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The Kabbalistic Alphabet of Libeskind: The Motif of Letter-shaped Windows in the Design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin

Scattered symbols

The edifice of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind and constructed between 1989–1999, is located on Lindenstrasse in the Kreuzberg district. The design was chosen by means of a contest organised by the German authorities; the aim was to conceive a museum that would refer both to the Holocaust and to the “2000 years of German-Jewish history” (Fig. 1). The building has been discussed in many academic publications to date, yet it still attracts unwavering interest, prompting debate among theoreticians of architecture, historians of art and philosophers alike.¹

Libeskind’s concept divided the museum space into two parts, i.e. the adapted form of the already existing baroque palace of Collegienhaus dating from the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm I (1713–1740)² and the adjacent new structure. The main (and only) entrance to the complex is situated in the baroque edifice, which is a two-story, three-wing masonry building with a courtyard. Its proportions are regular, symmetrical and harmonious, its façade a gentle mauve colour, its mansard roof a clear red. The building houses the ticket counters, the cloakroom, the museum

1 The present article was based on material not included in the author’s book *Muzeum Libeskinda w Berlinie. Żydowski kontekst architektury* [Libeskind’s museum in Berlin, The Jewish context of architecture], Poznań, 2015. The theses presented here were not mentioned in the book.

2 Due to the substantial damage it sustained during the Second World War, the edifice was reconstructed in 1963–1969 under the direction of Günter Hönow and chosen to house the Berlin Museum. Originally designed by Philipp Gerlach, the palace served as a court house. See I. Wirth, *Berlin Museum, Führer durch die Sammlungen*, Berlin, 1980; idem, “Geschichte des Berlin Museums (1964–1981)”, in: *Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, Jahrbuch 1999*, Berlin 2000, pp. 121–141; D. Bartmann, *Geschichte des Berlin Museums (1981–1995)*, in: *Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, Jahrbuch 1999*, Berlin, 2000, pp. 142–161; R. Bothe, *Berlin Museum, Kurzführer*, Berlin, 1987.



Fig. 1. The Jewish Museum in Berlin by Daniel Libeskind, general view from above. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Guenter Schneider

shop, the conference room, the restaurant and the underground passageway (tunnel) leading to the main museum edifice located to the west (Fig. 2).³ The tunnel is one of the three passage-axes (also located underground), whose shape on the floor plan resembles three spread fingers, identified with the form of the Hebrew letter *shin* (Fig. 3). The original axis becomes the stairway reaching up to the attic, whereas the other two lead outside to the E. T. A. Hoffmann Garden (the Garden of Exile)⁴ and to the so-called Holocaust Tower.

Libeskind's "proper" design, i.e. the so-called "Jewish part" (initially referred to as an *Abteilung*, i.e. section), has a zigzag plan resembling a crawling snake, a lightning or a shattered Star of David. The interior comprises four storeys, indistinguishable from the outside. Instead of neutral museum rooms, the architect designed asymmetrical spaces. Moreover, the entire zigzag structure is dissected with a straight line, 150 metres in length and 4.5 metres in width, which creates an

3 See e.g. Daniel Libeskind: *Extension to the Berlin Museum with Jewish Museum Department*, ed. K. Feireiss, Berlin, 1992; H. Stolzenberg, *The Jewish Museum Berlin. Can a Jewish Museum NOT be a Holocaust Memorial?*, Bloomington, 2003. See also: D. Libeskind, *Breaking Ground: An Immigrant's Journey from Poland to Ground Zero*, New York, 2004.

4 For more on the architect's sources of inspiration and the interpretation of this part of the museum, see G. Świtek, "Olimpia w Ogródzie Wygnania" [Olympia in the Garden of Exile], in: *Obraz zapośredniczony* [Mediated image], ed. M. Poprzeczka, Warsaw, 2005, pp. 75–88; G. Świtek, *Aporie architektury* [Aporia of architecture], Warsaw, 2012, pp. 102–111.

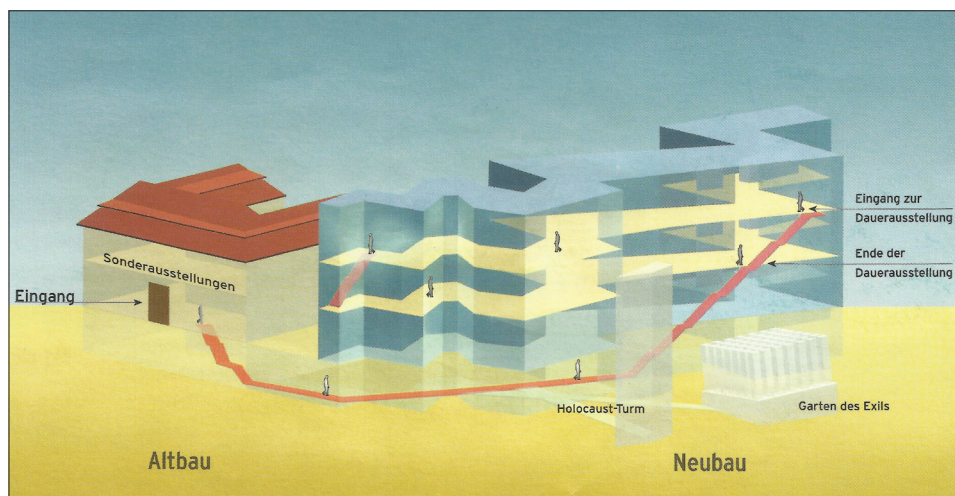


Fig. 2. Spatial cross-section. Illustration from the museum's information leaflet

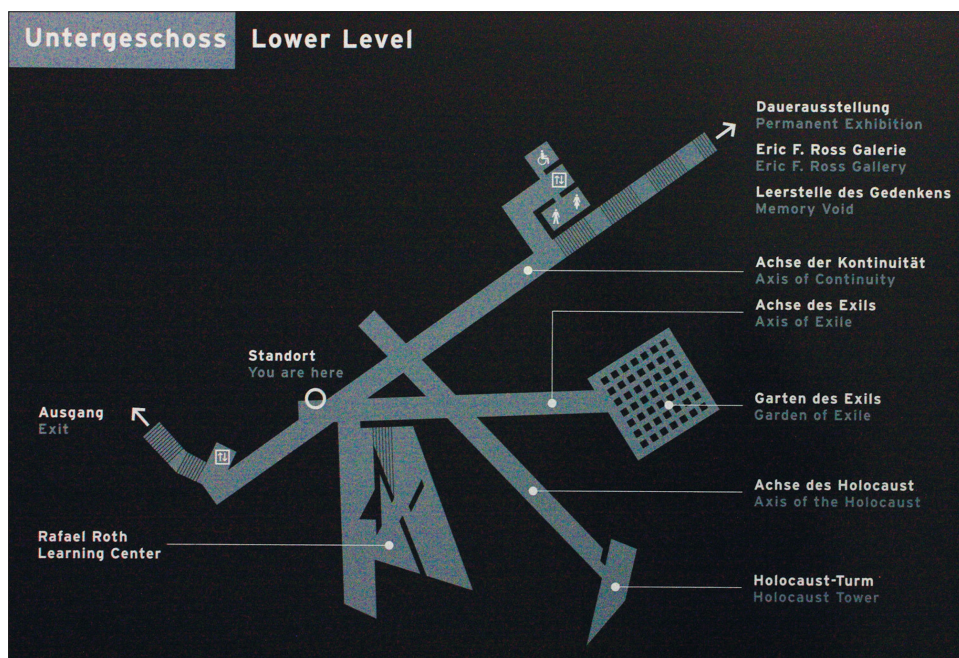


Fig. 3. The cross-section of the underground axes. Source: <https://pixelmaedchen.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/plan.jpg> [accessed 15 February 2015]

empty space (or empty spaces) spanning from the floor level to the roof, and separated from the rest of the structure.⁵ The external form of the building is a dynamic, expressive composition of irregular, angular shapes coated in gleaming zinc sheet, which appears green, blue or grey depending on the weather and the time of day. The walls, in turn, are slit with narrow, slender window openings that sometimes run diagonally in various directions, cutting through the entire elevation, several storeys high (Figs. 4, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 17). It is the form of these characteristic irregular windows, resembling a jumble of cuts and grooves on the façade, that constitutes the main subject of the present article. In it, the shapes are regarded as letter symbols from the Hebrew alphabet.⁶

Such a determinant for the analysis of the visual form of the building leads to further interpretative conclusions. The mysterious system of symbols may be



Fig. 4. View of the eastern façade. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Jens Ziehe

5 More in: B. Schneider, D. Libeskind, *Jewish Museum of Berlin. Between the Lines*, Munich, 1999 (4th edition, Munich, 2005), pp. 48–58. See also E. Dorner, D. Libeskind, *Jüdisches Museum*, Berlin, 1999; D. Libeskind, *Trauma*, in: *Image and Remembrance. Representation and the Holocaust*, eds. S. Horstein, F. Jacobowitz, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2003, pp. 43–58.

6 On the form of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, see e.g. R. Gromacka, “Język hebrajski” [The Hebrew language], in: *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon* [Jews in Poland. History and culture. Lexicon], ed. J. Tomaszewski, A. Żbikowski, pp. 195–204. See also: <http://www.onjewishmatters.com/the-evolution-of-the-hebrew-letters/>; http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/History/history.html [accessed 24 September 2018].

identified with the idea of a “scattered alphabet” known from the Kabbalah, which can consequently be tied to the notion of *tikkun olam*, or the “repair of the world”. To discuss these overlying motifs, one should, however, start from a terminological systematisation and a brief clarification of the meaning of the Kabbalah, the “scattered alphabet” and the postulate of the “repair of the world”, as well as other terms used in Jewish mysticism.⁷ The aim is not to present some hermetic definition of the notion of the Kabbalah itself (as there are many), but to specify what it may be in the interpretation of architecture and how it is understood in this field, i.e. how it can function in a complex weave with architecture, alphabetical symbols and a number of mystical concepts which may sometimes be perceived in the Jewish tradition from the perspective of imagery and representation. Thus, the issue concerns the idea of reading architecture as an “image”, through the lens of the Kabbalah.

