*śabda-brahman*) unfolding as cosmos and as self or mind.

This metaphysical aspect of the tradition reaches its height in Bhartṛhari, in the mid-fifth century CE, but Bhartṛhari clearly drew upon much earlier speculative materials. In any case, the grammarians themselves claim that they stumbled upon God while sifting through the arid matters of grammar, like someone who happens upon a diamond while searching through a stack of husks. A vast extension of this vision of the cosmos as vibrating with linguistic energies embodied in the phonemes, motivated by God’s inner reflection (*vimarśa*) upon his own luminous existence, eventually crystallized in the northern Śaiva systems that were preserved in Kashmir (for example, Abhinavagupta’s detailed account of linguistic cosmogenesis in the *Tantrāloka*, c. 1000).

2. However familiar some of this might sound to scholars of Kabbalah, it carries far less weight than the specifics of phonetic analysis. SY 2.3 speaks of the arrangement of sounds (the “letters,” ²*oṭiyyoṭ*) according to five points of articulation in the oral cavity (*we-kullan ḥaḥuqoṭ ba-qol ḥaṣuvot ba-ruaḥ qevu^coṭ ba-peh be-beh meqomot*). Although Greek grammarians had some awareness of differentially articulated sounds, the precise and comprehensive ordering of phonemes according to their points of articulation⁴ is an achievement of the Sanskrit phoneticians. It underlies all of Pāṇini’s grammatical

³ See the critical survey by W. Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany, 1988), pp. 14–18.

⁴ There are five such points for the plosives, as one sees clearly in the order of all Indian writing systems; but the Sanskrit grammarians speak of six or eight, including points of articulation for vowels, semivowels, sibilants, and *visarga*-aspiration (*aṣṭau sthānāni varṇānām: Pāṇinīya-śikṣā* 13): chest, throat, palate, roof of the mouth (for retroflexion), root of the tongue, teeth, nose, and lips.

analysis and is lucidly set forth as early as the *prātiśākhya* texts that focus on the preservation of the Vedic mantra, from roughly the middle of the first millennium BCE. It is difficult to avoid the impression that this phonetic analysis, including the arrangement of Sanskrit phonemes in a systematic pattern with an awareness of allophony and other phonetic transformations, ultimately underlies this *mishnah* of *SY*. Indeed, this notion of an operative phonemic system is the critical factor, even more so than the empirical observations relating to the position of the tongue relative to the palate, teeth, alveolar ridge, and so on. I would ask Yehuda Liebes: Is there any trace in *SY* of such a systemic perspective on phonology? That would immeasurably strengthen the possibility of a link with an Indian source.

There is another element to be considered. The *prātiśākhya*s, like the *Pāṇinīya-śikṣā*, are also deeply concerned with the process of articulation as a whole, beginning with the breath or wind (*māruta*) circulating in the thoracic cavity. The “self” (*ātma*), in conjunction with the perceiving mind and the urge toward utterance (*vivakṣā*), fans the fire that is said to be burning deep within the body. This fire propels the wind upwards into the throat and mouth, where various operations (of the tongue, vocal cords, nose, lips, and so on) shape the emerging sound in terms of tone, pitch, the presence or absence of nasalization, voicing, plosive or non-plosive quality, aspiration, intensity, and length.⁵ The grammarians divide this series into an intricate grid of formal features that permit the categorization of all known sounds in the Sanskrit phonological system. A far less detailed but not (in principle) dissimilar description is found in *SY* 2.1 (in the longer version of the text, the process of articulation is also described at some length).⁶ The *mishnah* quoted above is somewhat reminiscent of the process, especially in the role of *ruah*, “wind.”⁷ Indeed, a Sanskritist who comes to *SY* with the perspective of Pāṇinian phonology might well find this aspect—the awareness of a process of articulation that begins well before the actual production of audible sounds and is motivated by psychological-cum-

metaphysical drives toward expression—to be even more noteworthy, in the context of Indian materials, than the mere adaptation of the categorical division into five sets of sounds.

