"This Is the Table before the Lord": Visualisations of Tables and Loaves in Lurianic Prayerbooks

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Article

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Abstract

A notable feature of kabbalistic prayerbooks is their high textual density. What is also noteworthy is that this texture of different materials is very rarely, if ever, accompanied by schematic or pictorial illustrations. In the manuscripts and printed books that do contain them, illustrations are mostly used to support the text, emphasising and structuring its content. For example, words may be arranged in a particular configuration, such as the shape of the seven-branched candelabrum or menorah. This form of presentation distinguishes the text from its surrounding context and functions as a stimulus for contemplation and reflection.

Keywords

Lurianic Kabbalah, Lurianic prayerbook manuscripts, illustrations, diagramms, *Seder Tiqqunei Shabbat*

1. Introduction

A notable feature of kabbalistic prayerbooks is their high textual density. What is also noteworthy is that this texture of different materials is very rarely, if ever, accompanied by schematic or pictorial illustrations. In the manuscripts and printed books that do contain them, illustrations are mostly used to support the text, emphasising and structuring its content. For example, words may be arranged in a particular configuration, such as the shape of the seven-branched candelabrum or *menorah* (see, e.g. Fig. 1). This form of presentation distinguishes the text from its surrounding context and functions as a stimulus for contemplation and reflection.

Fig. 1: Psalm 67 in the shape of a *menorah*. Lurianic prayerbook, eighteenth century, Ashkenazi script. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528), fols 23ᵛ–24ʳ (online p. 29). Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

In Lurianic prayerbooks, however, there are two exceptions to this rule: namely, depictions of tables and loaves.[1] This study offers a preliminary examination of this hitherto unexplored aspect of the visual history of Lurianic Kabbalah. It provides a detailed analysis of the textual environment in which the illustrations are embedded, highlighting the various forms of representation used. This study will also offer suggestions as to the possible functions of these depictions by addressing the relationships between the image and the written word. Given the wealth of material, our discussion must be limited to a small selection of schematic representations. However, in order to do justice to the subject matter, it will focus on those examples that can be considered paradigmatic in terms of form and applied aesthetics.

Against this background, it will be argued that the schematic depictions of material objects are similar to the better-known diagrammatic representations of the Godhead – the so-called *ilanot* (or kabbalistic 'trees') – in that they serve as an aid for visualising that which is invisible.[2] In this sense, both types of visualisation support cognitive processes in generating, representing, structuring, retrieving, sharing, and using knowledge. However, they are fundamentally different, as the latter type uses concentric circles or the arboreal diagram to express 'hierarchy and coherence in visual terms and illustrate conceptual relationships between the various individual components and the whole, thus rendering difficult intellectual concepts accessible to their audience'.[3] The former type, on the other hand, uses the graphical representation of a familiar object in order to visualise its inherent sacredness. To this end, it makes use of letters. The letter thus becomes an image of the divine presence, while the illustration itself primarily serves as a canvas that helps to determine the distribution of the divine particles within the visible mundane objects.

2. Lurianic Kabbalah: Some general remarks

Compared to the well-known cultural centres of the late sixteenth century, the town of Safed in today's northern Israel may seem marginal in terms of its geographical size and population.[4] Judging by its literary output, however, Safed was undoubtedly among the major creative hubs of early modern Jewish thought, encompassing realms such as esotericism (*kabbalah*), religious law (*halakha*), and morality (*musar*), as well as biblical and rabbinical hermeneutics.[5] The tremendous radiance of Safed's intellectual output is particularly manifested in the rapid dissemination of the writings produced in the hills of the Upper Galilee, which were to spread throughout the entire Jewish world within a few decades.

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[1] At times, Lurianic *siddurim* also include diagrammatic representations of the immersion bath (the *miqwe*). However, they are not as common as the images of the table and the loaves of bread discussed here.

[2] See Chajes 2020, 37, who adopts this notion from Kemp 2000.

[3] Salonius and Worm 2014, 3 (quoted in Chajes 2020, 31).

[4] On the demographics of Safed, see Avraham 1988; 1999, 95–137.

[5] The scholarly literature on Safed is extensive. For an early publication that covers a great variety of topics, see Ben-Zvi and Benayahu 1962. For a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship on Lurianic Kabbalah, see Abrams 2008, 377–422 (note that due to the steadily growing number of new publications in the field, this list is slightly outdated).

Part of this development, which has been described as no less than a 'revolution',[6] was the emergence of a new form of Kabbalah that had a profound influence on the intellectual history of (early) modern Jewry: the so-called Lurianic Kabbalah, an esoteric tradition named after its spiritual founder Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572). Born in Jerusalem and raised in Egypt, Luria moved to Safed at the age of thirty-six, where he gathered a group of students around him who continued to follow him until his death two years later. According to the hagiographical narratives that appeared from the early seventeenth century onwards, Luria's knowledge of the secrets of the cosmos and the Godhead was rooted in revelations that he received from the prophet Elijah.[7]

Two of the main innovative characteristics of Lurianic Kabbalah, which is essentially a variant of the so-called theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, are the detailed descriptions of the creation of the upper worlds, including the catastrophic events that led to the broken condition of the cosmos, and the highly elaborate discussions of these divine realms that serve as an intermediary between the concealed part of the Godhead and the human sphere. Lurianic thinkers took the theosophical ordering principles of the kabbalists who preceded them to the extreme.[8] Their cosmographical descriptions consist of hundreds of attributes (referred to as *middot or sefirot*) that exist and operate in four or sometimes five different worlds (*olamot*) and form masculine and feminine anthropomorphic configurations or 'faces' (*parṣufim*).[9] These elements are in constant motion, approaching, uniting with, and separating from each other according to the forces acting upon them – either from the supreme power of the Godhead or from the lower human realm.[10] Kabbalists assume that knowledge of the inner workings of this divine organism enables them to have an impact on it. Accordingly, a significant portion of the Lurianic corpus offers decidedly technical instructions that – much like modern user manuals – teach what needs to be done in order to restore the higher realms that have lost their equilibrium – a condition further exacerbated by humankind's constant transgressive behaviour.[11] This activist approach is most clearly reflected in the concept of

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[6] Garb 2020, 30–66.

[7] This hagiographical element is clearly modelled after the narrative of the revelation of esoteric knowledge that the second-century tannaitic figure R. Shimeon Bar Yoḥai received from Elijah after he had hidden from the Romans in a cave for thirteen years. In traditional circles, Bar Yoḥai is considered the author of the *Zohar* ('[The Book of] Splendour'). According to scholarly opinion, however, the *Zohar* rather constitutes a repository of textual units that were composed in the Middle Ages and presumably by multiple authors, which were redacted into several volumes in the Early Modern Period. For a detailed discussion, see Abrams 2010, 224–428.

[8] The imagery of the upper worlds in Lurianic Kabbalah was strongly impacted by zoharic literature, particularly the sections on *Idra Rabba* and *Idra Zuṭa* (the 'Great Assembly' and the 'Small Assembly'). On the *Idrot*, see Giller 2001, 89–173; and Hellner-Eshed 2021.

[9] For a detailed discussion of the meaning of the terms *sefirot* and *middot* in the thought of Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), a contemporary of Luria in Safed, see Koch forthcoming.

[10] The attributes usually correspond to the Ten Sefirot, which are, in descending order, *Keter* ('Crown'), *Ḥokhmah* ('Wisdom'), *Binah* ('Understanding'), *Ḥesed* ('Lovingkindness'), *Din* or *Gevurah* ('Judgement' or 'Power'), *Tifʾeret* or *Raḥamim* ('Beauty' or 'Compassion'), *Nezaḥ* ('Endurance'), *Hod* ('Splendor'), *Yesod* ('Foundation'), and *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah* ('Kingdom' or 'Divine Presence'). The most frequent used configurations of the upper 'faces' are *Attiq Yomin* ('The Ancient of Days'), *Arikh Anpin* ('Long Countenance'), *Abba* ('Father'), *Imma* ('Mother', also referred to as 'Upper Female'), *Zeʾir Anpin* ('Short Countenance') and *Nuqva de-Zeʾir Anpin* ('Female Counterpart of Short Countenance', also referred to as 'Lower Female').