According to Gershom Scholem, a pioneer of Jewish mysticism and one of the greatest authorities on the subject, often cited by Libeskind, the Kabbalah is a kind of a speculative “system of mystical and specifically theosophical thinking”, pertaining to the so-called divine attributes, the creation of nature and the universe, the place and role of human beings in this system, their relation to the divine and an attempt at describing these themes with the help of purely visual metaphors.⁸ The last of these aspects seems particularly significant in the present context. Scholem writes of a certain “conflict between conceptual thinking and symbolic thinking, which gives the literature and history of the Kabbalah their unique character”.⁹ It is not only “the allegorical expression of a cosmology that might have been communicated in other ways”, but “symbols in the strict sense”.¹⁰ Moreover, in the history of the Kabbalah there appeared tendencies to pronounce symbols and metaphors as superior to concepts and terms, and some kabbalistic works (books), such as *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Sefer Zohar*, *Sefer HaTemunah*, or *Bahir* even “delight in images and carry them as far as possible”.¹¹ Their suggestive mythical content may only be expressed through visual metaphors, which cannot be fully melted into concepts, i.e. substituted with pure definitions. In Scholem’s view, discursive thinking is an

7 See also B. Kos, “Kabała” [Kabbalah], in: *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny. Dzieje, kultura, religia, ludzie* [The Polish Jewish dictionary. History, culture, religion, people], eds. Z. Borzyskiński, R. Żebrowski, pp. 727–731; J. Doktor, “Kabała” [Kabbalah], in: *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon* [Jews in Poland. History and culture. Lexicon], eds. J. Tomaszewski, A. Żbikowski, pp. 225–233. Cf. D. Matt, *Kabbalah. The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Edison, 1995; idem, *The Essential Kabbalah*, San Francisco, 1996; M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfection: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New York, 2002; Y. Al-Taie, *Daniel Libeskind, Metaphern jüdischer Identität im Post-Shoah Zeitalter*, Regensburg, 2008; A. Gorlin, *Kabbalah in Art and Architecture*, New York, 2013.

8 In Gershom Scholem’s understanding, the Kabbalah is literally “tradition” in which the mystical tendencies of Judaism are reflected. However, the word may also be translated as “receiving”, “accepting” or “transmission”. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, translated by R. Manheim, Frankfurt, 1965; idem, *Major trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1995, pp. 1–39.

9 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 96.

10 Ibid., p. 93.

11 Ibid., p. 97

asymptotic process, in which conceptual descriptions and formulations attempt to clarify “symbolically full” and “inexhaustible” images as abbreviations for conceptual series, which they are not.¹² The mythical element cannot be placed within the realm of rational concepts, and may only be explained by using paradoxes,¹³ which causes the images to be internally logical.¹⁴ This statement pertains, for instance, to the concepts of: *tsimtsum* (the constriction of God in the process of emanation),¹⁵ *shevirat kelim* (the shattering of the vessels, i.e. the primordial forms holding God’s light),¹⁶ *shekhinah* (divine presence),¹⁷ and, most of all, the emanation of the Scripture in the mythical act of creation. The interpretation of architecture from the perspective of kabbalistic systems of imagery, therefore, faces the challenge not of regarding the alphabet as a rational system of symbols, but addressing its mystical (or visually-mystical) nature, since the “scattered alphabet” is such a visual form, also in the Kabbalah.¹⁸

In the doctrine of the *Zohar*,¹⁹ one of the most important kabbalistic books, “God spoke – this speech is a force which at the beginning of creative thought was separated from the secret of *En-Sof*”.²⁰ Further sections of the *Zohar* present this “process” as the gradation of the world of emanation, beginning from the purest, unfathomable will, followed by thought, the inner and inaudible word, audible voice and speech, i.e. physically articulated and differentiated expression.²¹ The workings and expansion of God’s mystical power, as well as the ongoing differentiation occurring within the divine itself are represented as a language process. This “dynamic” of the existence of the divine (or within the divine – its emanation), is therefore

12 Ibid., p. 96.

13 G. Scholem, *Major trends...*, pp. 35, 280.

14 See also G. Scholem, “Dziesięć ahistorycznych tez o kabale” [Ten ahistorical theses on the Kabbalah], translated (into Polish) by A. Lipszyc, *Literatura na świecie* 1997, 312, no. 7, pp. 244–256.

15 On the concept of *tsimtsum*, see e.g. R. Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God. The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, translated by J. M. Green, New York, 1993, chapter 16: *The Doctrine of Tzimtzum*, pp. 79–91; J. Bar-Lew, *Song of the Soul: An Introduction to Kaballa*, Jerusalem, 1994, part 3, chapter 1: *The concept of tzimtzum*, pp. 162–168.

16 See e.g. B. Kos, “Szwirat ha-kelim”, in: *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny...*, vol. 2, pp. 664–665.

17 See e.g.: G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah (Mysticism and Kabbalah)*, translated by J. Neugroschel, New York, 1997, chapter 4: *Shekhinah, the Feminine Element in Divinity*, pp. 140–196; A. Unterman, *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*, London, 1991, p.181.

18 In the kabbalistic and Chassidic tradition, before the Torah was written down, the alphabet appeared as an “a heap of unarranged letters”. See e.g. M. Halbertal, *Of Pictures and Words: Visual and Verbal Representation of God*, in: *The Divine Image. Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art* (catalogue of an exhibition at the Israel Museum), Jerusalem, 2006, pp. 7–13.

19 See e.g. G. Scholem, *Major trends...*, *Fifth Lecture: Zohar I. The Book and its Author*, pp. 156–204, and *Sixth Lecture: Zohar II. The Theosophic Doctrine of the Zohar*, pp. 205–243.

20 For more on the *En Sof* formula, see e.g. G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, pp. 207–220. See also T. N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God. The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 65–74; P. Schafer, *The Hidden and Manifested God. Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, translated by A. Pomerance, New York, 1992, pp. 77–81, 97–103.

21 *Zohar* I, 74a and I 15a, after G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 216.

also perceived as the development of the elements of speech/language, from which (and through which) “spring the primeval forms of all letters”.²² Thus, according to the *Zohar*, God “is revealed in the unity of his activity”; the specific – alphabetic – structure of His name, the tetragrammaton (JHWH) is a specific expression of his levels of manifestation.²³ According to Scholem, kabbalists wished to penetrate the mystery of the linguistic and mystical act in which “the Tetragrammaton is split and divided into other divine names”, linking the mysticism of language with anthropological mysticism. “What takes on form in God is that in which He reveals and announces Himself”, i.e. the elements of his name (e.g. the Tetragrammaton) composed of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and constituting a factual aspect of his form. As noted by Scholem, this view has been present in the history of the Kabbalah from its very beginnings; a classic work which portrays this issue in a very “visual” manner is the already mentioned *Sefer HaTemunah*, whose title means the Book of the Shape, i.e. the shape of the Hebrew letters, or the Book of the Image (the image of the divine).²⁴ The letters that are the forms of God’s creative power also make up his mystical image which appears in the world of his manifestations (the *Sefirot*).²⁵ In other words, as stated in the *Sefer ha-Temunah*, this shape is the Hebrew alphabet, the symbolic “image” of the divine. Thus, for kabbalists, a person deep in contemplation of the alphabet fulfils the following verse of the Torah: “And the shape of God does he behold”.²⁶

In rabbinic literature, the letters of the alphabet are presented, in a sense, as an independent, self-aware/mystical “being”, which had existed before and, moreover, took part in the creation of the world. One may therefore venture the statement that Scripture was both the subject and the object of the world being created.²⁷ The midrash *Bereshit Rabba* (I, 1) comments on the tale of the Scripture boasting that it served as the tool of all creation: “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to His works of old”.²⁸ The midrash *Tanchuma*, *Bereshit* 1, in turn contains the following passage: “The Torah served as an artisan in all the work of creation [...]. With it, He bound up the sea lest it should go forth and overflow the world”.²⁹

22 G. Scholem, *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*, Frankfurt, 1970, p. 51.

23 G. Scholem, *On the Mystical...*, p. 51.

24 In was published in 1250 in Catalonia and in 1892 in Lvov. See G. Scholem, *On the Mystical...*, p. 49; idem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 78.

25 On the notion of the *sefirot*: B. Kos, “Sefiry” [Sephireth], in: *Polski Słownik Judaistyczny...*, pp. 510–511; J. Bar-Lew, op. cit., part two: *The Sefirot*; M. A. Ouaknin, *Mysteries of the Kabbalah*, translated by J. Bacon, New York, 2000, part four, *The Ten Sefirot*, pp. 191–272; M. Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, New Haven CT, 1988, chapter 6: *Kabbalistic Theosophy*, pp. 112–155; R. Elio, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, Oxford, 2008.

26 G. Scholem, *On the Mystical...*, p. 49.

27 Tadeusz Zaderecki, *Tajemnice alfabetu hebrajskiego* [The mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet], Warsaw, 1994, p. 47.

28 Ibid., p. 49.

29 Ibid.

It should, however, be noted that in the Hebrew language the term for “letter” is *ot*, which may also be translated as a “sign” and evokes the connotation with the word for “creation”.³⁰ The Book of Genesis presents the process of creation as an incessant stream of letters pouring from heavens to the earth. According to rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi, thought of in this way, letters bring a thing into being.³¹ In the kabbalists’ own opinion, however, the being or world (or rather universe) in the Kabbalah is not a perfect work, but one that is “deformed” from its very beginning.

The Kabbalah portrays the act of creation (identified with the emanation of God himself) as paradoxical in itself, a process of the “unfolding” of the primeval divine light, which successively assumes the appropriate hypostases, or forms, also known as the *sefirot* or vessels.³² However, as Scholem puts it, these vessels did not manage to hold God’s light, cracked and then shattered. This is the origin of the kabbalistic idea of the “shattering of vessels” (*shevirat kelim*). The already mentioned book of *Yetsirah*, in turn, argues the connection between elements of language and the act of creation. In this framework, *shevirat kelim* is identified with the idea of the shattering of the alphabet or literally the scattering of letters, their disarrangement or even deformation. This topic will be discussed in more detail in a further section of the present work; for now let us turn to the actual subject of this article, i.e. Libeskind’s architecture, and look at his designs and publications, to see references to the kabbalistic letter symbols.