We should pay some attention to the intriguing question of the *resh*, included in *SY*'s crucial list of seven doublets (*bgd kfrt*). Liebes has devoted a penetrating essay to this series and its pre-history.⁸ He convincingly derives the double pronunciation of the *resh*, which allows for its inclusion in this series,⁹ from the presence of aspirated and non-aspirated variants—as in Greek. This explanation, logical enough in terms of the presumed Greek linguistic milieu at the time of the book's composition, has the added attraction of laying down a homogeneous principle that would apply equally throughout the *kfrt* set, at the very least. There is the empirical question of consistent alternation between aspirates and non-aspirates within this set in Second Temple-period Hebrew and later—a question I leave to the Semiticists. In any case, Sanskrit phonology is of some interest here, on several counts. First, and most conspicuously, Sanskrit distinguishes a vocalic *r̥* (with short and long variants) from the consonantal *r*. This distinction is the subject of acute phonological analysis in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (second century BCE?). So *r* is by nature double: the *Prāṭisākhya* texts even ascribe distinct points of articulation to the two sounds, the vocalic *r̥* being

⁵ *Pāṇinīya-śikṣā* 6–10.

⁶ See the discussion in Liebes, *Toraṭ ha-yeširah*, p. 167.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ “Ševa^c kefuloḡ bgd cfrt: ʿal ha-resh ha-kefulah veʿal riq^c o šel *Sefer yeširah*,” *Tarbiz* 61 (1992): 237–247.

⁹ The “hard” and “soft” variations in the pronunciation of the other six sounds reflect their alternation as plosives or fricatives, as represented later by the presence or absence of the *dagesh*. Earlier, though, the *kefet* phonemes show a distinction in terms of aspiration (see the essay cited in n. 8).

velar or retroflex whereas the consonantal *r* is dental or alveolar. (Pāṇini makes *r* retroflex.) Furthermore, the vocalic *r* is itself analyzed into four segments—an initial vocalic quarter, two consonantal quarters in the middle, and a concluding vocalic quarter.¹⁰ Finally, *r* and the unusual vowel *ḷ* are classed together in the *Śiva-sūtras* that provide the basis for Pāṇini’s meta-language; a special *sūtra* of the grammar (8.2.18) provides for the substitution of *ḷ* for *r* and its related forms in specific conditions. In short, the *r* series is internally divided to a degree unique in the Sanskrit phonological system, and the grammarians were aware of the complexity of this division from very early times. None of this applies to Hebrew *resh*—the Greek parallel is closer and more pressing—but we should nevertheless note the prominence of this theme in India in the context of possible borrowings from the Sanskrit phoneticians.

3. Intra-linguistic cosmogony of the type we are discussing is generally rather hostile to semanticity per se. It is not surprising to find a “certain contempt for semantic content and the meaning of words and sentences” in *SY*.¹¹ Liebes stresses *SY*’s interest in the “letters” as entities in their own right, and in particular in their phonetic properties, rather than in their meaning-bearing function.¹² In the Bhartṛhariian philosophy of language that emerges directly from the Sanskrit grammatical tradition (and culminates in the northern Śaiva materials mentioned earlier), referential meaning could almost be seen as the detritus left behind by “real” language, although subtle analysis is still, of course, applied to explain the transition from pure sound to meaning. On this level, there is a certain natural affinity between *SY* and some Indian theoreticians of language.

