Meanings

Aleph and aluph, Hebrew for “leader” or “chieftain,” share the same root, וֹא. Aleph, the first letter of the Aleph Beit, is the chief of all the letters that follow it.

In the Hebrew numerical system, where each letter represents a number, Aleph equals the number one. It is also the first letter of the word for “one,” יָדָה, echad. Aleph symbolizes the central teaching of Judaism, that God is one.

Aleph is the first letter of the first word of the Ten Utterances (a.k.a. The Ten Commandments), יְדַדֵּי, anoki, “I.” All the 613 commandments of the Torah follow the lead of this chief. All the commandments trace their essence to Aleph, the symbol of the Holy One.

At the same time, however, Aleph shares the same root as eleph, Hebrew for the number one thousand. This denotes both the specific numeral 1,000 and also a vastly large, innumerable quantity. Aleph,
embodying both unity and multiplicity, is thus the prime factor of creation, leading the other letters as they combine to form the phenomena of the universe.

Computers are driven by an either/or, yes/no model of reality, and all of modern life seems more and more infused with this simplistic and reductionistic viewpoint.

Aleph slips the clutches of the limitations of “computer mind,” of simplistic dichotomies, of narrow labeling and pigeonholing, and black-and-white thinking.

This letter of simultaneous oneness and numberlessness begins several names of God including Elohim, אֱלֹהִים, and Adonai, אֲדֹנָי. Interestingly, the name Elohim is a plural word that literally means “Forces.” God is at the same time one and many and beyond all such distinctions.

Another name for God is Ein Sof, literally “Without End.” Ein Sof is related to the word יָם, ayin, which begins with an Aleph and means “nothing.” Aryeh Kaplan explains that the term Ein Sof has the connotation of “the Ultimate Nothingness.” The essence of Aleph and of our lives is, paradoxically, nothingness.

Aleph’s essence of nothingness is reflected in its sound. It has none. The very first letter of the Aleph Beit is silent! Aleph is the sound that comes before sound. Aleph is so close to the divine essence, on the edge of the holy nothingness from which sound and form emerge, that it can’t be constrained within a particular sound. We “pronounce” Aleph by opening our mouths but saying nothing, as if we were speechless with awe and wonder.

Aleph coalesces into form that which is formless. It makes solid that which cannot be grasped. At the same time, Aleph retains the pre-alphabetic condition, when “the earth was without form, and empty.”

Out of this emptiness, experience flashes vividly into being. God says, “Let there be light” and there is light. Earth, air, water, and fire come into form. Three of these four elements begin with Aleph: עָדַם, adamah, “earth”; אַוֶּר, avir, “air”; and אש, esh, “fire.”
Application

When Aleph materializes in our hands, it is an opportunity to recall what is primary. Aleph indicates a time to strip away the superfluous and get back to basics, to essentials, to what is elemental in our existence. What are our priorities? Where, given the vastness of the universe, amid the swirlings of numerous intents, will we focus our energies?

Aleph is a transcendental letter which is at the same time at home in the elements. When selecting Aleph, we have a big challenge: to be grounded in the earth, air, and fire of daily life while staying aware of the cosmic emptiness of ayin, nothingness. “Rabbi Aaron of Karlin was asked what he had learned from his teacher, the Great Maggid. ‘Nothing at all,’ he said. And when they pressed him to explain what he meant by that, he added: ‘The nothing-at-all is what I learned. I learned the meaning of nothingness. I learned that I am nothing at all, and that I Am, notwithstanding.”

The basic ambiguity of existence Rabbi Aaron is describing is expressed through Aleph. The word “ambiguity” has an original meaning of “driving in two directions.” Aleph drives two ways: toward oneness and toward numberlessness, toward nothingness and toward “I Am-ness.” The Buddhist “Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra” describes this same dynamic: “Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form.”

Aleph challenges us to live, at least for a little while, without being constrained within an “either/or” mindset.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Ben Yisrael put it this way: “God must be both Yesh and Ayin, Being and Emptiness, simultaneously. Yesh and Ayin reside in and are expressions of God’s wholeness (shlemut).”

How can we simultaneously embrace form and emptiness, something and nothing? How can we truly feel the oneness of creation within the infinite variety of its forms? Reb Yerachmiel wrote, “The purpose of Judaism is not other than the purpose of any authentic religion: the unification of Yesh and Ayin, Being and Emptiness, in the awakened consciousness of humankind.” How do we discover the unity of such apparently conflicting forces?
The shape of the letter Aleph provides some clues. Jewish sages teach that Aleph represents: (1) the yoke of an ox, (2) the upper and lower waters separated by the sky, and (3) a ladder. Each of these images can give us some guidance in making peace with the ambiguity of Aleph, the ambiguity of our lives.