The architecture of letters

Even before the Berlin museum opened, Libeskind published a collection of (rather similar) texts entitled *Between the Lines*.³³ The title evokes associations with the textual, yet the articles in the volume could be described rather as a form of the architect’s commentary on his own designs, and refer to the idea of language very laconically, as if to a kind of matrix or architectural formula.³⁴ Without engaging in a thorough analysis of these texts, which offer a rather convoluted explanation

30 B. Black Koltuv, *Amulets, Talismans, Magical Jewelry: A Way to the Unseen, Ever-Present, Almighty God*, Berwick, 2005, p. 61.

31 Ibid., p. 61.

32 G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 266.

33 The texts were published, in a very similar form, as many as four times. D. Libeskind, A. P.A. Belloli, *Radix–Matrix: Architecture and Writings*, Munich–New York, 1997, pp. 34–45; D. Libeskind, *Between the Lines*, in: *Daniel Libeskind: Extension to the Berlin Museum with Jewish Museum Department*, ed. K. Feireiss, Berlin, 1992, pp. 57–125; D. Libeskind, *Daniel Libeskind: The Space of Encounter*, New York, 2000, pp. 38–45. See also D. Libeskind, *Between the Lines* (Opening speech, Berlin, 1999) in: *Radix–Matrix...*, pp. 46–47.

34 A more direct reference to the idea of text is found in the title of the catalogue: *Daniel Libeskind. Architektura jako język* [Daniel Libeskind. Architecture as a Language], Ostrava, 2010. The texts it contains (by T. Goryczka and J. Nemec) do not, however, make any references to the notion of the alphabet.

for the Berlin design (or the sources of inspiration for it), we may nonetheless note the interesting visual materials accompanying them. These are the architect's own works: sketches, drawings and designs.³⁵ In one of the reprints (*Between the Lines*) first appearing in the book under the meaningful title: *Radix-Matrix: Architecture and Writings*, Libeskind added a photograph of his concept graph-design entitled simply "The Alphabet" (Fig. 5).³⁶ The graph takes an entire page and is composed of seven vertical columns, each of which contains a series of various symbols, suggestively evoking the motifs of primordial, elementary letters. Each column has an apt title (from left to right): underground, void, internal, site, linear, window and combination, and refers to selected fragments or lines of foundations, the shapes of walls, interior or exterior space, the form of windows, etc., taken from various parts of the design. As noted above, the entire graph is a convincing matrix of something resembling a "jumbled alphabet". The same text (in *Radix-Matrix*) also features other illustrations, such as the one entitled "Names" (p. 37), which shows a photograph of a diorama of the museum placed on an acrylic glass print of a page of the *Gedenkbuch* listing the names of the Berlin Jews murdered during the Second World War, as well as a graph with calculations, the so-called "Façade coordinates" (p. 41) and the "Structural calculation plan, Façade" (p. 43), which are also based on the communicative aspect of the symbol of a letter or number, here assuming a certain visual quality. In a different version of the same text (*Between the Lines*), this time appearing in *Extension to the Berlin Museum*, Libeskind added new illustrations, which nonetheless referred to the notion of letters and the alphabet.³⁷ The first shows a redrawn fragment of the façade featuring a window shaped like two disjointed, slanting tablets (p. 58), evoking the story of Moses receiving the tablets on Mount Sinai – an association that shall be discussed below. The architect also included a reprint of a fragment of the libretto to Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* (p. 60), a model of the museum structure (pp. 32–33)³⁸, two plans (the floor plan [p. 64] and elevation [p. 68]). Significantly, both these plans featured passages of the Talmud superimposed thereon. The same passages were used by Libeskind in his design for the Danish Jewish Museum in Copenhagen, where the structure of the central text (the Talmud) is surrounded with layers of intertextual commentaries (and commentaries to commentaries). Thus, as Libeskind himself puts it, the design is "both written and read like a text within a text within a text".³⁹

35 The designs were shown e.g. at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, during the exhibition "Daniel Libeskind Fundamenty Pamięci" ("Daniel Libeskind. Foundations of Memory; 14 June 2004 – 15 August 2004). Curators: G. Świtek, C. Swickerath.

36 D. Libeskind, A. P. A. Belloli, *Radix-Matrix...*, pp. 34–45 (illustration on p. 36).

37 D. Libeskind, *Between the Lines*, in: *Extension to...*, pp. 57–125.

38 This photograph appears in Ralph Bothe's article "The Berlin Museum and Its Extension", in: *Extension to...*, pp. 32–52.

39 After J. E. Young, "Daniel Libeskind's New Jewish Architecture", in: *Daniel Libeskind and the Contemporary Jewish Museum: New Jewish Architecture from Berlin to San Francisco*, ed. C. Wolf, New York, 2008, pp. 54–55, 59.

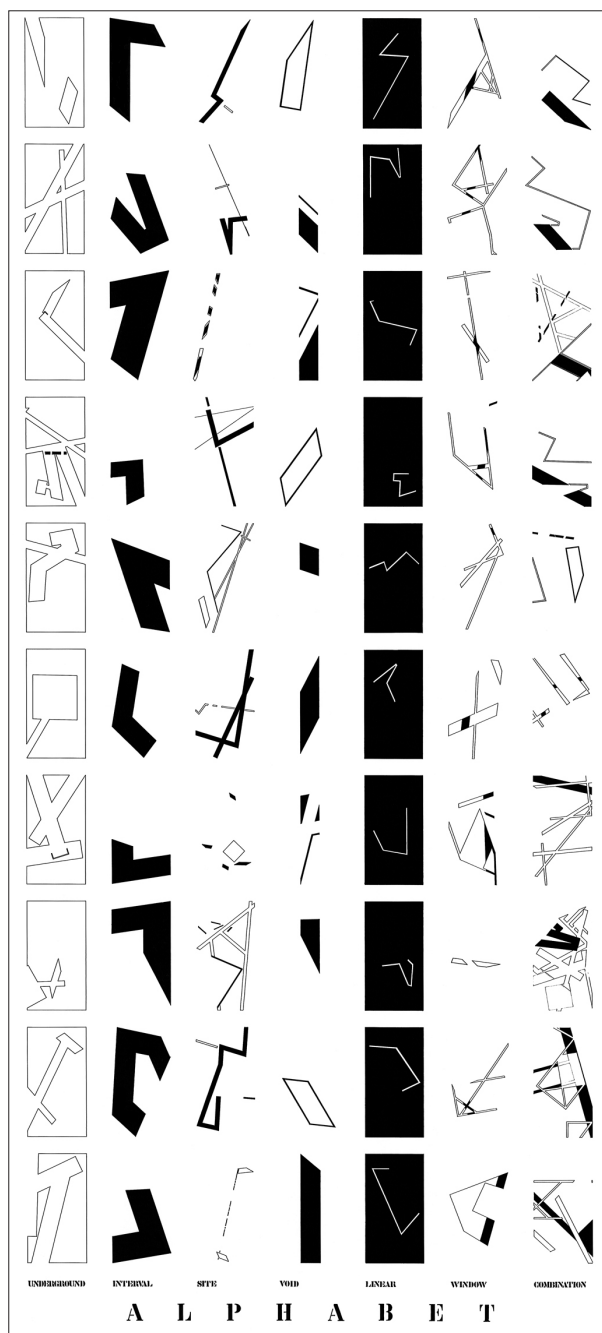


Fig. 5. Daniel Libeskind, “The Alphabet”, concept drawing. Source copyrights: Studio Libeskind New York

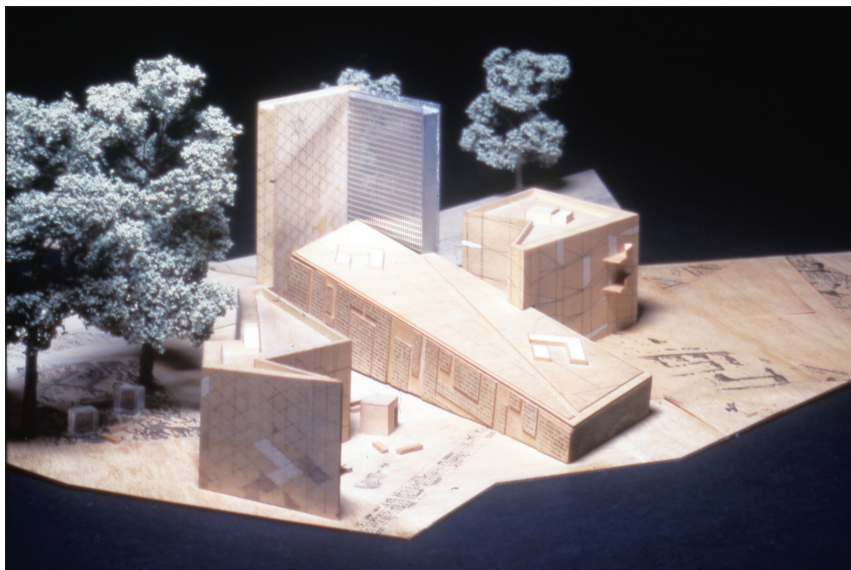


Fig. 6. Daniel Libeskind, “The Alef Before the Beit. Jewish Community Center and Synagogue, Duisburg”, model. Source and copyrights: Studio Libeskind New York

A similar treatment of “marking” a structure of a building with complex symbolism of the Scripture can be found in the project entitled *The Aleph before the Beit. Jewish Community Center and Synagogue. Duisburg*, where the architects fills the façade of a wooden model of the edifice (Fig. 6).⁴⁰ The floor plan has the form of the Hebrew letter *aleph*, which happens to be the most complex and symbolically significant letter of this alphabet. “The Aleph before the House [since the letter Beit also signifies ‘house’]. The Aleph represents the unity of Israel – the unity of G-d. The Aleph stands for more than a letter, more than an emblem, more than the fiery beginning from which the word Bereshit-stems [...]. The Aleph,” Libeskind continues, “is the foundation of the Tetragrammaton, Yud, Heh and Vav – the ineffable and unpronounceable Name. These letters have their seat and are given form in the One”.⁴¹ The architects also compares the shape of the *aleph* to the book in which it appears. The letter and the book represent the spiritual and cultural identity of the Jewish nation; they are the twin elements organising the urban and architectural structure, as well as the functional dimension of the Duisburg

40 D. Libeskind, *The Aleph Before the Beit. Jewish Community Centre and Synagogue, Duisburg*, in: *Radix-Matrix...* pp. 98–99. The façade of the building is focused on windows (or structured by them: it is the windows that build the façade), which bring light inside through complex patterns of Talmudic pages. In other words, the arrangement and construction of windows is to resemble the structure of the pages of the Talmud. This intention is clearly visible on the (wooden) model. The illustration appears on page 99.