[11] According to the Lurianic myth of creation, the 'breaking of the vessels' caused by the overflow of divine efflux constitutes the first cosmic catastrophe that needs to be rectified by means of human actions, more precisely the fulfilment of the

tiqqun (lit. 'rectification'), which Lawrence Fine has aptly described as a 'healing of the cosmos', a process that is achieved by the use of mystical intentions (*kawwanot*) that accompany physical actions, among other methods.[12]

Apart from a few commentaries on some minor portions of zoharic literature, Luria himself did not leave behind any fundamental writings. Instead, his disciples began to compose comprehensive works in which they meticulously explained – in their teacher's name – the account of the creation, the esoteric content of the biblical scriptures, the cosmic rationale behind the commandments, and the proper use of the previously mentioned *kawwanot*.[13] For various reasons, this extensive corpus was not published in print until the end of the eighteenth century.[14] However, it circulated almost instantaneously in manuscript in Central and Eastern Europe, Italy, Northern Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. These texts were copied, edited, and annotated, and parts of them were extracted and combined with other materials. The *kawwanot* designed to accompany the recital of the blessings and the daily prayers, for example, were incorporated into prayerbooks for the weekdays and for the Sabbath and holidays (*siddurim* and *maḥzorim*). This latter development is not surprising. In fact, it can be seen as a logical consequence of merging related topics, as it allows for a more user-friendly study of the respective mystical intentions to be applied when pronouncing a particular letter, word, or phrase of a prayer or blessing. However, the process of selecting these excerpts and their subsequent modification and formatting is worthy of closer analysis. This little-studied aspect of this highly eclectic transmission process is not only important for a better understanding of the spread of Lurianic practices during the seventeenth century; it also sheds light on the formation of a particular Lurianic prayer rite that served as a foundation of the creation of the so-called *nusaḥ ha-Ar''i*.[15]

A particularly peculiar facet of this phenomenon, which surfaces alongside the formatting of Lurianic esoteric knowledge in prayerbooks, is the use of diagrams and illustrations. These are not, as one might suspect, visualisations of divine attributes or the configurations in the upper worlds in the shape of trees (*ilanot*) or concentric circles – a subject that has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, most notably in the seminal work of Giulio Busi and the impressively

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commandments. See, e.g. Scholem 1961, 375–434. On Lurianic myth, see also Fine 2003, 124–149.

[12] See Fine 2003, 187–258 (addressing the notions of both *tiqqun* and *kawwanah*). On *tiqqun*, see Nabarro 2006. For more recent studies of kabbalistic intentionality, see Safrai 2014, 2016; and Paluch 2019.

[13] For an in-depth analysis of the hermeneutics of Lurianic Kabbalah, see Magid 2008.

[14] It is noteworthy that this practice differs substantially from the writings of other Safedian kabbalists, such as those of Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570) or his disciple Elijah de Vidas (1518–1587), which were published by the printing presses of Venice and Krakow almost immediately after their completion. This was mostly due to an initiative by one of Luria's main disciples to prohibit the unauthorised reproduction of these esoteric teachings.

[15] In general, one can distinguish between at least two different types of Lurianic prayerbooks. The first type contains Lurianic *kawwanot* as well as short passages that explain the reasoning behind the mental techniques and their effects. The first printed version of this sort was published in Venice in 1657 under the title *Tefillot le-khol ha-Shanah*. The second type is usually referred to as *nusaḥ ha-Ar''i*, which appeared in the wake of the formation of the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe and was published for the first time as the famous *Rashkover Siddur* in Zolkiew in 1781. The multifaceted editorial history of Lurianic prayerbooks has been largely ignored, apart from the unpublished groundbreaking studies Kallus 2002 and Safrai 2012. For a published study, see Kallus 1997. On contemplative prayer in the Yemenite and Jerusalemite tradition of the Sharabian kabbalists, see Giller 2004, 2008.

rich and groundbreaking publications of J. H. Chajes and his team.[16] Rather, they are schematic representations of material objects that are familiar to the reader from their everyday life. Remarkably, by far the most common representations are tables and loaves, and more specifically the domestic dining table and the *ḥallot* prepared for Sabbath – both of which will be the focus of discussion in the present article.

3. Typologies of visualisations in Lurianic prayerbooks

Lurianic *siddurim* are comprised of a multitude of texts and textual levels. They bring together different bodies of knowledge, translate cosmic processes into a liturgical context, and associate novel practices with an established ritualistic system.[17] Often, the conventional wording of prayers is supplemented by metaphysical explanations and combined with practical instructions. In other instances, the letters of divine names, the five parts of the human soul, or the four upper worlds are added above or below certain words in the main text. The scribes and artists involved in the production of Lurianic prayerbooks used a variety of formatting strategies to achieve these goals. The more ornate artefacts not only employ divergent fonts and font sizes, differently arranged columns and blocks for different units of text, superscript and subscript additions to the continuous main body of the text, glosses, headings, and explanatory subheadings – the tone of which is often reminiscent of stage directions in a play – but also contain, albeit rarely, illustrations, diagrams, and tables. In this regard, they are exemplary of the pivotal role that formatting plays in the production and dissemination of content (see, e.g. Figs 2 and 3).

In terms of typology, the visualisations in prayerbooks with Lurianic content can be classified into at least two distinct groups. The first is decorative and encompasses representations wherein the artistic composition is the primary focus, with the objective of evoking a specific ambience. They often resemble illustrations that can be encountered in *minhagim* books ('books of customs') written in Jewish vernacular languages (Fig. 4). They are also reminiscent of the imagery found in Jewish ceremonial literature written by Jews who had converted to Christianity, or by Christians who had acquired a certain familiarity with Jewish rituals and customs, with the intention of conveying a (generally very biased) image of Judaism to a non-Jewish audience.[18] Thus, for example, in early eighteenth-century manuscripts of *Seder Tiqqunei Shabbat*, a collection of prayers for the

[16] Busi 2005; Chajes 2022. For further details, see also the ongoing Ilanot Project led by J. H. Chajes at the University of Haifa (<https://ilanot.org>, accessed on 12 August 2024). I am not aware of kabbalistic prayerbooks that include elaborate *ilanot*, but this is a subject that requires further systematic study.

[17] To be sure, this observation applies to Jewish prayerbooks per se, since from early on, they did not merely contain the plain wording of the blessings, prayers, and supplications, but also instructions and explanations, as well as biblical books (such as the Song of Songs) or rabbinic texts (such as *Pirqe Avot*) to be read during special occasions.

[18] The production of both *minhagim* books and ceremonial literature was particularly popular in the Early Modern Period. One of the most impressive examples in terms of its illustrations is the Yiddish *Sefer ha-Minhagim* that was printed in Venice in 1593. See, e.g. Baumgarten 2020. For the phenomenon of ceremonial literature, usually composed in non-Jewish languages such as German or Italian, see Carlebach 2001, 170–199.

Fig. 2: Beginning of the 'Hear, O Israel' prayer with instructions, commentary, and supra-linear additions of the forty-two-letter name of God, 1626, Italian script. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°6291, fols 135ᵛ–136ʳ (online p. 139). Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

Fig. 3: The thirteen attributes of mercy (Exod 34:5–7) recited before the *Taḥanun* (or *Nefilat Apayim*) prayer, eighteenth century, Ashkenazi script. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Heb. Ms. 8°885 (B 47), fols 76ᵛ–77ʳ (online p. 82). Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

Fig. 4: *Minhagim*, 1708, Frankfurt am Main, fol. 8ʳ, detail. From the Collections of the National Library of Israel.

Fig. 5: Seder *Tiqqunei Shabbat*, 1722, Ashkenazi script, Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Levy 61, fol. 10ᵛ [23], detail; CC Public Domain Mark 1.0.

Sabbath with Lurianic addenda,[19] one can find depictions of dinner table scenes, as well as images of the lady of the house kindling the Sabbath lights, with the two *ḥallot*, the braided loaves of bread set on the table (Fig. 5).[20]

While *Seder Tiqqunei Shabbat* contains kabbalistic materials – for example, a Friday night poem attributed to Luria – it lacks specific descriptions of mystical intentions or explanations of the esoteric rationales for certain customs. Instead, one can find quite general instructions such as

one must set the Sabbath table according to one's ability, eat with joy and goodness of heart, and enjoy plenty of fruit and all kinds of [pleasant] smells in order to complete the hundred blessings each day.[21]

The second type of presentation differs significantly from the first in that it focuses on the table and the objects placed upon it. The imagery ranges from the most basic of diagrams to more complex two-dimensional illustrations that provide an overhead view of the tabletop. Even the more realistic graphics exhibit a schematic quality. The remainder of this article will provide a more detailed analysis of these depictions.

[19] Several beautiful examples thereof are housed in Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky in Hamburg. See, e.g. *Seder Tikune Shabat*, Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Levy 59; Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Levy 60; and Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Levy 61. These manuscripts are described in Wandrey 2014.

[20] Two *ḥallot* are prepared to commemorate the Israelites receiving a double portion of mannah every Friday during their wanderings in the desert, in honour of the Sabbath (see, e.g. Exod 16:23–24).

[21] Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Levy 61, fol. 28ʳ.

4. Of loaves and tables in Lurianic Kabbalah: Part I

Based on the idea that the kabbalist's behaviour has an effect on the higher worlds, the conduct of the spiritual founder and namesake of Lurianic Kabbalah was seen as the ultimate blueprint for this dynamic. Hence, detailed descriptions of Luria's performance of ritual actions are particularly common in the writings of Ḥayyim Vital (1542–1620), Luria's self-proclaimed chief disciple.[22] In *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah* ('The Gate of Prayer'), which following its redaction by his son Shmu'el Vital (1598–1678) became widely known under the title *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot* ('The Gate of Intentions'),[23] one can read, for example, the following combination of a first-hand account of Luria's preparations of the Sabbath table with a technical directive:

> I observed that my teacher, blessed be his memory, was very meticulous about always eating on the Sabbath and holidays from a table that had four legs, modelled after the table in the Temple. Concerning the arrangement of the bread, one must be careful to place twelve loaves on the table for each meal, analogous to the twelve loaves of the Bread of the Presence [*leḥem ha-panim*].[24] And you must arrange them in this order, six on the right side of the table and six on the left side; and the six on the right side must be arranged three by three, and likewise on the left side. And the bottom three on the right side must be placed in the shape of a *segol* and the other three must lie on top of them, and on the left side in the same way. This is their exact arrangement: ⸪ ⎯ ⸫ In sum, there are four loaves on the right side of the table, two next to each other, and the same number on the left side. And in between are the other four loaves, one on top of the other. However, the two middle pairs are separated and there is a gap between them, with one pair closer to the four loaves on the right and the other pair closer to the four loaves on the left.[25]

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[22] While elaborating on the preparations for the Sabbath, Vital states, for example, that 'I heard from my teacher on the subject of the twelve [loaves] of bread' (Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008/2020, 261/393), or 'it was also my teacher's custom to set the table at his place on the eve of the Sabbath' (Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008/2020, 264/398). For a general overview of the kabbalistic significance of the Sabbath table, see Hallamish 2006, 317–322.