But there is also a rather striking difference. In Liebes’ view of the text, the *ṛotīyyoḷ* serve a primary symbolic function, evident from the very opening of the text with the numerical correspondences it establishes between the series of *ṛotīyyoḷ* (3+7+12) and the spatio-temporal divisions of the cosmos, the elements, *sefiroḷ*, physiological and psychological dimensions of the human being, and so on.¹³ Yet these cor-

respondences seem to lack even a minimal principle of iconicity; they are, it seems, “symbolic” in the Peircean sense, that is, selected and fixed in place almost arbitrarily rather than on the basis of some inner relationship or affinity among levels (such as a phonetic one, as we might expect with this kind of grid). There is a marked contrast with the generative role of the Sanskrit phonemes as conceived in the more elaborated cosmological systems such as Abhinavagupta’s—for in the latter, pronounced iconic links bind individual phonemes to their domains of operation. For example, *i* relates directly to the divinity’s aspect of desire (*icchā*) and to lordship (*iṣānatva*); the *ṛ-ḷ* series generates and indicates what is called “the void” by virtue of innate characteristics evident in the phonetic actualization of these sounds; we could continue like this for the entire set of 51 primary sounds.¹⁴ None of this really belongs in the domain of the “symbolic” as the term is usually understood; in fact, the very absence of a symbolic quality explains the generative potential of these sounds as the godhead unfolds into a visible world.

There is a clear parallelism with the two sounds *a* and *h*, as Liebes notes.¹⁵ *SY* relates *alef* (with the open *a* vowel) to the principle of unity. All Indian languages, beginning with Sanskrit, make a similar claim: *a* is the primal sound inherent in all the other phonemes (and also represented in the base forms of non-vocalic graphemes), just as God inheres in the world. The identification of *a* with the deity has its own distinct career in Tamil.¹⁶ But a no less powerful assertion is made for the

¹⁰ *Sarva-sammata-śikṣā* 19.

¹¹ Liebes, *Toraṭ ha-yeṣirah*, p. 147.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–22.

¹⁴ See chapters 1–4 of Abhinavagupta’s *Tantrāloka*.

¹⁵ Liebes, *Toraṭ ha-yeṣirah*, p. 118.

¹⁶ *Tirukkuṛaḷ* 1.1. For the medieval developments, see David Shulman, “First Gram-

voiced *h* and the unvoiced aspiration known as *visarga* (*ḥ*), the latter being equated with the god Bhairava, a form of Śiva, and the subtle, self-created, unmanifest breath of life that pervades the whole of reality. Once again, these identifications have nothing symbolic about them.¹⁷

4. The last remark, citing discussions from eleventh-century Kashmir, takes us well beyond the temporal limits proposed for *SY*, but the connection to Śaivism is nonetheless worth mentioning, this time in a somewhat wider context. For what is perhaps the most charged and evocative of Liebes' metaphysical interpretations—the notion of creation as *belimah* in its various connotations, including the restraining of created phenomena and of human contemplation of these phenomena, as well as the sense of a very tentative order that is constantly subject to destruction and replacement¹⁸—resonates strongly with the Śaiva understanding of God's quintessential role. Śiva is Hara—not so much the “destroyer,” as so many secondary works on India assert, but rather the divinity who “takes away” (Sanskrit *harati*). His main task is, as it were, to open space in a cluttered cosmos by removing the ossified and deadened parts of himself, to make room for the fullness that always characterizes the Hindu “void.” In a Śaiva universe, taking away is the most creative act of all, just as negation is the most potent form of affirmation. There are linguistic equivalents to this principle, as befits a metaphysics so richly bound up with creative sounds. This Śaiva theology first crystallized in the northwestern part of the subcontinent in the centuries immediately preceding and following the beginning of the Common Era. If one can posit a channel of cultural transmission from India to the intellectual world of *SY*, one would be tempted to situate its start in a northwest Indian Śaiva milieu at some point later than the composition of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and, perhaps, the *Pāśupata sūtras* (second century BCE–first century CE)—and certainly later than the masterpiece of Sanskrit grammatical thought, Patañjali's *Mahāb-Mahābhāṣya* commentary on Pāṇini.

marian, First Poet: A South Indian Vision of Cultural Origins," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (2001, in press).

¹⁷ On the eschatological role of Hebrew *beḥ*, see Liebes, *Toraṭ ha-yeṣirah*, p. 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.