In addition to Aleph’s shape resembling the yoke of an ox (especially in its earlier historic Phoenecian form), the word Aleph is related to a Hebrew word for “ox,” aluph. An ox is an animal of tremendous power and fortitude. When this power is tamed and harnessed, it helps people cultivate fields and provide the food of life. “A rich harvest comes through the strength of the ox.” The ox represents the spiritual power we have within us. The yoke symbolizes the discipline that contains this incredible ox energy and directs it in positive, nourishing ways.

The central prayer of Judaism is the Shema, “Hear O Israel, Y-H-V-H is our God, Y-H-V-H is One.” To know this unity beyond duality, we need first to have a kavanah or intention to do so. Then, we need the yoke of a spiritual practice that will help us prepare the soil of our minds and souls to directly experience this oneness. This yoke may take the form of daily prayer, meditation, mindful movement, or study. Aleph encourages us to take on at least one of these yokes, and to start plowing.

The great Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that the shape of Aleph, embodying the ambiguity of driving two ways, had another kind of significance. Aleph is formed by the letter Yud in the upper right and a Yud in the lower left, with the letter Vav lying diagonally between them. In Genesis, God says, “There shall be a sky in the middle of the water, and it shall divide between water and water.”

According to Rabbi Luria, the upper Yud stands for the higher waters, which symbolize the joys of feeling close to God. The lower Yud represents the lower waters, which symbolize the bitterness and sorrow of feeling far from God. The Vav in the middle simultaneously separates these two waters and connects them.

Aleph is thus a Jewish version of the yin-yang symbol, the Chinese symbol of complementary tendencies. Aleph embraces the ambiguity
and the balance of form and emptiness, separateness and unity, one-

ness and “thousandness.” The Zohar describes this situation: “Crying

is enwedged in my heart on one side, while joy is enwedged in my

heart on the other side.”

Aleph teaches us to embrace both sides of life, the grief and the

joy, the bitter and the sweet, in order to experience the integrity, the

undivided completeness of our lives.

The shape of Aleph represents a ladder, ascending up to the left.

Jacob dreamed of a ladder, set upon the earth and reaching all the way
to heaven, upon which the angels of God ascended and descended.

Aleph is the connector, the bridge, that makes it possible for angels,
bearers of divine messages, to flow freely back and forth between
the heavenly and the earthly, the world of infinite emptiness and the
world of unique form, the numberless and the one.

As we identify as Aleph, we become the ox steadfastly plowing the
field, preparing the ground for new growth. We become the sky and
the waters, simultaneously divided and united. And we become the
ladder making the connection between heaven and earth, providing
the channel for angels to ascend and descend, opening the way for
communication with the Holy.

Then, we can say, as Jacob cried when he awoke from his dream
of the ladder, “God truly is in this place but I did not know it...How
awe-inspiring this place is! It must be God’s temple. It is the gate to
heaven!”

Aleph’s Shadow

A danger of Aleph is to become paralyzed with ambivalence. When
we are able to see both sides, we may become like Hamlet, unable to
choose and act. We may need to rouse ourselves into action, while
recognizing that “not choosing” is itself a choice.

Because Aleph is so close to the Ein Sof, the Ultimate Nothingness,
it carries the danger of leading into nihilism, the belief that existence
is senseless and useless. If we have drifted to this extreme, we can
recall the other direction Aleph moves, toward form and fulfillment.
Aleph drives both ways. We can be alert to the tendency to get stuck in one side or the other of form and emptiness.

**Personal Comments**

Aleph is hard to grasp. How do we get hold of a letter that has no sound? It’s like trying to catch the wind in a butterfly net. Better not to try, I think, and just enjoy the breeze.

Aleph comes from two directions and then — wham! — here we are right at the crux. When I look at Aleph, I think of all the mothers and grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers all the way back through time. I hear their cries as they give birth. I think of all the fathers all the way back. I feel their anxieties and confusions. How precariously these ancestors engendered life and then nursed it along until mysteriously and wonderfully these children grew up and had babies of their own. For generations upon generations this happened, long before hospitals and anesthesia. Amazing! And then it comes down to me, to you. All these couplings, all these birth pains, all the work they did, all the food they ate, the lusts and the loves of these old ones, led to my birth, to your birth. Here we are!

Aleph reminds me of all this, of the beginnings, of the matings, of birth, of promise. Aleph births the Aleph Beit. It births the Ten Utterances. Its two small lines connect with the bold diagonal line, the connection, the crux in the middle. That’s where we are right now, smack in the middle. Aleph is basic, fundamental, ancient. Aleph is like a rock; it has seen it all.
Summary for Aleph

Numerical value: 1; 1,000; numberless
Application: Focus our energies on what is elemental and basic. Live, at least for a little while, without being constrained within an “either or” mindset. Open ourselves to both the grief and the joy of life. Accept the yoke of a spiritual practice.
Reflection: What are my priorities? Where, given the vastness of the universe, will I focus my energies?
Suggested action: Close your eyes. As you open them, imagine you have just been born and are seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling the things of this world, including your own body, for the very first time. Experience being reborn to the world around you and in you with heightened appreciation for the newness of each moment. Practice this a few times today in various situations.