[23] On the provenance of the manuscript that forms the basis of the edition and which is an autograph by Vital himself, see Ya'aqov Moshe Hillel's introduction to Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008 (17–28), as well as the editorial notes (29–31) and facsimile reproductions (9–16). A digitised version of the manuscript (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ahron Moses Weiss/Schwartz [NLI F 71911/PH 7617]) is now available. On *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, see also Avivi 2008, vol. 1, 124. An autograph manuscript of Shmu'el Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot* is housed in the collection of the Library of Agudas Chasidei Chabad in Brooklyn, but it is not accessible to the public (see Avivi 2008, vol. 2, 691 and 694, no. 891).

[24] Also referred to as the 'showbread' or 'shewbread'.

[25] Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008/2020, 261/392–393 (my translation). Cf. also Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 1923, fol. 72a, and Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 2016, 242, as well as Vital, *Ḥemdat Yisra'el*, vol. 2, 86. Cf. also Panzeri, *Sefer ha-Kawwanot [ha-Yashan]*, 192. For a translation of the parallel passage from *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, see Fine 2003, 251. The graphic reproduced here is a true-to-scale reconstruction of the diagram as it appears in Vital's autograph manuscript. Due to copyright restrictions, the image cannot be reproduced here, but the manuscript (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ahron Moses Weiss/Schwartz, fol. 100ᵛ) is accessible at the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts of the National Library of Israel (F 71911/PH 7617).
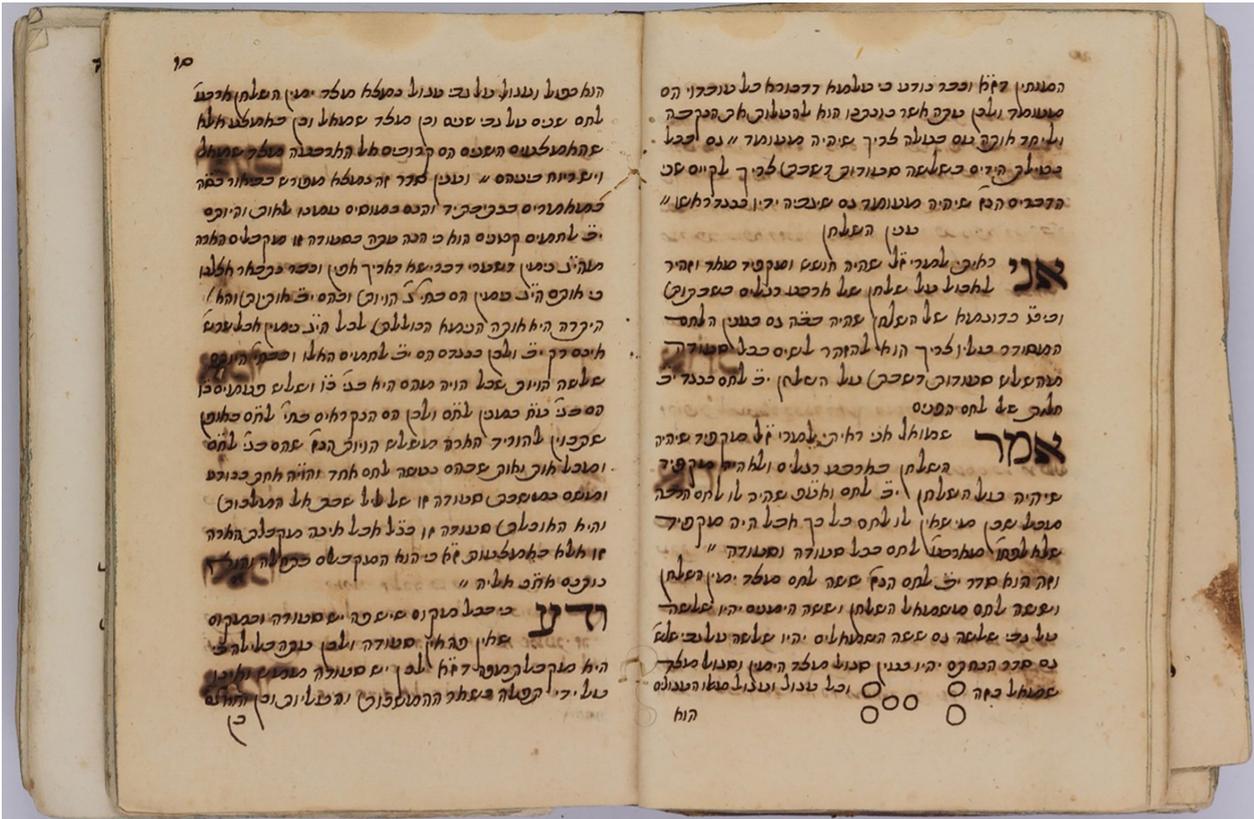
Fig. 6: Diagram of the six piles of loaves in Shmu'el Vital's *Ḥemdat Yisra'el*, seventeenth century, Oriental script. Note that the arrangement of the centre loaves deviates from the depiction in Ḥayyim Vital's autograph. Ramat Gan, Bar-Ilan University Library, Israel, Ms. 1154 (NLI: F 22873), fols 65ᵛ–66ʳ. From the collections of Bar-Ilan University. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

First, this passage clearly outlines (in a rather cumbersome way) what is relatively vividly illustrated by the accompanying diagram; namely, the placement of the loaves on the Sabbath table. They are to be arranged in a triangular shape, resembling the vowel sign *segol* rotated by an angle of ninety degrees. The only information that can be gleaned from the text and not from the diagram is that each of the six dots represents a stack of two loaves. Second, it is striking that Vital instructs the reader to put twelve loaves on the table instead of the usual two. In so doing, he explicitly refers to the showbread (*leḥem ha-panim*) in the Jerusalem Temple, which was displayed on a special table for a week and replaced each Sabbath. However, whereas the twelve loaves in the Temple were arranged 'in two rows, six to a row',[26] which was later interpreted as a vertical, shelf-like construction for storage,[27] Vital's account refers to six stacks of one pair each, and thus so does the version edited by his son Shmu'el (Fig. 6).

In light of the previously mentioned scarcity of such representations in kabbalistic prayerbooks, one might inquire as to why a relatively straightforward custom is described in such comprehensive detail and, more notably, illustrated (albeit in a rather simplistic manner), while other considerably

[26] Lev 24:6.

[27] See, e.g. *Babylonian Talmud,* tractate *Menaḥot*, 94b.

more obscure instructions are not. It can be proposed that part of the answer lies in the peculiar status of the table, which not only acquired significance as a material substitute for a piece of furniture that once stood in the Temple, but was also imbued with a much deeper, existential meaning in the context of kabbalistic thought. To gain further insight into this topic, it will be beneficial to examine some medieval texts from the zoharic literature that predate Vital's example by approximately three centuries.

5. The table and the bread in zoharic literature

The textual traditions of post-biblical Judaism contain detailed discussions of the Jerusalem Temple and Temple worship. Some seem to have served to preserve this body of knowledge after its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. Others reinterpreted rituals that were no longer in use and gave them new meaning. Both tendencies can be observed in the case of the showbread and the table: the mishnaic and talmudic discussions, along with the medieval and early modern legal codices, contain comprehensive accounts of the properties of the table and the bread.[28] In other genres, we find more associative interpretations.[29] In medieval kabbalistic zoharic literature, for example, the 'secret of the table' is presented as one of the great supernal mysteries. In a textual stratum of the *Zohar* that was probably composed in the second half of the thirteenth century, we find the following interpretation of God commanding Moses to build a portable construction for the showbread:

> 'You shall make a table' (Exodus 25:23) – this is a table below so that the Bread of the Presence [*leḥem ha-panim*] may be placed upon it. Which is superior to the other – the bread or the table? If you say that all is one, well, look, the table is set for that bread; the table is below and the bread is on it! However, the table is essential in its arrangement, to receive blessings from above and nourishment for the world. From the mystery of this table issues food to the world, as conveyed to it from above. And the bread is the fruit and food issuing from that table, demonstrating that from the table fruit, vegetation, and food emerge for the world.[30]

In exploring the question of whether the table or the bread is superior, the zoharic passage favours the table. In fact, when read through a kabbalistic hermeneutical key, the cosmic significance of the table unfolds its full scope: it symbolises *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine, also known as *Malkhut* ('Kingdom'), the tenth and lowest *Sefirah* of the divine structure. As such, it plays a mediating role

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[28] See, e.g. *Mishnah*, tractate *Menaḥot* 11:4–5 and *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Menaḥot*, 94b and 96a.