41 D. Libeskind, *The Aleph Before...*, p. 98.

design. Concentration, contemplation, perception and consideration of the forms and shapes of the letters is a notion known from the Kabbalah (or its practical branch); in this case architectural references to Jewish mysticism (since the Kabbalah is an element thereof) are more than just a strategy for interpretation, but a declarative assumption made by the architect himself. The motto to the article under analysis (*The Aleph Before the Beit*) is a passage from the kabbalistic book the *Zohar*, recounting the following story: “Rabbi Elazar bar Abina said in Rabbi Aha’s name: For 26 generations the Aleph complained before G-d: I am the first of the letters yet you didn’t create Your world with me! Don’t worry, said G-d, the world and all its fullness were created for the Torah alone. Tomorrow when I come to give my Torah at Sinai the first word I say will begin with you”.⁴² The first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph* and *bet* also have their place in the new building of the Academy of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The academy is situated on the other side of Lindenstrasse, exactly opposite the Collegienhaus; the letters may be found on the roof of the “vestibule” imitating a wooden chest, tilted and partially sunk into the ground. The architect intended them to refer to the essence of the (entire) alphabet and the imperative of education, which constitutes the core of Jewish culture.⁴³ Other (Jewish) designs by Libeskind also use letters not as the sources of iconic inspiration, but rather as a specific interpretation which forms a number of meanings stemming from the symbolism of the letters. For instance, the structure of (and inspiration for) the Jewish Museum in San Francisco, whose design was made public in 2000 (and implemented in 2008), is based on different two Hebrew letters – *hei* and *yud*. The combination of these two means “alive” or “the house of life” (these letters often appeared above entrances to synagogues).⁴⁴ The next example is provided by the Maurice Wohl Centre at the campus of the Bar Ilan university in Ramat Gan (Tel Aviv), opened in 2005. The building is even referred to as “a labyrinth of letters”. The edifice designed by Libeskind resembles an open book, from which letters are flowing.⁴⁵ Reduced to their rudimentary forms, albeit clear and almost ostentatiously legible letter symbols appear not only in the corridors, in the main lecture hall, on walls and ceilings, but also on the compositionally complex façade, in a way shining through the walls and, again, evoking the concept of the scattered alphabet. Nevertheless, the first implemented design in which Libeskind

42 As the first letter of the alphabet, the *aleph* is traditionally considered to be the visual compilation of all the following letters. According to the Kabbalah, it has the structure of the body. It is structured by three elements: the head, signifying teaching, the torso, signifying community, and the supporting legs, which symbolise the education of children. After: Libeskind, *The Aleph Before...*, p. 98.

43 <https://www.dezeen.com/2012/11/21/the-academy-of-the-jewish-museum-berlin-by-daniel-libeskind/> [accessed 24 September 2018].

44 See J. E. Young, op. cit., pp. 54–55, 59; M. Schwartz, “Toward a California Judaism”, in: *Daniel Libeskind and...*, ed. C. Wolf, pp. 39–43.

45 See: <https://www10.aecafe.com/blogs/arch-showcase/2012/05/08/the-wohl-centre-in-ramat-gan-israel-by-studio-daniel-libeskind/> [accessed 24 September 2018].

used such an “alphabetical, architectural and kabbalistic” interpretation was the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Learning the alphabet

Among the jumble of cuts and grooves on the walls of the structure, one may find not only motifs evoking the shape of Hebrew letters, but also a number of other forms, some complex and others very simple. Sometimes they are ordinary axes of varying width, transecting at various angles, at other times geometrical shapes, such as slanting rectangles, and occasionally complex patterns of lines and planes. In the assumed interpretation, all of these symbols may be regarded as representing various stages in the evolution of Hebrew writing, from the first archaic traces to the full letters of today. The modern Hebrew alphabet is called the “square script” (*ktav meruba*), yet since the Talmudic period it has also been referred to as the “Assyrian script” (*ktav ashuri*).⁴⁶ The Assyrians adopted the proto-Hebrew script around the 7th century BC, abandoning (or modifying) the cuneiform. The script was subsequently subjected to Greek influences and ultimately assumed a form resembling the modern version around the 2nd century BC in Judea. It should be noted that the system also includes forms whose origins can be traced to the cuneiform, such as the letter *yud* (which resembles a comma, a small wedge or a short stroke), or *vav* (a vertical stroke).

It is therefore possible to read the “disarray” of the letter-like vines placed by Libeskind on the smooth walls of the Berlin structure as the idea of letters scattered in chaos and deformed or, conversely, as the process of the alphabet’s creation.

Given the fact that the museum should, in principle, also refer to the Holocaust, the evoked idea of creating a new alphabet may also be understood as a metaphor for creating a new language, a new speech (or the learning of a new alphabet) after the events of the Second World War. The symbolical notion of creating the world anew, out of chaos, is a return to “ancient history”, the time after the deluge, where the world has to be revived from the debris and remains. One has to re-learn how to speak, write and communicate. Significantly, in the Kabbalah the essence of language, i.e. its mystical (or even magical) qualities is not related to the awareness of its visual evolution, but stems from the belief in the power of the symbol regardless of its current evolutionary form.⁴⁷ Moreover, it is the diversity of symbols that becomes a matter of special consideration (Fig. 7). For the kabbalist Isaac Luria (cited by Libeskind himself) even the various calligraphic styles of the Hebrew script have specific mystical meaning.⁴⁸

46 *Żydzi w Polsce. Leksykon...*, pp. 195–204.

47 The already mentioned Book of Temunah (*Sefer haTemunah*) discusses the mythical interpretations of the shapes of all twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. See also G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 178.

48 D. Libeskind, *The Aleph Before...*, p. 98; Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 256.

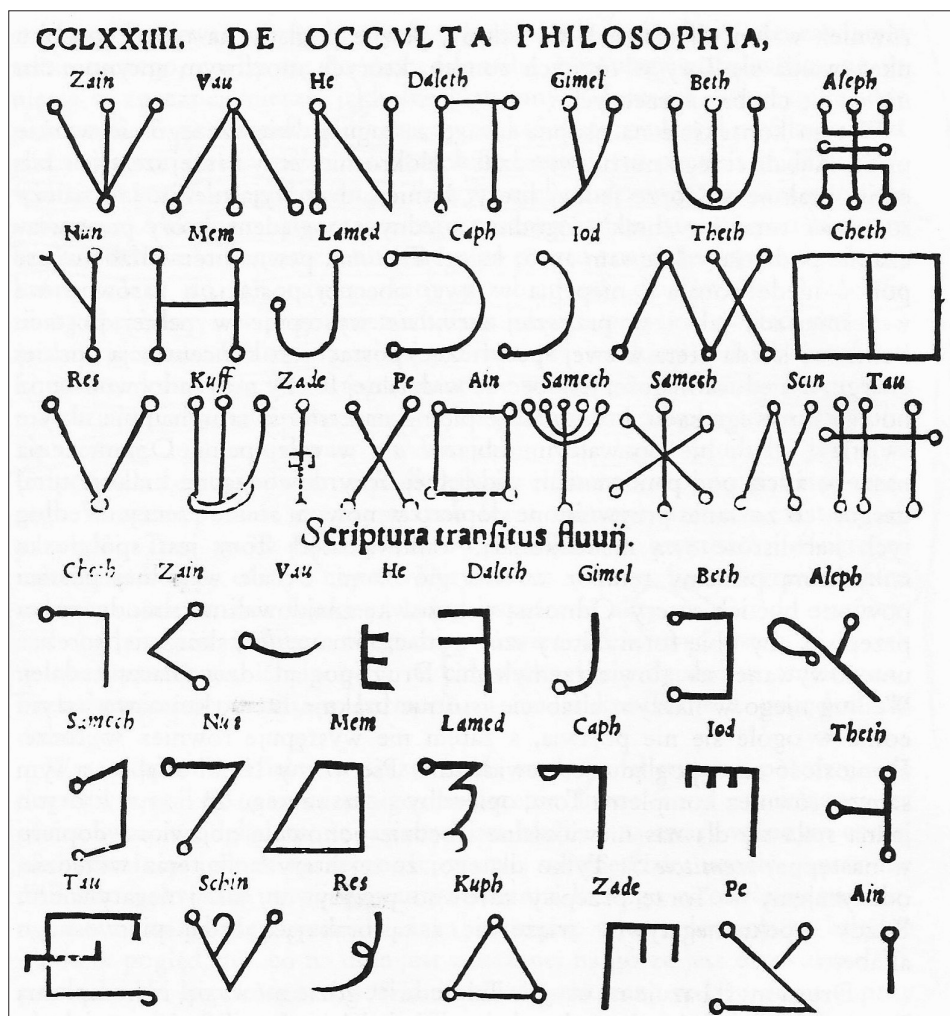


Fig. 7. Kabbalistic letters. C. Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbala Denudata*, Sulzbach-Frankfurt, a/M 1677–1684. Reprinted in: L. Gorny, *La Kabbale juive et cabale chretienne*, Paris, 1977. Source: G. Scholem, *Kabala i jej symbolika*, Polish translation by R. Wojnakowski, Cracow, 1996, p. 90

The manner in which Libeskind includes letters in the design of the walls of the Berlin museum – as grooves and openings (i.e. windows) – may be associated with the way the Decalogue was written on the stone tablets. The letters of the Torah Moses received at Mount Sinai were cut by divine fire, which formed translucent symbols in stone. When, upon seeing the golden calf, Moses smashed the tablets, the letters flew up to the Heavens.⁴⁹ The chaotic arrangement of the letters on the

49 Deut. 9:17, after G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 69.

Berlin museum and the breakneck form of many symbols also evokes the thought of this scattered alphabet, which – as letter-windows – can be read from two sides: the interior and the exterior. The symbols that appear reversed from the outside may be read correctly from the inside, and vice versa (Fig. 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17). The forms are, however, deliberately “simplified”, and the chaotically dispersed traces of letters, fragments of words or sentences resembles incomprehensible gibberish or the strained speech patterns of a stutterer.