[29] For example, *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate *Berakhot*, 55a discusses why the biblical figure of Ezekiel refers to the wooden construction that is three cubits high and ten cubits long that he sees in his vision of the future Temple first as the 'altar' (*mizbeaḥ*) and later as the 'table (*shulḥan*) that is set before the Lord' (Ezek 41:22). This terminological distinction, according to the talmudic rabbis, hints at the fact that 'as long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel, but now a person's table atones for him/her' (translation in Simon [tr.], *Babylonian Talmud: Berakhoth*, 1990). The notion that the table has a purifying quality is also echoed in zoharic literature (see, e.g. *Zohar* 2:153b).

[30] *Zohar* 2:154a–b, English translation in Matt (tr.), *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 2009, 401–402. For an alternative translation of the same passage, see also Tishby 2008, 913–914.

between worlds: in relation to the upper divine attributes, she serves a receptive function, while in relation to the earthly sphere, she assumes a giving and nurturing role. In other words, the table represents an interface that allows the divine to flow into the world.

The loaves, on the other hand, are depicted as a product of the table. However, they are not created by the power of *Shekhinah* alone. On the contrary, they are her fruit or offspring. In other words, they are portrayed as the result of her being nourished from above by the masculine divine forces. The zoharic interpretation further elaborates on this gendered imagery by stating:

> Loaves on the table of the blessed Holy One number twelve. We have already established the mystery of loaves, which is the mystery of faces [*raza de-panim*], and therefore it is called Bread of the Faces [*leḥem ha-panim*], for the food and sustenance of the world comes from those upper faces [*panim 'il'in*]. Consequently, this bread is the innermost of all, in supernal mystery fittingly.[31]

Here, the zoharic text offers a literal reading of the Hebrew designation of the twelve loaves; namely, *leḥem ha-panim*, rendering it as 'Bread of the Faces'. The term 'faces' is understood here as a reference to the masculine divine powers that preside over *Shekhinah*.[32] Against this background, it can be asserted that while the loaves are a product of *Shekhinah*, they are also containers that encapsulate the 'food and sustenance' that they receive from above. They are a materialised form of the divine emanation that sustains the world.

The erotic dynamic between the masculine and feminine elements, which is only subtly expressed here, is articulated much more explicitly in *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, a collection of seventy interpretations of the first word of the Torah that was presumably composed in the early fourteenth century.[33] *Tiqqun* 47, which discusses the sixth day of creation, and specifically the creation of *adam*, contains an instruction on how to prepare the Sabbath table. There, it is stated:

> And on the Sabbath, you must prepare a table with four legs, like the table on high, as it is said, 'This is the table before the Lord' (Ezek 41:22), as well as 'You spread a table for me' (Ps 23:5), the table of the Holy One, Blessed be He, who is *Shekhinah* […]. The table is supported by four legs, like a body supported by legs and arms […], and it needs six loaves on each side. And the secret of the word 'this' [from the verse] 'This is the table before the Lord' is that it amounts to six and six, which are the six joints

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[31] *Zohar* 2:155a, slightly modified version of the English translation in Matt (tr.), *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 2009, 405. See also Tishby 2008, vol. 3, 916.

[32] Presumably referring to the sixth *Sefirah* (*Tif'eret*), the male counterpart of *Shekhinah*, as well as the ninth *Sefirah* (*Yesod*), commonly identified with the divine phallus; or alternatively to the twelve supernal boundaries. See Tishby 2008, vol. 3, 916 n. 50. Tishby points to the fact that both *Tif'eret* and *Yesod* are symbolised by the Hebrew letter *waw*, whose numerical value is six, in sum twelve, which is the numerical equivalent of the loaves. The supernal boundaries are the twelve channels that connect the lower seven *Sefirot* (excluding *Malkhut*). Elsewhere, the Zohar associates these twelve channels with the twelve stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. See *Zohar* 2:229b, where it is stated that 'the twelve stones bear the names of the children of Israel, and all the twelve supernal boundaries are comprised within the mystery of the tribes of Israel' (translation in Tishby 2008, vol. 3, 917). Cf. also Matt (tr.), *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 2009, 405 n. 621.

[33] *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* was first printed in Mantua in 1558. For a general study of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, see Giller 1993. See now also Vick 2019.

of the two arms and the six joints of the two legs. For *Shekhinah* is made into a body for the King, with all her adornments. And with these twelve parts of the female and the twelve parts of the male, the angels say: 'And this called to this [*ve-qara zeh el zeh*] holy holy holy, etc.' (Isa 6:3). 'This' (zeh/זה = 12) together with the Holy One, blessed be He (1), is 'One' (אחד = 13); 'this' (zeh/זה = 12) together with *Shekhinah* (1) is 'One' (אחד = 13); and altogether, they are one Tetragrammaton (יהוה = 26), both united.[34]

The association of the table with *Shekhinah* is plain here. However, unlike the passages from the main body of the *Zohar*, the example from *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* seems to portray the twelve loaves not as the offspring of the feminine, but as twelve masculine aspects that provide a vessel for the divine emanation. The twelve joints of the 'arms' and 'legs' serve as their feminine counterparts, enabling the union of the 'King' or the 'Holy One, Blessed be He' with *Shekhinah*. By transforming words into numbers by means of *gemaṭria*, the text argues that these individual components, when combined, yield the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton, symbolising the perfect unity of all existence and the Godhead in its primordial state. The issue here is no longer the hierarchy of bread and table. Rather, what this example clearly conveys is the centrality of the two elements in their relationship to one another.

The difference in style and tone between the passages in the main body of the *Zohar* and *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* is particularly important for our context. In the former, we are dealing with an interpretation by rabbis who are uncovering the esoteric content of the biblical text, aligning it more closely with the domain of the mythical.[35] They present the table of the tabernacle and subsequently that of the Temple as the archetypal table, the source of sustenance for the entire cosmos. In contrast, the latter refers to the private dining table in one's own home. It conveys a sense of timeliness and urgency, thereby providing a rationale for why it is so important to perform this ritual. It therefore falls within the realm of theurgy. Precisely this latter, activist aspect came to full fruition in the writings of the sixteenth-century kabbalists, to whom we will now (re)turn.

6. Of loaves and tables in Lurianic Kabbalah: Part II

Zoharic literature served many of the Safedian kabbalists as a model for the development of new ritual practices and as a general basis for their understanding of both worldly and otherworldly processes.[36] Along these lines, Solomon Schechter already wrote in 1908 that 'the text-book of the school [of Luria] was the Zohar' and that 'Loria himself and the Associates, in their present capacity as mystics, represented the reincarnation of the supposed heroes of the Zohar'.[37] The similarities between the ideas and concepts reflected in the zoharic passages and those formulated in Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah* are therefore no coincidence, and they reflect this precise tendency.

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[34] Margoliot (ed.), *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, 1978, *tiqqun* 47, fol. 84ᵃ (my translation).

[35] For a general discussion of the not-uncontested notion of myth in Kabbalah, see Liebes 1993.

[36] See, e.g. Faierstein 2013; for the Sabbath eve, see 32–46. Many of the customs that Faierstein describes have their roots in Safed and draw in one way or another on zoharic literature.

[37] Schechter 1908, 267 and 277.

The close connection to the zoharic world of ideas is also evident in the Lurianic adaptation of anthropomorphic descriptions of the Godhead, a phenomenon that the Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem considered 'the greatest victory which anthropomorphic thought has ever achieved in the history of Jewish mysticism'.[38] This tendency becomes particularly apparent in the metaphysical significance that Vital attaches to the twelve loaves. In connection to the above-quoted technical explanation of the loaves placed on the table, he writes:

> The reason why there are twelve loaves is that at the very moment of that meal,[39] one receives the illumination from the thirteen strands of the hair that is on the head of Long Countenance [*Arikh Anpin*], and we have already clarified that all thirteen strands are the aspect of the three Tetragrammata that consist of twelve letters,[40] since the additional strand contains all thirteen,[41] but only twelve of them have roots.[42] Therefore, there are correspondingly only twelve loaves of bread. Since there are three Tetragrammata whose sum is seventy-eight,[43] they are called the aspect of 'bread' [*leḥem*], which in *gemaṭria* also amounts to seventy-eight (לחם = 78). In this way you intend to draw down the illumination of these three Tetragrammata, [...] forming with each letter a loaf of bread and a Tetragrammaton, as is known. And from there this meal of the Sabbath eve goes on to *Malkhut*, who eats this meal [...]. She does not receive the illumination [directly], but through Short Countenance [*Ze'ir Anpin*], who first receives them [i.e. the loaves] and then passes them on to her.[44] Know that there is a meal only when the aspect of the mouth is involved. Therefore, at night, when she receives from the mouth of *Ze'ir Anpin*, there is a meal [that enables] the descents and ascents and they are not [induced] by means of prayer.[45]

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[38] Scholem 1961, 268.

[39] I.e. the first of the three Sabbath meals on Friday night.

[40] I.e. three times *YHWH* amounts to twelve letters.

[41] On the thirteenth strands of *Arikh Anpin's* hair, see *Zohar* 3:129a (in Matt [tr.], *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 2014, 334). Melila Hellner-Eshed describes the hair of *Arikh Anpin* presented in the *Zohar's Idra Rabba* as the 'physical representation of channels for the flow of divine bounty' (Hellner-Eshed 2021, 194). For the Lurianic context, see Vital, *Mavo She'arim*, 164–165, as well as Ashlag, *Talmud 'Eser Sefirot*, vol. 5, 1365.

[42] See Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Ma'amarim*, 78. This passage gives a more detailed explanation of the characteristics of the upper heads, how the strands emerge from these heads, and how they correspond to the different spellings of the Tetragrammaton.

[43] The numerical value of the letters of the Tetragrammaton amounts to twenty-six (יהוה = 26) in sum, which, when multiplied by three, amounts to seventy-eight.

[44] See also Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008/2020, 257/386–387, where it reads: 'And it appears now, during this night meal, since she receives from the three brains [*moḥin*] of the head of *Ze'ir Anpin*, at the end of which is the mouth of *Ze'ir Anpin*. And *Malkhut* is now nourished and eats from what is in the mouth of *Ze'ir Anpin*. And although she is still standing below [in the realm of the Sefirot of] *Nezaḥ*, *Hod*, and *Yesod* of *Ze'ir*, nevertheless enlightenment and food descend to her. Hence it is called 'the meal of the consort' [*se'udata de-maṭronita*], because she is the one who eats this meal and nourishes from the mouth of *Ze'ir Anpin*.' On the term *se'udata de-maṭronita*, see *Zohar* 2:88a–b and 3:288b.

[45] Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, 2008/2020, 261/392–393 (my translation). Cf. also Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 1873, fol. 72a (and Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 2016, 242).

Fig. 7: Detail of an *ilan gadol* ('great tree'), mid-eighteenth or nineteenth century, Ashkenazi script. The thirteen strands of *Arikh Anpin* are illustrated as two curved bundles of black lines. Tel Aviv, Gross Family Collection 028.012.011/Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 4°9804. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, CC-BY-NC 4.[46]

Here, Vital explains the process of bringing down divine energy, which is described as nourishing light. He establishes a continuity between the twelve loaves of bread below and the twelve channels above, which are the strands of hair in the configuration of Long Countenance (*Arikh Anpin*). This process is visualised, for example, in the *Arikh Anpin ilan* designed by R. Moses Zacuto (Fig. 7).

While Vital clearly adopted this anthropomorphic imagery from the zoharic cluster known as the *Idra Rabba* ('Great Assembly'), he also seems to have been inspired by the previously discussed notions of the 'mystery of the faces' from the main body of the *Zohar*, as well as the erotic connotation of the union of the masculine and the feminine stressed in *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*.

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[46] This particular manuscript is discussed (with images) in Chajes 2022, 352–353. The detail seen here opens Zacuto's *Ilan of Arikh Anpin*, which is discussed in Chajes 2022, 118–122.

A unique aspect of Vital's explanation is his emphasis on the most significant of the divine names, the Tetragrammaton, and its relationship to the twelve loaves and the divine channels: both are equated with the sum of the letters of three Tetragrammata. Divine power is manifested in the name, whose letters serve as tools for the kabbalist. The text thus describes a theurgical act that brings about an outpouring of divine power during the Sabbath meal on Friday evening. The table below, and more importantly the arrangement of the loaves, sets the stage for the nourishment on high. It regulates, as it were, the upper constellation so that the divine light from above can descend to the lower realms.

More specifically, the passage stresses that divine power cannot flow directly from the upper masculine element of Long Countenance (*Arikh Anpin*) to the lower female element of *Malkhut* ('Kingdom'). Rather, it has to pass through the lower masculine aspect of Short Countenance (*Ze'ir Anpin*), who is considered the natural partner of the lower feminine aspect. Furthermore, *Malkhut* is presented as eating from *Ze'ir Anpin's* mouth. This involvement of the aspect of the mouth, as the text puts it, requires a parallel act of human eating below. This means that in this instance, the desired theurgical outcome cannot be achieved contemplatively, through the exclusive practice of prayer intentions. Rather, it necessitates a tangible physical action. Accordingly, the kabbalist below, who consumes the bread, serves to activate the nourishment of the divine feminine above. It is precisely this performative aspect that reveals the unique status of the ritual and the potential reasons for its detailed description and illustration, as will be demonstrated in the subsequent sections.[47]

7. Visualisations of tables and loaves in a Lurianic *siddur*

This study has thus far concentrated on the esoteric significance of the table and the rationale behind the arrangement of the twelve loaves. It has been demonstrated that within the main body of the *Zohar*, the table was regarded as being of greater significance than the bread. In contrast, Vital's discussion emphasised the theurgical significance of the loaves. In his elaborations, the detailed textual descriptions remain predominant, with only minimal support from a basic diagrammatic representation of the arrangement of the twelve loaves. However, this ratio undergoes a transformation with the advent of Lurianic prayerbooks, where both the table and the loaves are treated with equal attention. More importantly, these explanations are supplemented with more elaborate depictions, drawing on additional passages from Lurianic writings. In order to illustrate this phenomenon, we shall consider a Lurianic *siddur* of Ashkenazi provenance from the eighteenth century, which will serve as a reference point and as a paradigmatic example of a great many other artefacts written in a similar style, employing analogous iconography.[48]

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[47] To avoid misunderstandings: Lurianic descriptions of *kawwanot* are generally very detailed and their performance requires a high degree of concentration and knowledge. However, most of them relate to the spoken word, which may be the reason why they lack visualisations.

[48] Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528).

7.1. The table

Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528) contains a comprehensive account of the esoteric implications associated with the table. It is plausible that this account was derived from *Mishnat Ḥasidim*, a widely circulated synopsis of Lurianic doctrine authored by the Italian kabbalist Immanuel Ḥai Ricci (1688–1743), which was first printed in Amsterdam in 1727.[49] The complete set of instructions reads as follows:

> Focus on each of the four corners [of the table], which is *Malkhut* who has [the spelling of] fifty-two and [the spelling of] seventy-two [in the variant of] a quadripartite simple Tetragrammaton.[50] And the sum of the four [spellings of] seventy-two of the four corners [equals] the number of the 288 sparks. In order to lift them up, one must concentrate (*yekhawwen*) in each corner on one [spelling of] seventy-two of *Ze'ir Anpin*, which is the [spelling of the divine] name [that amounts to] forty-five together with the numerical value of the Tetra-grammaton (26, thus 45 + 26 = 71), which is its root when including the additional digit [*ha-kollel*] (71 + 1 = 72).[51] And this [spelling of the divine name that amounts to] forty-five is vocalised in each corner in a different way. How? In the south-eastern corner, the name's masculine letters – namely, the *yods*, *waws*, and *alephs* – will be vocalised with the vocal sign for *Abba* ['Father'], which is *pataḥ*, which impacts the feminine [letters], which are the *daleths* and *hehs* with the vocalisation of *Ze'ir Anpin*, which is *ḥolem*. And in the north-eastern corner, the masculine ones are the vocal signs of *Yisra'el Sabba*, [which is also *pataḥ*], which impact the feminine ones with the vocalisation signs of *ṣere*, which is the vocalisation for *Tevunah*. And in the north-western [corner], the masculine ones are *kamaṣ*, the vocalisation of *Arikh* [*Anpin*], which includes the three heads and which impacts the feminine ones vocalised with *pataḥ*, the vocalisation of *Abba*, and from him to *Imma* ['Mother']. And in the south-western [corner], the masculine ones – namely, *yod aleph* and *waw* with *shuruq*, which is the vocalisation of *Yesod* of *Ze'ir Anpin*, which is in the west, all the *Ḥassadim*, which [correspond with] the vocalisation of *segol* of the feminine letters, because it impacts *Nuqva*. Also, concentrate that these sixteen names that are at the four edges of the table correspond to the numerical value [of the term] 'hyssop' (16), which corresponds to twice the cross-sum of *Shaddai* (i.e. 314 → 3 + 1 + 4 → 8 × 2 = 16), which are hinted in the *Yesodot* of *Abba* and *Imma*. And the three Tetragrammata that amount to 'bread' (*leḥem* = 78) that sweetens the 'salt' (*melaḥ* = 78) are also the three last Tetragrammata; therefore, twenty names. How? Twelve at the edges of the table and two times *Shaddai* and six Tetragrammata; therefore, twenty names. And thus, the number of the term 'hyssop' (*ezob* = 16) with its four letters [i.e. 16 + 4] is [also] twenty. And this *kawwanah* of the hyssop bars the external [evil] forces from one's table,

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[49] On *Mishnat Ḥasidim*, see Luboshitz 2018, especially 45 n. 226 on the 1744 Zolkiew edition, in which the section of the work that deals with mystical intentions (i.e. *mafteaḥ ha-kawwanot*) was presented for the first time in the form of a prayer-book. See also Luboshitz 2018, 48, which states that four of the first eight editions of *Mishnat Ḥasidim* were essentially printed in the form of a *siddur*.

[50] This expression refers to a spelling of the divine name that divides it into four versions consisting of one, two, three, and four letters each; i.e. *Y*, *YH*, *YHW*, *YHWH* (יהוה יהו יה י = 10 + 15 + 21 + 26), which in sum amounts to the numerical value of seventy-two.