The problem of the inexpressibility of the word and its medial aspect is included in Libeskind’s interpretation taken from the unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron* by Arnold Schönberg. In the final scene Moses does not sing, but speaks, invoking the absent word; this “can be understood as a text, since the missing word comes clear to the listeners – it is Moses’ call for the word, pronounced without singing. I tried to finish that opera by architecture”.⁵⁰ In the architect own words:

It is not only that he [Schönberg] had no inspiration, so to speak, to complete act III, but also the whole musical structure had ground to a halt, erasing the possibility of continuing in the operatic mode. [...] So I got out my records and began reading the libretto. [...] It is a dialogue between Aaron and Moses [...]. Aaron wants to communicate to the people, lead them into the Promised Land, and Moses is unable to convey the revelation of God through any image, including the musical image of Schönberg’s case.⁵¹

Libeskind, who consistently avoids being literal, in his designs and commentaries alike, does not clarify which element of the structure refers to Schönberg’s libretto or to Moses himself. The issue may only be clarified interpretatively or treated as a challenge and infer its traces in the jumble of letter-windows. However, suggestive, even persistent, associations with Moses’s tablets are evoked by two large windows visible from the courtyard, i.e. from the south-east (Fig. 12). They resemble two spread tablets, or twin doors torn from their hinges. Their form is that of large slanting rectangles, one of which reaches the edge of the building and splays onto the other wall visible beyond the sharp corner. If one perceives this fragment as a visual metaphor, it is from these window-tablets that the letters flowed (becoming scattered and deformed). These letters need to be collected and ordered again, given form or “learnt”.

The scattered alphabet is a visual metaphor repeatedly employed by contemporary Jewish architects who declaratively refer their works to kabbalistic books or use the Kabbalah as a direct source of inspiration. Some of them, such as David Rakia and Mordechai Ardon, treat the motif of the scattered alphabet rather literally, while others, such as Amon Ben-David, Michael Sgan-Cohen, Michail Grobman and Gary Goldstein, engage in a meaningful game with the alphabet, the Kabbalah

50 D. Libeskind, “Between the Lines: Jewish Museum Berlin”, in: *The Space of...* p. 26; Libeskind, *Breaking Ground...*, p. 15.

51 D. Libeskind, “Between the Lines...”, in: *Extension to...*, p. 57.



Fig. 8. Inside view of a window form. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Silke Helmerdig



Fig. 9. View of an eastern façade window (Paul Celan Hoff). Source: <http://a397.idata.over-blog.com/5/05/35/05/2012/3eme/HIDA/Daniel-libeskind-facade.jpg>



Fig. 10. View of the western façade. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Jens Ziehe

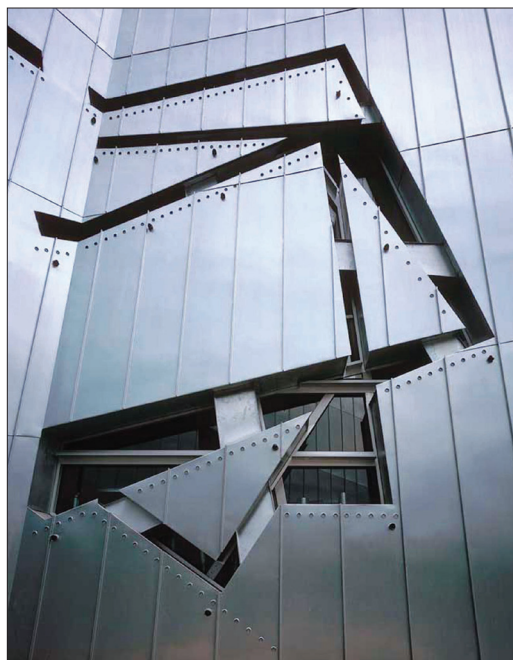


Fig. 11. Inside view of a window form. Source: B. Schneider, D. Libeskind, *Jewish Museum of Berlin. Between the Lines*, Munich, 1999 (4th edition, Daniel Libeskind: Jewish Museum Berlin, Munich, 2005), p. 44 (photo by Stefan Müller)

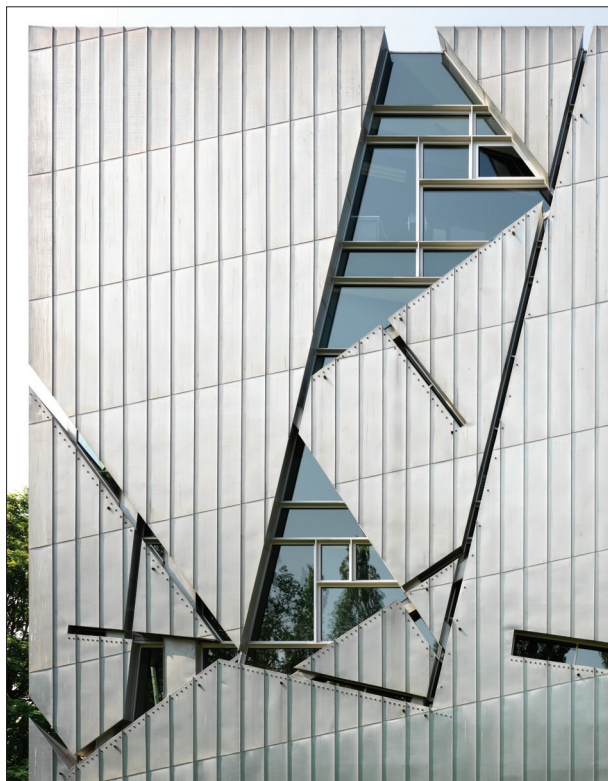


Fig. 12. View of the south-eastern façade. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Jens Ziehe

and the aspects of divine imagery, thereby leaving some room for interpretation.⁵² Moreover, in modern studies on the Jewish iconosphere, the theme of “scattered letters” also stimulates academic research (in fields such as the study of art or art criticism) assuming the metaphorical perspective of the Kabbalah.⁵³ In this case,

52 See e.g. S. Laderman, “The Unique Significance of the Hebrew Alphabet in the Works of Mordecai Ardon and Michael Sgan-Cohen”, *Ars Judaica. The Bar-Ilan Journal of Jewish Art*, 2009, 5, pp. 85–106; R. Dorot, “Jerusalem – ‘The Heavens Tell’ David Rakia – Paintings”, *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia* 2013, 7, pp. 285–308; M. Goldfarb Berkowitz, “Sacred Signs and Symbolism in Morris Louis: The Charred Journal Series”, 1951, in: *Complex Identities. Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, eds. M. Baigell, M. Heid, New Jersey–London, 2001, pp. 193–205; M. Baigell, *American Artists, Jewish Images*, New York, 2006; idem, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America*, Cambridge, 2001.

53 See e.g. Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts*, New York, 1993, Introduction, pp. 7–30. See also: eadem, “Art Confronts the Holocaust”, in: *After Auschwitz. Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, (exhibition catalogue, curated and edited by M. Bohm-Duchen, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art) Sunderland,

the Kabbalah is more than some aesthetic or visual reflection found in works of art (a reference in itself), but often a tool or a bridge leading to the issue of the Holocaust in art. One of the most commonly mentioned, though not literal, examples is Renata Stein's work entitled *Gateway to Heaven (Sha'ar Hashamaim)* from 1994. It shows four horizontal lines, tapering progressively towards the top of the composition, drawn against a standing brown rectangle. Depending on the interpretation, the lines indicate the rungs of a ladder, railroad sleepers or the logs of a hearth.⁵⁴ Above them, directly beneath the arching "firmament", the artist placed scattered Hebrew letters in gold. In a direct and suggestive manner, the work evokes associations not only with symbols of the Holocaust, already entrenched in art, but also with the (kabbalistic) motif of scattered symbols which had escaped God in the primordial act of the creation of the world, and scattered in the skies. The two seemingly unrelated themes, the breaking of the vessels and the scattering of the alphabet, in relevant literature became almost synonymous, and are therefore (like an echo of a catastrophe) invoked in connection with all tragedies known from Jewish history, referred to as *churban* [Hebr. catastrophe, destruction].⁵⁵

According to Howard Wettstein, an American philosopher of language, in Judaism *churban* is a metaphor for a "cosmic jolt", echoed by the Babylonian captivity, the destruction of the first and second Temple, the expulsion of Jews from the Holy Land, and even (in the views of Gershom Scholem) the exodus from Spain and the Holocaust itself. Wettstein perceives the notion of a catastrophe whose negative repercussions continue to shake Jewish history as the core of contemporary religious identity, also referred to as *post-churban Judaism*.⁵⁶ Its perpetual aim is to provide the response and references to this (cosmic and primeval) catastrophe and its reverberations in the human world. To use a metaphor, the breaking of vessels, the scattering of letters and their incessant migration, is sometimes also referred to as "exile" (*galuth*). As Wettstein notes, Judaism is a religion inherited from the generations of rabbis of the Talmudic era and the following fifteen centuries of unending persecution, exile and *shoah* – it is a religion of *galuth*, a religion of (the awareness

1995, pp. 48–77; A. Kampf, *Chagal to Kitaj. Jewish Experience in 20th Century Art*, London, 1990, pp. 153–163; O. Soltes, *Fixing the World: Jewish American Painters in Twentieth Century*, New England, 2009.

54 See e.g. M. Baigell, "Jewish American Artists: Identity and Messianism", in: *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, ed. M. Baigell, M. Heyd, New Brunswick–New Jersey, 2001, pp. 182–192; M. Baigell, "Social Concern and 'Tikkun Olam' in Jewish American Art", *Ars Judaica. The Bar-Ilan Journal of Jewish Art*, 2012, 8, pp. 55–80; *Jewish Dimension in Modern Visual Culture*, eds. R. C. Washton Long, M. Baigel, M. Heyd, Milly, Hanover–London, 2010.

55 G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, pp. 326–330, 338; A. Lipszyc, *Ślad judaizmu w filozofii XX wieku* [The trace of Judaism in the philosophy of the 20th century], Warsaw, 2009, chapter 5: "Gershom Scholem: Niezniszczalność tradycji i nicość objawienia" [Gershom Scholem: The indestructibility of tradition and the void of the revelation], pp. 82–83 (74–84). See also: D. G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge MA, 1984, pp. 41–43.