[51] The addition or 'inclusion' of numbers that signify the word or the number of letters of a word is a common practice in *gemaṭria*.

and even more so if there is an actual hyssop placed on it. And one must also be careful to have salt on one's table, for the restoration of one's soul, especially if its root stems from [the world of] *Yeṣirah*.[52]

Similarly to the zoharic depictions, the table is identified with *Malkhut*, the lower feminine aspect of the Godhead. Here, however, the surface of the table is divided into four parts, and each of these sub-areas is associated with differently spelt names of God that add up to a total sum of 288, which is the number of holy sparks that, according to the Lurianic account of creation, fell into the lower worlds during the cosmic catastrophe referred to as 'the breaking of the vessels'.[53] The letters associated with the first eight of the twenty divine names thus symbolise the divine within the world that must be returned to its place of origin. Accordingly, the kabbalist's focus is intended to bring about an upward movement, which is accomplished via the contemplation of four pairs of additional divine names that are imagined in the corners of the table and whose numerical value also amounts to four times seventy-two.[54] The passage then continues with a meticulous description of how these names must be vocalised in different ways. In so doing, the letters are divided into masculine and feminine ones, and the corresponding vowel signs are presented as symbolising various interactions between the upper configurations, or 'faces' (*parṣufin*), which also represent masculine and feminine aspects of the Godhead.[55] Their correct adjustment is the fundamental condition that enables a bottom-up or top-down interaction, which is frequently described using explicit sexual terminology.

In a further step, eight additional divine names are introduced; namely, *Shaddai*, which is to be imagined twice, thus symbolising the hyssop, and six other simple spellings of the Tetragrammaton, three of which represent bread and three salt. In both cases, the connection is again established based on *gemaṭria*, with 'hyssop' equaling the cross-sum of *Shaddai* and 'bread' and 'salt' equalling the numerical value of three Tetragrammata, as was also pointed out by Vital. Finally, 'sweetening the salt' refers to the neutralisation of the judging forces, a process that is central to the Lurianic activist's aspiration to restore the cosmos. This notion is further amplified by the second major objective of the *kawwanah*; namely, the attempt to keep the evil forces at bay and away from the table.

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[52] Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. 8°3569 (B 528), fol. 110ʳ (my translation).

[53] According to the Lurianic account of creation, the all-encompassing Godhead contracted itself – a process described as *ṣimṣum* – in order to make space for the creation of the cosmos. However, some of the vessels that were created to hold the divine light emanating into this vacuum could not withstand the force of the divine influx and shattered (the so-called breaking of the vessels or *shevirat ha-kelim*). The sparks of divine light attached to the shards remained in the material world and are 'trapped' there. For a more detailed explanation of this process, see, e.g. Scholem 1961, 260–273; Fine 2003, 124–149.

[54] More specifically, these are four pairs that consist of the simple spelling of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה = 26) and the full spelling with the 'filling' (*milui*) of the letter *aleph* (i.e. הא ואו הא יוד = 20 + 6 + 23 + 6 = 45). To achieve the total of seventy-two, one adds another digit (*kollel*), which signifies the word itself.

[55] The text refers to the configurations of *Arikh Anpin*, *Abba*, and *Imma*, as well as *Ze'ir Anpin*. Furthermore, it mentions *Yisra'el Sabba* and *Tevunah*, aspects that are usually associated with the configuration of *Ze'ir Anpin* in *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah*, as well as other sefirotic powers, such as the ninth *Sefirah* of *Yesod* and the so-called *Ḥassadim*, which commonly describe five positive aspects that neutralise the judging forces on high. For a more detailed discussion of the Lurianic notion of *parṣufim*, see Magid 2008, 24–29.

Fig. 8a: 'Kawwanat ha-Shulḥan', *Siddur ha-Ar"i,* Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528), fol. 110ᵛ–111ʳ. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

The following page of the manuscript contains a graphical representation of this very description (Fig. 8b). It offers a schematic bird's-eye view of the tabletop. Ornamental elements extending beyond the edges of the table on all four sides and in the corners divide the surface into several smaller sections. The round elements in the centre of each side of the rectangle, protruding over the table's edge, contain the names of the four directions in large square letters: 'east' at the top, 'south' to the right, 'west' at the bottom, and 'north' to the left. The largest round protrusion on top with the word *mizraḥ,* 'east', refers to the direction in which Jerusalem lies. In the corners of the double-edged frame, the names 'south-east', 'west-south', 'north-west', and 'east-north' are written diagonally in small italics. This outer frame of the table also contains (in the same font) brief indications of how to imagine the vowel signs associated with the masculine and feminine letters of the names of God.[56]

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[56] For example, in the south-east corner, and in analogy with the description on fol. 110ʳ, the upper left margin reads 'the vocalisation of the feminine [letters] is *ḥolem*'; the upper margin reads 'the vocalisation of the masculine [letters] is *pataḥ*'.

Fig. 8b: 'Kawwanat ha-Shulḥan', *Siddur ha-Ar"i*, Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528), fol. 110ᵛ. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

Inside each corner, two names of God are placed diagonally: the simple spelling of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה = 26) above and a variant of the name with the 'filling' of the letter aleph (יוד הא ואו הא) corresponding to the numerical value of forty-five below.[57] Both names, which in total amount to seventy-two, are marked with the vowel signs as outlined in the text.[58]

Furthermore, the table contains a total of eight double-sided rectangles, arranged in pairs parallel to the four edges of the table. The bottom pair includes *Shaddai* (שדי). The remaining three pairs each contain a simple Tetragrammaton (יהוה). In addition, the top pair also comprises the words 'bread' (לחם) on the right and 'salt' (מלח) on the left. The long inner sides of these eight rectangles form a square in the centre of the table, at the corners of which are eight additional names of God. These are the ones mentioned at the very beginning of the previously quoted passage; namely, the spelling of the Tetragrammaton that amounts to fifty-two (יוד הה וו הה) and the quadripartite segmentation of the simple Tetragrammaton (י|יה|יהו|יהוה), which amounts to seventy-two (עב), also written there. It is most likely that the text identifies only this inner square with *Malkhut*, since the total sum of the names framing it – 4 × (52 + 72) – equals the numerical value of *Malkhut* (496).[59] The outer four corners, on the other hand, are the ones identified with the masculine counterpart, and the text refers to them as the seventy-two of *Zei'ir Anpin* (i.e. the above-mentioned combination of the simple Tetragrammaton with the name of forty-five). This information, which can be gleaned from the diagram, represents a model in which the divine names associated with the masculine configuration form a kind of protective shield around the femininely gendered inner area of the table. The lack of terminological differentiation in the text prevents it from being able to convey the message that is clearly communicated by the image.

The innermost section of the table offers supplementary and succinct written explanations in italicised letters. The one in the upper part points to the notion that 'four times seventy-two is in *gemaṭria* 288, to redeem [*levarer*] 288 sparks by means of the *kawwanah* of eating'.[60] The second one pertains to the term 'hyssop' (אזוב), which is inscribed in large square letters at the bottom of this area. It states that the numerical value of the word 'hyssop' (16) refers to the 'twenty names that are written here when the number four is added', with the latter value corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew spelling. 'The pure table', a title of sorts for this depiction, is written in large square letters at the centre of the illustration. Above the illustration, and only partially preserved in the manuscript itself, is the biblical verse that is so prominently featured in the above-quoted passage from *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*: 'This is the table before the Lord' (Ezek 41:22).[61]

This example not only vividly illustrates the full complexity of the highly technical characteristics of a typical Lurianic exposition, but it also demonstrates why visualisations can prove useful in the

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[57] The most common full spellings of the Tetragrammaton amount to forty-five (יוד הא ואו הא), fifty-two (יוד הה וו הה), sixty-three (יוד הי ואו הי), and seventy-two (יוד הי ויו הי). For the sake of brevity, they are usually referred to by their respective number.

[58] Thus, for example, in the south-east corner יַהֹוָה יַד הֹא וַאו הֹא.

[59] (52 + 72) × 4 = 496 = מלכות = 40 + 30 + 20 + 6 + 400.

[60] The verb *levarer*, which literally means 'to sift', is a Lurianic technical term that refers to the process of *birur*, an act of 'sifting' that separates the holy sparks from the material aspects to which they are attached, thereby redeeming them.

[61] See above, 11.

context of this kabbalistic current: they offer the possibility to organise and locate things. They also make it possible to graphically and unambiguously depict the corresponding linguistic subtleties through labelling. They can easily display, for instance, the different spellings of God's names and their vocalisations, which the text painstakingly circumscribes. In other words, the example demonstrates how the graphical representation can serve to reinforce the text. Nevertheless, it also shows that the visualisation is not a full-fledged substitute for the text, since without context, it would be almost unintelligible.

7.2. The loaves

The second context in which we encounter visualisations of the Sabbath table revolves around the arrangement of the loaves. The description in Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528) bears similarities to the one in Vital's *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*. It is, however, much more detailed in terms of both text and graphics. For example, while Vital merely mentions that one must form 'with each letter a loaf of bread and a Tetragrammaton, as is known',[62] the passage in the *siddur* reads as follows:

> Arrange the Sabbath table, which should be [a table] with four legs, in analogy to the 'table [set] before the Lord',[63] [and it should be] twelve palms long and six palms wide, and its height should be not over ten or below nine palms.[64] And on the Sabbath, the [name of] seventy-two on which one must concentrate [while contemplating] the four corners [of the table] is different from the one used on weekdays, since it is the name of seventy-two [spelt with the letters] *yod* in actuality, located in [the *Sefirah* of] *Ḥokhmah*.
>
> And on top of [the table], one must place twelve loaves [of bread], three on the right side in the shape of a *segol* so that the two dots that are next to one another like a *ṣere* are parallel to the edge of the table; and the centre dot, which [in the shape of the *segol* would be located] below the two [dots], is in the centre of the table. And the other three must be arranged in the same way on the left side of the table, so that the centre dot, which is the centre bread, is at the centre of the table [adjacent to] the centre [dot] of the other *segol*.
>
> And all these six are in the secret of the six *hehs* of the three Tetragrammata, and exactly on these six [loaves], one must place the six other [loaves] that are in the secret of the masculine [letters of these three] Tetragrammata, *yod waw* on the right, *yod waw* on the left, and *yod waw* in the centre. In fact, all three Tetragrammata, which consist of twelve letters, together with the additional number [*ha-kollel*] amount to thirteen, the secret of the thirteen strands [*nimin*] of *Arikh Anpin*.[65]

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[62] See above, 13.

[63] According to Ezek 41:22.

[64] The unit of measurement mentioned here is *tefaḥ*, plural *tefaḥim*; namely, a biblical unit of length based on the width of the human hand (presumably 7.5–8 cm).

[65] Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8°3569 (B 528), fol. 130ᵛ (my translation).

Drawing from previous halakhic discussions, the exact dimensions of the four-legged table are specified here.[66] Immediately after this, however, the text dives into the highly technical world of Lurianic *kawwanot*. It points out that the practice on the Sabbath differs from that on weekdays in that one must focus on a different spelling of the divine name. At this point, it also becomes clear that the passage builds on the previous discussion of the table, particularly the description of how to release the holy sparks by focusing on the variously pronounced names of God associated with the four corners of the table. There, the name with the numerical value of seventy-two was composed of the simple Tetragrammaton, the fully spelt name in the variant of forty-five plus one.[67] Here, it is the fully spelt divine name 'filled' with the letter *yod*.[68] Not only is this name identified with a higher source, but concentrating on it also enables communication with the second *Sefirah* of *Ḥokhmah*.[69]

The explanation then continues with a detailed account of the arrangement of the twelve loaves. Two things are noteworthy here. First, the arrangement of the loaves differs from that of *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*. The latter specifies a distance between the two middle stacks of bread. Here, however, one is instructed to place them in the centre of the table so that they are next to each other. Second, the text associates the loaves with the letters of the Tetragrammaton. Following the same principle that we encountered in the previous example in the context of the vocalisation of the divine names, the letters of the three simple Tetragrammata are gendered as masculine and feminine. The loaves at the bottom are identified with the six feminine *hehs*, while the ones placed on top of them represent the masculine *yod* and *waw*.[70] However, the stacks are not only imagined as couples: the six piles are also divided into three quartets – the top and bottom pile on the right, the two in the middle, and the top and bottom pile on the left – each of which forms the four-letter name of God. To convey this image to the reader, the text uses the shape of the vocalisation marks: the triangular *segol* (אֶ) in a ninety-degree rotation and the *ṣere* (אֵ) with its two dots serving to illustrate the grouping of the two pairs at the respective edges of the table. Employing *gemaṭria*, the passage concludes with a brief reference to the thirteen strands of *Arikh Anpin*'s hair, which, as we learned in *Sha'ar ha-Tefillah*, serve as a link between the upper and lower worlds.

The accompanying diagram visualises this very information (Fig. 9). The rectangular frame with a geometric pattern suggests the edges of the table's surface, in each corner of which there is a name of God with the numerical value of seventy-two. Six circles are arranged across the surface, illustrating the stacks of twelve loaves of bread: two each to the left and right, parallel to

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[66] See, e.g. the statement made in the name of R. Meir in *Mishnah*, tractate *Menaḥot* 11:5. Cf. also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Avodah*, *Hilkhot Temidin ve-Musaffin*, 5:9 (ed. Makbili 2009, 528), who uses the term *tefaḥ* rather than the mishnaic *eṣba*. A possible source for Ḥai Ricci may have been Avraham Azulai, *Ḥesed le-Avraham*, Ma'ayan 2, Nahar 49 (Jerusalem: Makhon Sha'arei Ziv, 1996), 87. See also Hallamish 2006, 319.

[67] יהוה+יוד הא ואו הא עם הכולל. See above, 16.

[68] יוד הי ויו הי.

[69] The previous passage referred to 'the seventy-two of *Ze'ir Anpin*', which is usually identified with the sixth *Sefirah* of *Tif'eret*.

[70] It is worth recalling here that in the above-quoted passages from the main body of the *Zohar* and *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, the table is considered feminine and the loaves are presented as the fruit of the masculine 'upper faces' and the 'table'.

Fig. 9: 'Seder ha-Shulḥan', *Siddur ha-Ar"i*, Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°3569 (B 528), fol. 130ᵛ–131ʳ. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

the edge of the table, and two side by side in the centre of the table. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the different 'decorations' of these circles were not chosen at random. They represent the different letters associated with the loaves: the double-framed, dewdrop-like outlines symbolise the feminine letter *heh* (ה), while the black dots in the centre of the circles represent the masculine *yod* (י) and the vertical black lines in the centre represent the masculine *waw* (ו). At this point, the visualisation provides information that is not clearly conveyed by the text; namely, the exact distribution of the masculine letters on the stacks of bread. And even though the text dominates, here as well, text and diagram form a symbiosis of sorts. The graphical representation visualises what is written, but it cannot be understood without knowledge of the text. Moreover, the additional medium can be utilised as a mnemonic device or synopsis in the event that the observer is familiar with the respective text and context.[71]

8. Conclusion

Lurianic prayerbooks are valuable sources that document how (early) modern kabbalists applied Lurianic teachings in their daily practice. These texts offer insights into the integration of sophisticated mental techniques with some of the most fundamental ritual practices within Judaism.

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[71] See Chajes 2020, especially 41, where he notes that to understand diagrams, 'we need text and context'.

By way of a few select examples, the preceding discussion has demonstrated how cryptic Lurianic elaborations were accompanied by graphical representations and how this symbiosis between text and image facilitated a more profound comprehension of intricate relationships.

Diagrams of this kind can be found in a large number of written artefacts. In some cases, they represent identical traditions, while in others, they reveal variants. For example, they may show differences in the spelling of divine names or in the assignment of letters to the loaves (see Figs 10, 11, and 12).

However, there are also cases in which this symbiotic relationship is dissolved and the diagram and the text no longer match. A stunning example of this occurs in a manuscript of the kabbalistic work *Ḥesed le-Avraham* by Avraham Azulai (1570–1643). The copy, which was completed in Sulzbach in 1685 – presumably by acquaintances of the circle of Christian kabbalists around Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689) – contains a diagram of two side-by-side arrangements, each comprising six dots, in a shape that vaguely resembles two sefirotic trees (Fig. 13).[72] It is most likely that this version also served as a *Vorlage* for the print produced by the press of Moshe ben Uri Shraga Bloch (1625–1693) published in the same year (Fig. 14).[73] Whether the creator of these diagrams was unfamiliar with the conventional Lurianic visual representations of the loaves or whether he/she was unable to properly interpret the text cannot be clearly determined. What is certain, however, is that this edition was printed without the approbation of the rabbinic authorities (*haskamot*) who might have noticed the inaccuracy.

In conclusion, the significance attributed to the effective execution of the *kawwanot* in purifying the table and the configuration of the loaves also gives rise to the question of their practicality. The theurgical objectives and mental journeys presented in this discussion are not uncommon within the Lurianic intellectual tradition. In light of the aforementioned evidence, it can be reasonably inferred that the actions described in the table were, in fact, carried out. However, the matter is somewhat different with respect to the placement of the bread. In total, therefore, thirty-six loaves would have to be prepared for three Sabbath meals. Vital himself commented on this issue, citing the behaviour of his father, Ḥayyim, when writing:

> I saw that my teacher was scrupulous about using a table with four legs, but that he was less concerned about putting twelve loaves of bread on the table, even if he had plenty of it […]. However, he was meticulous about having no less than four loaves for each [of the three Sabbath] meals.[74]

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[72] It is noteworthy that other manuscripts of *Ḥesed le-Avraham* do contain illustrations that are similar to the ones in the writings of Ḥayyim or Shmu'el Vital. See, e.g. Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. Hebr. 242, fol. 40ᵛ.

[73] On the printing house of Moshe ben Uri Shraga Bloch and the production of the Sulzbach *Zohar*, see Huss 2007, especially 122–123.