56 See also D. Rynhold, "The Problems of Evil", in: *Modern Judaism. An Oxford Guide*, ed. N. de Lange, M. Freud-Kandel, Oxford, 2005, pp. 314–324.

of) exile, be it physical, intellectual, theological or cultural.⁵⁷ Thus, to use Scholem's words, beginning from this primordial act, all being has been in exile and needs to be "led back". The "breaking of the vessels continues into all the further stages of emanation and Creation; everything is in some way broken, everything has a flaw, everything is unfinished". [...] For after the crisis nothing remains as it was. [...] Nothing remains in its proper place. Everything is somewhere else. But a being that is not in its proper place is in exile".⁵⁸

However, from the theological perspective, conceptualising *exile* in God is, in Scholem's view, rather problematic, bold or even audacious as a gnostic paradox, but has been influential as an idea and a deceptively vivid symbol.⁵⁹ Exile (and dispersion) is both the primordial catastrophic cosmic act, but also a process which pertains to God as well (at least the manifestations of his being), and therefore historical experience may be placed in the realm of religious, or even mystical experience. In other words, all the negative experiences of the Jews are presented as the echoes of the primordial catastrophe that continues to affect the human world. The work of man, in turn, consists in the continuous "uplifting of the fallen sparks". Here, a new kabbalistic metaphor appears. The sparks are the shattered fragments of letters, symbols or entire "lost" words, while the process of gathering them is, literally, an act of repairing the world (*tikkun olam*). As Scholem puts it: "The Tikkun restores the unity of God's name which was destroyed by the original defect – Luria speaks of the letters JH as being torn away from WH in the name JHWH – and every true religious act is directed towards the same aim".⁶⁰

On the one hand, the necessity for continuous (historical) restoration and the awareness of its utopian nature (the inability to reach perfection – to grasp God) has created a state of a certain religious and cultural condition, which Wettstein calls the religion of *galuth*, catastrophe. On the other hand, Judaism emphasises that even the events of the *Shoah* do not relieve a person from their responsibility to make further attempts at restitution; to the contrary, in such a situation restoration is even more desirable.⁶¹ In the Hebrew language *tikkun* may mean "perfecting", "betterment", "correction", but also "institution" or "arrangement".⁶² In order to mend the shattered world or rebuild an edifice, one needs to (metaphorically) bring forth "healing, constructive lights".⁶³

57 H. Wettstein, "Coming to Terms with Exile", in: *Diasporas and Exiles. Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. H. Wettstein, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 2002, p. 49 (47–59). See also: *Diaspora: Exile and the Jewish Condition*, ed. E. Levine, New York, 1983; A. Eisen, *Galut*, Bloomington, 1986.

58 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, pp. 112–113. See also P. Śpiwak, *Teologia i filozofia żydowska wobec Holocaustu* [Jewish theology and philosophy in the face of Holocaust], Gdańsk, 2013.

59 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 113. As Scholem puts it, the quest for the reason for this dispersion/exile is not only indispensable, but also impossible to complete.

60 After: G. Scholem, *Major Trends...*, p. 275.

61 According to Isaac Luria, the process of *tikkun olam* takes place partially in God, and partially in man as the peak of all creation; hence the special role of human beings in this process. See Scholem, *Major Trends...*, *Seventh Lecture: Isaac Luria and his School*, pp. 244–286.

62 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...* p. 127.

63 Ibid., p. 113.

This is the task undertaken by art and architecture that have inherited religion's theurgic power to affect the human world and connect it to the "supra-terrestrial" sphere. Art and religion come from a common source, while all creative processes, architectural endeavours included, share certain features.⁶⁴ Adopting this logic, one may assume – again following Scholem – that the doctrine of the mystical actions of an orans, a kabbalist, an artist or an architect constitutes one of the crucial points of contact between mysticism and magic, which can easily blend into one another.⁶⁵ As Scholem writes, it is obvious that the teaching on a specified intention in a religious act (Hebr. *Kawwanah*) may be regarded as a form of magic; it implies the issue of magical influence. Magic and mysticism may overlap and permeate one another, while certain forms of mysticism do not blur the difference between the Creator and the creation, thereby acting as transitional forms between magical and mystical religious awareness.⁶⁶ One may also make the (rather bold) assumption that in this case the architect is no less than a "mystic", or even a mage influencing the world through their actions, i.e. designs. Incidentally, in this case mystical aspects constitute both the source of an architect's inspiration, and the framework of the artistic awareness and directives for the work of a demiurge-artist. This artistic awareness is accompanied by belief in mystical, or even magical components of creative work (and its forms), perceived as a real factor influencing the process of creating a new (utopian) world and its shape. Here, the basic constituents are letters, which may, in the appropriate kabbalistic interpretative framework, be called the building material.

Building material/The return of the Shekhinah

A look at archival photographs documenting the museum's construction inevitably reveals an interesting phenomenon – the impression that the entire structure was built upon letters/symbols. This suggestive image is evoked by the fact that the windows of the museum do not delineate any specific horizontal planes, but run diagonally spanning the entire structure; the walls appear to be, in a way, "suspended" from these patterns. The photograph which illustrates it the most clearly shows the construction of the eastern façade, whose window resembles a slanting rectangle (Fig. 13). The cut of the window forms a certain "vacuum" enclosed by a physical wall, as if the rectangle symbol was in itself "condensed" (and at the same time transparent). On the other hand, it may be assumed that only the construction of the building results in the creation of the letter symbol. Here we may recall

64 M. Szwarc, *Sztuka a Żydzi* [The Jews versus art], Tel Aviv, 1919, 11, after: J. Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich w XIX i XX wieku* [Painting and sculpture by Polish Jewish artists in the 19th and 20th century], Warsaw, 2000, pp. 186, 206, note 26.

65 G. Scholem, *Major Trends...* pp. 340–341. Scholem also notes that even the Torah was repeatedly used for magical purposes; the divine names it contains were treated as incantations, as were magical names derived from the combinations of letters. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, pp. 37–38, 136. See also: R. Elior, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, Oxford, 2008.

66 G. Scholem *Major Trends...* p. 341; idem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 190.

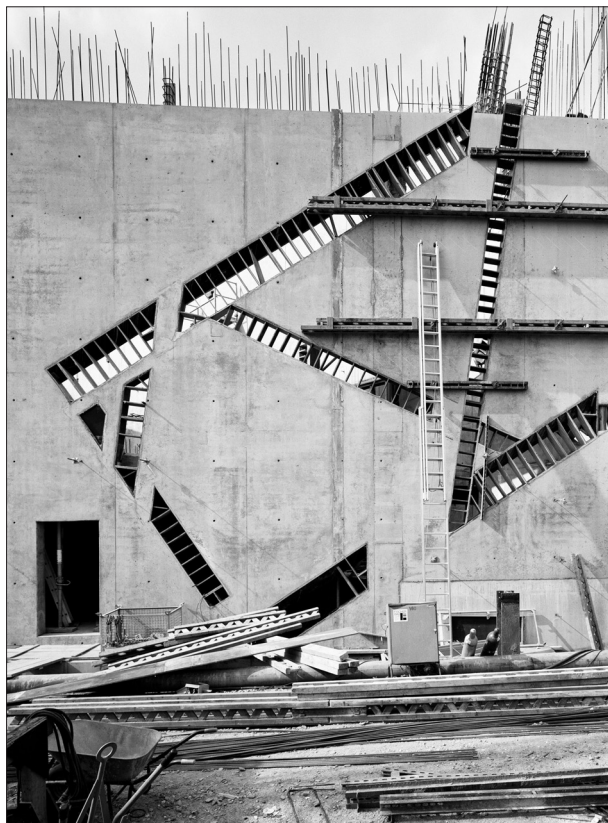


Fig. 13. Museum construction site. Photo by Silke Helmerding, 1999. Source: by kind permission of the photographer

fig. no. 5, i.e. Libeskind's graph depicting symbols and entitled "the alphabet", which the architect designated as one of the basic planes of interpreting the entire complex structure of his design. In the specific, Kabbalah-centric angle of analysis followed in the present work, this "alphabet" may be regarded as an "architectural primer", which may be further interpreted as leading to the *Sefer Yetsirah* and the verses describing the shaping of the world (or the restoration thereof). Identified with the sefirot, or the phases of divine emanation, letters are described as "structural elements" (in the structure of both the world and God, or the divine name), as well as the "stones from which the edifice of Creation was built".⁶⁷ As emphasised by Scholem, the Hebrew term used in the book to present consonants as "elementary letters" indubitably reflects the double meaning of the Greek word *stoicheia*, which may signify both "letters" and "elements".⁶⁸ It should also be noted that the Hebrew

⁶⁷ G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

term for “word” (*mila*) may be used interchangeably with the word *devar*, which can also mean “a thing”, or “an element”.⁶⁹

As mentioned above, in the Kabbalah letters constitute the appropriate tool, the building material and the matter in the divine act of creation, so described in the second chapter of the *Sefer Yetsirah*: “[...] ‘Twenty-two letter-elements: He outlined them, hewed them out, weighed them, combined them, and exchanged them [transformed them in accordance with certain laws], and through them created the soul of all creation and everything else that was ever to be created.’ And further: ‘How did He combine, weigh, and exchange them? A [which in Hebrew is a consonant] with all [other consonants] and all with A, B with all and all with B, G with all and all with G, and they all return in a circle to the beginning through two hundred thirty-one gates – the number of the pairs that can be formed from the twenty-two elements-and thus it results that everything created and every thing spoken issue from one name’”.⁷⁰ Thus, as Scholem puts it, letters are the mystical body of the divine, as God is the soul of the letters: “the Holy One, blessed be He, is in His Name and His Name is in Him, and that His Name is His Torah [...] Thy Name is in Thee and in Thee is Thy Name”. Following Scholem: “For the letters of His Name are He Himself. Even though they move away from Him, they remain firmly rooted [literally: fly away and remain with him – *ki’otbiyotb porbotb ve-’omdotb bo*]”.⁷¹ In the perception of the famous kabbalist Moses Cordovero, divine letters, which form the innermost essence of the Torah, are also configurations of divine light. They combine in various ways in the course of progressive materialisation. First of all, they compose divine names, afterwards, the appellatives and predicates describing the divine, and later still, they combine in new ways to form words that pertain to earthly events and material objects.⁷² Moreover, a commentary to the *Midrash Kohen* (dealing with cosmogony) written by Isaac the Blind contains the following passage: “In God’s right hand were engraved all the engravings [innermost forms] that were destined some day to rise from potency to act. From the emanation of all [higher] *sefirot* they were graven, scratched, and molded into the *sefirah* of Grace (*hesed*), which is also called God’s right hand, and this was done in an inward, inconceivably subtle way. This formation is called the concentrated, not yet unfolded Torah, and also the Torah of Grace. Along with all the other engravings [principally] two engravings were made in it”.⁷³

In this almost architectural labour of creation (which is ongoing, since the world has not been completed) human beings have a special role to play. According to the

69 See T. Zaderecki, op. cit., pp. 47–49; M. A. Ouaknin, op. cit., pp. 267–328.

70 See *Księga Jecirah. Klucz kabały* [Book Yetsirah. The Kabbalah Key], translated by M. Prokopowicz, Warsaw, 1994; *Sefer Jecira, czyli Księga stworzenia* [Sefer Yetsirah, or the Book of Creation], translated by W. Brojer, J. Doktór, B. Kos, Warsaw, 1995. See also: G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 168.

71 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 44.

72 Ibid., p. 71. Scholem also writes that in the Messianic Age people will be able to read the Torah in a completely different combination of letters.

73 Ibid., pp. 48–49.

Kabbalah, man was not only made of the letters of the alphabet,⁷⁴ but from the very beginning has been involved in the matter of language as the elementary material and instrument of salvation. The kabbalist tradition recounts the tale of God taking pity on Adam after his expulsion from paradise and sending the Archangel Raziel after him. The angel was to give Adam a book which would enable him not only to one day return to the Garden of Eden, but also to remember that he was made in the image of God and that he may see God's face by looking at the mirror of his creation.⁷⁵ The Book of Raziel (*Sefer Raziel*) [Raziel means "Secret of God"] belongs to the basic canon of kabbalistic magic books. It stipulates that people learn the combinations of letters that make up the names of God, which in turn have the power to interfere with the reality of this world (or at least this is the belief).

Abraham himself is another individual traditionally thought to have possessed the ability and skill to use the alphabet in a demiurgic manner. Early manuscripts of the *Book Yetzirah* bear the title of the "Alphabet of our father Abraham" (*'Othioth de-' Abraham Avinu*). Its conclusion contains the following passage: "When our Father Abraham came, he contemplated, meditated, and beheld, investigated and understood and outlined and dug and combined and formed [i.e. created], and he succeeded".⁷⁶ As Scholem writes, this "created and succeeded" refers not only to successful endeavours of speculative nature, but clearly to Abraham's work with letters, in which he precisely repeated all the verbs God used during the process of creation.⁷⁷

The biblical character which provides a more direct connection between architecture and the mythological metaphors presented above is Bezalel, who helped (and astonished) Moses by constructing the Tabernacle in the desert. Midrashes recount that Bezalel "knew the combinations of letters with which heaven and earth were made" and could replicate the act of creation *en miniature*; his building was a "complete microcosm, a miraculous copy of everything that is in heaven and on earth".⁷⁸ Following Scholem's argumentation, a similar tradition of creative power lies at the roots of another midrash referring to the Torah: "No one knows its [right] order, for the sections of the Torah are not given in the right arrangement. If they were, everyone who reads in it might create a world, raise the dead, and perform miracles. Therefore the order of the Torah was hidden and is known to God alone".⁷⁹ Thus, the Torah itself was originally a heap of unarranged letters (Hebr. *tel shel 'othiyoth bilti mesuddaroth*), and God's original intent expressed therein will only be revealed after

74 I. Kania, *Opowieści Zoharu. O Kabale i Zoharze* [Tales of the Zohar. On the Kabbalah and the Zohar], Cracow, 2005, pp. 30–31.

75 Z. Halevi, *Kabbalah: A Tradition of Hidden Knowledge*, London, 1979, p. 35.

76 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, pp. 169–170. In a footnote to this citation Scholem writes that the word for "formed" (*ve-isar*) is a commonly used verb form and carries the meaning of "created".

77 This refers to the crucial fact of introducing monotheism, which is identified simply with "forming" the world anew.

78 After: G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, pp. 166–167.

79 *Midrash Tehillim to Psalm 3*, ed. S. Buber, 17a; after: G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 167.

the coming of the Messiah. The current combination of letters forming the words of the Torah known to us will then be annulled; the letters will arrange themselves into new words forming sentences that speak of “other things”.⁸⁰ Other comments state that the Torah will stay the same, yet people will learn to read it in accordance with a different combination of letters, a different order of words and their new meanings. Thus, the same letters will be combined into words which will tell an entirely different story.

The kabbalistic context of the alphabet presented above may therefore work as the interpretative framework for Libeskind’s design. Offering such an interpretation contextualised by letters may then be regarded as accepting the architect’s challenge. Responding to this provocation, one should decipher at least some of the symbols encoded in the bundle of lines, “return to them” their original signification and derive further meaning. This task would, however, not only require capturing specific letters or even words, but also result in the need to write numerous detailed analyses citing various analogies, examples, comparisons and confirmations based on the Kabbalah. The present work may only single out some of the symbols, identify the shapes of the letters they contain and refer them to the notarikon, the method of discerning the meaning of words and entire phrases (sentences) from their abbreviated forms, i.e. the first consonants.⁸¹ The system is very popular in Hebrew writing. A glance at the entire structure of Libeskind’s museum and photographic images of the building (for certain forms sometimes become discernible only on photographs) reveals a broad spectrum of letters, such as *bet*, *kaf*, *mem*, *nun*, *tsade*, *gimel*, *yud*, *vav*, *hei*, *het*, *tet*, *tav*, *resh*, *dalet*, *shin* and others. In the notarikon system, each of them may be read as a symbol of a specific phrase and therefore lead to interesting conclusions.

On the north-eastern façade of the building, in the location of the courtyard-garden one may find the letter *mem* (Fig. 14), which may be deciphered as *malkuth*, one of the *sefirot*, or the levels of God’s emanation in the process of creating the world. The elevation as seen from Lindenstrasse, i.e. on the west side, features a jumble of symbols (Fig. 10), with the letter *kof* clearly discernible. The same letter may also be spotted on the staircase inside the building (Fig. 11). It symbolises the word *kidusha*, meaning “sacred”, “holy”. The motif was also used in the design of the synagogue

80 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, pp. 74–75. To illustrate the belief in the creative power of letters, Scholem quotes Azulai: “When a man utters words of the Torah, he never ceases to create spiritual potencies and new lights, which issue like medicines from ever new combinations of the elements and consonants” (after: G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 76) and Pinhas of Koretz: “Indeed it is true that the holy Torah was originally created as an incoherent jumble of letters. [...] These words, on the contrary, were not yet present, for the events of Creation that they record had not yet taken place. Thus all the letters of the Torah were indeed jumbled, and only when a certain event occurred in the world did the letters combine to form the words in which the event is related” (after G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 76).

81 There are two other methods of reading the meaning of letters, namely the masora, which is based on the symbolic interpretation of the shape of letters, and the gematria, which assigns numerical value to letters.

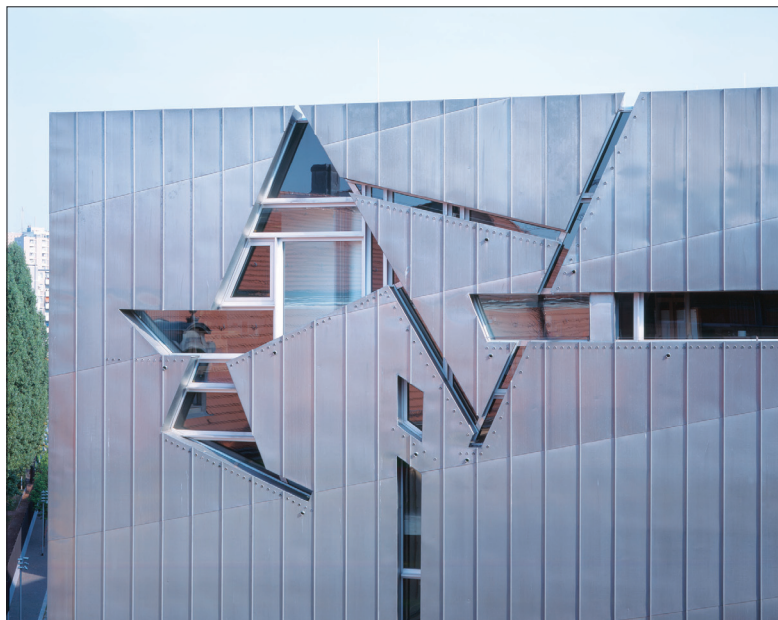


Fig. 14. View of a window in the northern wall. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Jens Ziehe

and the cultural centre in Mainz, authored by Manuel Herz Architects, whose façade is anchored on the word.

Looking at the façade from Lindenstrasse at a direct angle, one may also notice the motif of a deformed star of David, as well as three vertical, slightly slanting lines below two horizontal ones, visible on the section closest to the street.⁸² Together, the arrangement forms two letters *dalet*, one of them reversed, and the letter *vav* in the centre. *Dalet*, *vav* and *dalet* form the word David, as if in confirmation of the shape of the star in the background. The word *dalet* itself is the name of the letter, yet the combination of consonants d-l-t may also mean “gate”. It seems that the motif was deliberately situated near what is symbolically the front entrance.

Furthermore, the wall in the Paul Celan courtyard (from the east side) bears several letters superimposed on one another. These include: *nun*, *kaf*, *dalet*, reversed *shin* and *bet*, the latter of which is the most easily visible (Fig. 8, 9). *Bet* signifies a house, but in this case it may be a reference to a kabbalist interpretation of the first verses of the Exodus: *Bereshith* (“In the beginning”). Scholem notes that, contemplating the arrangement of symbols in the opening line of the Exodus, Isaac Luria rearranged the letters in the very first word (*Bereshith*), and arrived at the word *be-sherid* – “from the remains/leftovers”. “Leftovers of what? – asked saint Lev, and

82 See: <https://stephenvaradyarchittraveller.com/2016/05/06/jewish-museum-berlin/> [accessed 24 September 2018].

engaged in the investigation of the history of creation before creation, before the bereshith".⁸³

One symbol that deserves particular attention is *shin*, whose shape may be discerned in several places, the first of them being the previously mentioned arrangement of the underground axes, resembling the fingers of an open hand (Fig. 3, 7). Cut into the wall of the building, below the line of the roof on the façade facing E. T. A. Hoffmann's garden, it looks like a naturally proportioned, accurate alphabetical symbol with its characteristic form of three lines drawn upwards (Fig. 15). The same form of the letter is repeated (at least) three more times, each time facing a different geographical direction. Twice it appears upside down. It may also be discerned on both sides of the building as a "transparent" symbol. The most interesting view of this trick is found on the first floor of the museum, if one looks to the east. The *shin* there is oriented towards Jerusalem, facing the garden courtyard (Fig. 16, 17).

In the interpretation of the structure adopted in the present work, the letters *shin* carved or cut into the walls may be regarded as acronyms of the word *sh'ma* (Hebr. listen). It is the name of the short (it has only three verses) but immensely



Fig. 15. View of a section of the western façade. Author's own photograph

83 K. Gebert, *54 komentarze do Tory* [54 commentaries to the Torah], Cracow, 2004, p. 14.



Fig. 16. Inside view of a window form. Author's own photograph

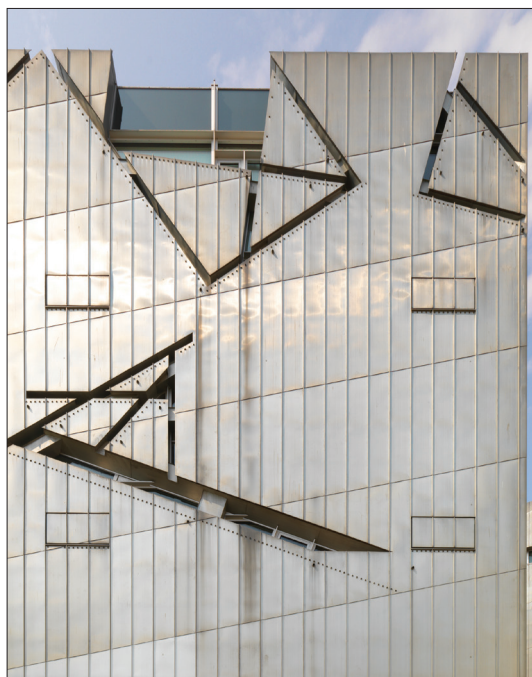


Fig. 17. View of the southern façade. Source copyrights: Jüdisches Museum Berlin (c), photo: Jens Ziehe

significant Hebrew prayer (Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num. 15:37–41), an affirmation of monotheism: Hear, oh Yisrael, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Eḥad*). In Jewish tradition, the verse of the Shema is placed in a *mezuzah* (a small box) hung at the right side of the entrance to the house. The boxes are additionally decorated with the letter *shin*, or three letters – *shin*, *dalet* and *yud* – to signify *Shaddai* (the Almighty).⁸⁴ The letter *shin* may also be seen as a reference to the word *Shekhinah* (Hebr. dwelling). In the most general of terms, *Shekhinah* is the personification and hypostasis of the “divine presence” or his “dwelling” in the world and is a concept that has functioned in Jewish tradition since antiquity.⁸⁵ The term is used only in the context of the divine dwelling, never to denote ordinary presence; it is God’s visible and hidden presence in a given place.⁸⁶ The exile of Israel meant the exile of *Shekhinah* itself, since it shares the fate of the community and envelops all of its people.⁸⁷ This motif holds predominantly mystical and symbolical significance; some Kabbalists are of the opinion that the exile of the *Shekhinah* continues until the day of the coming of the Messiah.⁸⁸ This image (*galuth*, exile) comes from the Talmud, which stipulates: “In every exile into which the children of Israel went, the *Shekhinah* was with them”. The Kabbalah, in turn, interprets it to mean that “a part of God Himself is exiled from God” (as in the exile of the soul from its source).⁸⁹

In view of these connotations of the letter *shin*, Libeskind’s choice to visually translate the symbol into shapes on the walls of his building can be understood as an architectural and theurgical act of inviting/invoking the *Shekhinah* to return, which is the core of the magical and mystical aspect of *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world).

Nevertheless, the letter visible on Libeskind’s design appears deformed in a rather peculiar manner. Instead of presenting the usual three lines spreading upwards, the architect added a fourth line running crosswise to connect two of the lateral ones. Why is the letter deformed, and why does it take such a shape? The answer, once more, is to be found in the Kabbalah. It stipulates that the world created by God with the primordial alphabet (*Sefer Yetsirah*) is not perfect, because one of the letters is deformed – its flaw led to the “contamination” of the whole “construction” (including negative aspects finding their way into the Torah). Kabbalists presumed this faulty letter to be none other than the consonant *shin*, written with

84 M. A. Ouaknin, op. cit, pp. 365–366.

85 G. Scholem, *On the Mystical...*, p. 171.

86 Ibid., pp. 171, 178–178.

87 On the withdrawal of the *Shekhinah*, see G. Scholem, *On the Mystical...*, pp. 161–164; idem, *Major Trends...*, p. 250.

88 M. Buber, *Opowieści Chaszyów* [Tales of the Hasidism], translated by P. Hertz, Poznań–Warsaw, 1988, pp. 266–267. On the female aspect of the *Shekhinah*, see e.g. R. M. Gross, “Steps toward Feminine Imagery of Deity In Jewish Theology”, in: *On Being Jewish Feminist*, ed. S. Heschel, New York, 1983, pp. 234–247. See also: B. Kos, M. Krych, “Kabbala żywa” [The living Kabbalah], *Znak*, 1983, no. 339–340, pp. 305–306.

89 *Megillah* 29a, after G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 107.

three prongs, while it ought to have four. Scholem notes that kabbalists prescribed to have both forms of the letter engraved in the *tefillin*, as it ought to evoke the perfection of the alphabet that humankind would learn after the coming of the Messiah.⁹⁰ Thus, *tefillin* always feature the letter *shin* with four prongs – a form never used in ordinary writing.⁹¹ The four-lined *shin* on the walls of the building therefore serves as corroboration of the kabbalist and messianistic interpretation of the entire design, whose aim, as mentioned above, is to theurgically fulfil the postulate of the repair of the world (*tikkun olam*).

The characteristic chaotic arrangement of the window openings is not simply a means of artistic expression to illustrate the civilisational, historical and cultural “fragmentation” (Holocaust), nor does it result from doubt in the possibility for recovery. On the contrary, the design manifestly embodies the nostalgia for the mythical times of harmony, order and regularity, as well as the longing for clear structure and symbiosis. Architecture understood as a kabbalistic system of images is therefore, in this context, a postulate of metaphorical reconstruction. Furthermore, it refers to the utopian, messianistic belief in the renewal of the Covenant, the restitution of former glory and the hope for repair, *tikkun olam*. The system of scattered letters on the Berlin museum, at first glance seemingly returned to their primordial form, begs to be arranged in order, and “read” anew. Such architecture deliberately implicates the feeling of some unfinished gesture or act, and therefore, in the realm of the symbolic, motivates towards restoration (understood as a kind of reflection).

As Scholem writes, “to bring about the *tikkun* [...] is precisely the aim of redemption. In redemption everything is restored to its place by the secret magic of human acts, things are freed from their mixture and consequently, in the realms both of man and of nature, from their servitude to the demonic powers, which, once the light is removed from them, are reduced to deathly passivity”.⁹² All human activity is, therefore, work towards this repair. In a broader sense, *tikkun olam* is also perceived as the general social process encompassing historical, cultural and political issues, including art and architecture as the instruments of this interpretation.⁹³

In this case, the context of the Kabbalah is a characteristic symptom or a certain modality forming – in the aspect of its reception – a new matrix for the analytical description of architecture, as well as presenting it as a specific mechanism of influence in the broadly understood process of *tikkun olam*.

Translated by Julita Mastalerz

90 See: <http://lubavitchyeshiva.com/product/tefilin/> [accessed 24 September 2018].

91 G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah...*, p. 80.

92 Ibid., pp. 116–117.

93 See e.g. Matthews Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick, New Jersey–London, 1997 (chapter 4: “Tikkun Olam”), pp. 51–58; idem, *Social Concern and 'Tikkun Olam...*, pp. 55–80. See also Robert S. Wistrich, “Fateful Trap: The German–Jewish Symbiosis”, in: *Tikkun* 5.2 (March–April 1990), pp. 34–38.

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Abstract

The present article attempts to analyse and interpret the structure of windows in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind and constructed in 1989–1999. Elongated, narrow, irregular window openings arranged at different angles like a tangle of cuts and grooves span the entire structure and resemble Hebrew letters and the kabbalistic notion of the "scattered alphabet", which functions in Jewish tradition as a visual metaphor.

The assumption of such a perspective of interpretation, based on the visual form of the building which was, in its principle, meant to partially refer to the Holocaust, leads to the hypothesis that the chosen motifs of letter-shaped windows (the scattered alphabet) is connected to the kabbalistic postulate of the "repair of the world", known in Jewish tradition as *tikkun olam*. The characteristic chaotic arrangement of the window openings is not, as it might be assumed, simply a symbol of the civilisational "fragmentation" resulting from the Holocaust. On the contrary, the design manifestly embodies the nostalgia for the mythical (and messianic) times of harmony, order and regularity, as well as the longing for clear structure and symbiosis. This manifests in the kabbalistic interpretation of the motif of letter-windows understood as a mystical (or even theurgical) element of restoration. Concentration, contemplation, perception and consideration of the forms and shapes of the letters is a notion known from the Kabbalah; in this case architectural references to Jewish

mysticism are more than just a strategy for interpretation, but a declarative assumption made by the architect himself. Libeskind's design in Berlin, therefore, involves the matter of language as the elementary material and instrument of salvation, while the context of the Kabbalah ought to be regarded as a certain symptom or a specific modality shaping new meanings manifested by the work of art that this museum undoubtedly is.

Keywords: Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum, Kabbalah, contemporary architecture