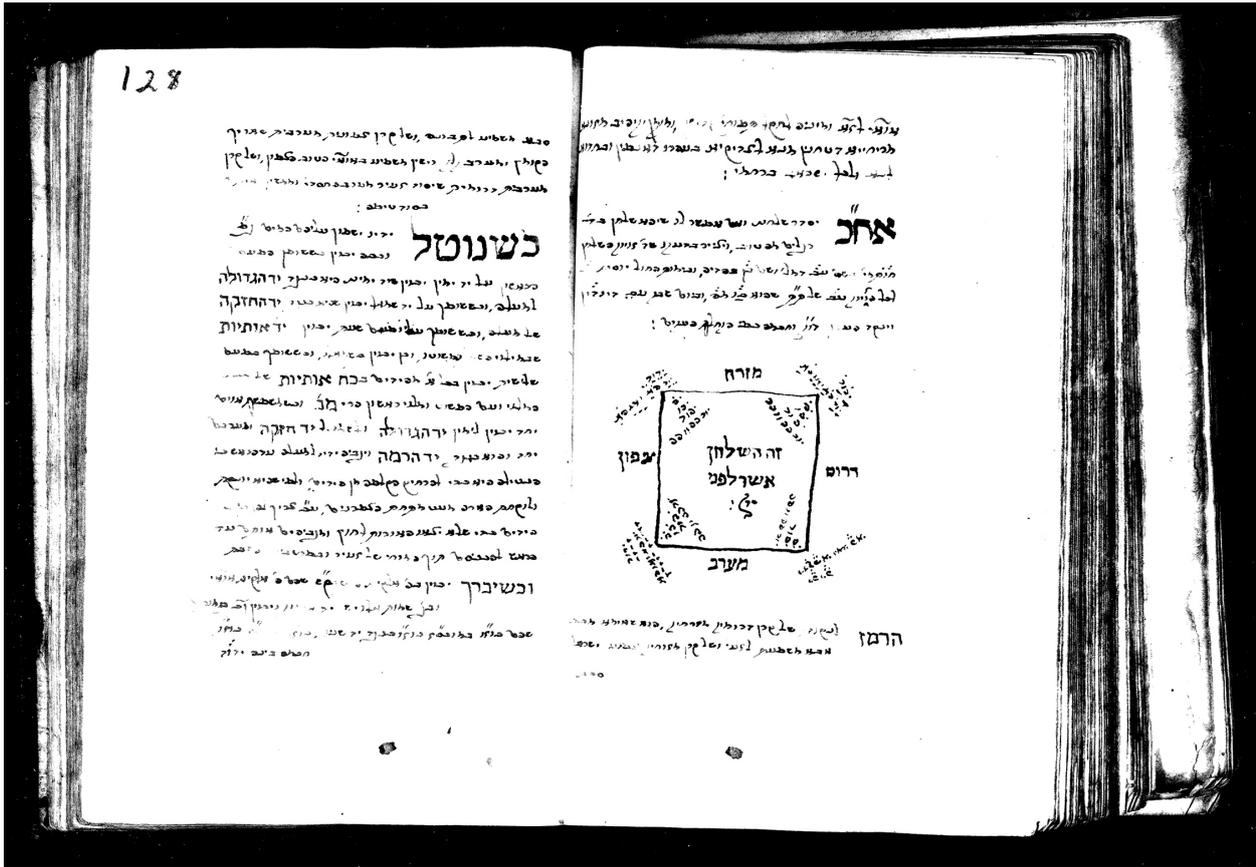[74] Vital, *Ḥemdat Yisra'el*, part 2, 85–86.

Fig. 10: 'Seder ha-Shulḥan', *Siddur 'im Kawwanot*, Italian script, c. 1640. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°7133, fols 127ᵛ–128ʳ. Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, public domain.

Fig. 11: *Tefillah mi-kol ha-Shanah me-ha-Ar"l z"l*, Tel Aviv, Gross Family Collection 95 (EE.011.001) (NLI: F 44895, MSS-D 2687), fol. 158ᵛ–159ʳ. This diagram combines elements included in the previously discussed *Kawwanat ha-Shulḥan* (Fig. 8) and *Seder ha- Shulḥan* (Fig. 9). Ktiv Project, National Library of Israel, CC-BY-NC 4.
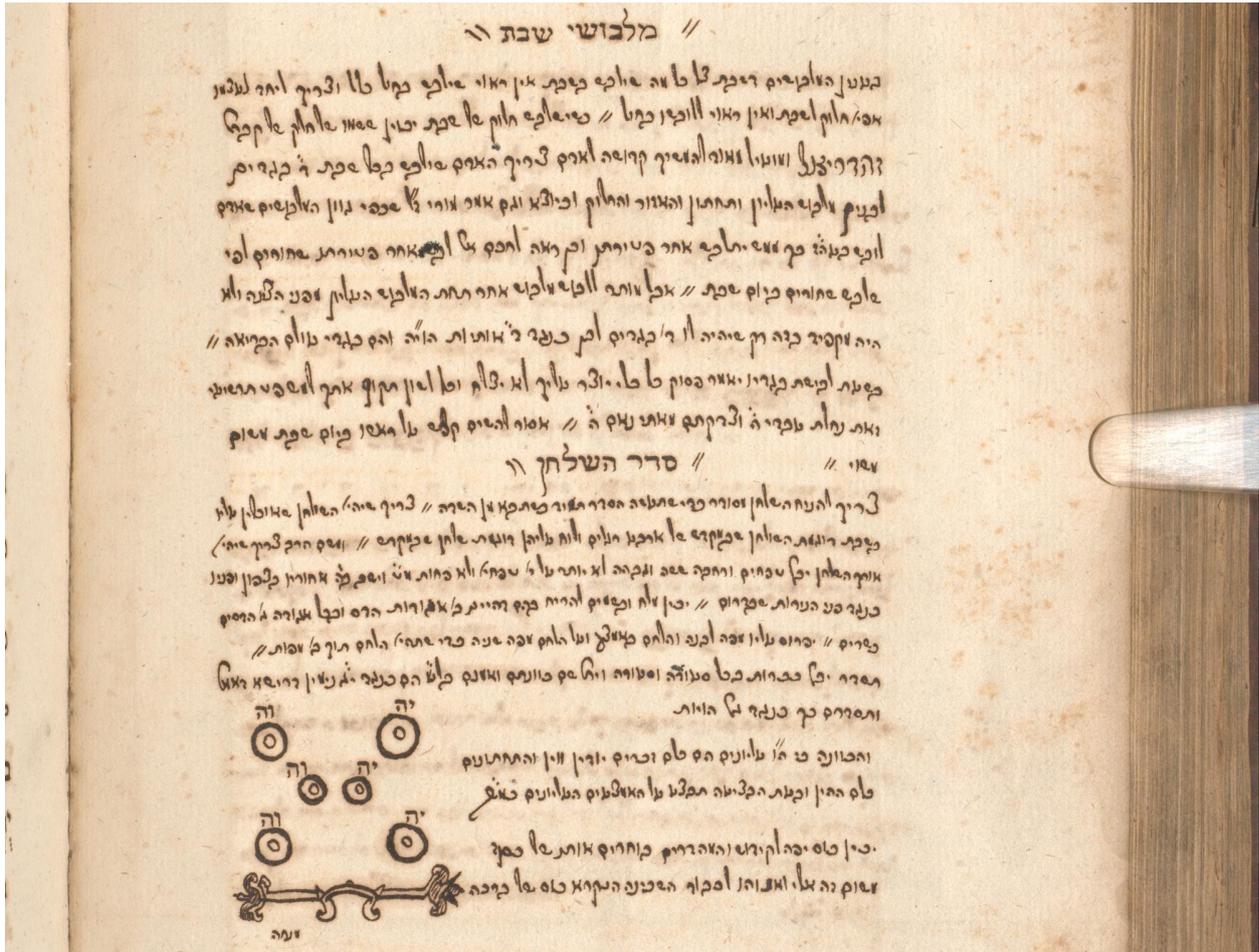
Fig. 12: Detail from *Seder ha-Tefillot* (*Lo ha-Midrash hu ha-'Iqar ela ha-Ma'aseh*), Frankfurt am Main, Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, Ms. hebr. oct. 50, fol. 121ᵛ (Hebrew foliation of the manuscript). Digitised by Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, Frankfurt am Main [2011]: urn:nbn:de:hebis:30:2-8391, fol. 130ᵛ (later Arabic foliation) [262]. Note that the attribution of the masculine letters of the upper loaves differs from those in Figs 9 and 11. CC Public Domain Mark 1.0.

Similarly, in his *Ḥesed le-Avraham*, Azulai suggests that 'if one is unable to place twelve loaves on the table, one should not place more than four loaves'.[75] It appears that the number four, which represents the four-letter name of God, was ultimately the preferred choice, and it would also seem that the practice still offered the possibility of affecting the higher realms and drawing down the divine flow from above.

From a theoretical standpoint, it can be posited that akin to the reader-text interaction – namely, the intellectual activity of 'discovering, understanding, interpretating, and producing text, which is deeply inherent to a person'[76] – the viewer of a schematic representation endeavours to comprehend it through the lens of their own visual-linguistic reservoir of knowledge. Along the lines of Jonathan Culler's notion of 'literary competence' – that is, the reader's knowledge of institutionalised conventions that help him or her better understand a given text – a viewer of diagrams develops 'visual competence';

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[75] Azulai, *Ḥesed le-Avraham*, Ma'ayan 2, Nahar 49 (Jerusalem: Makhon Sha'arei Ziv, 1996), 87.
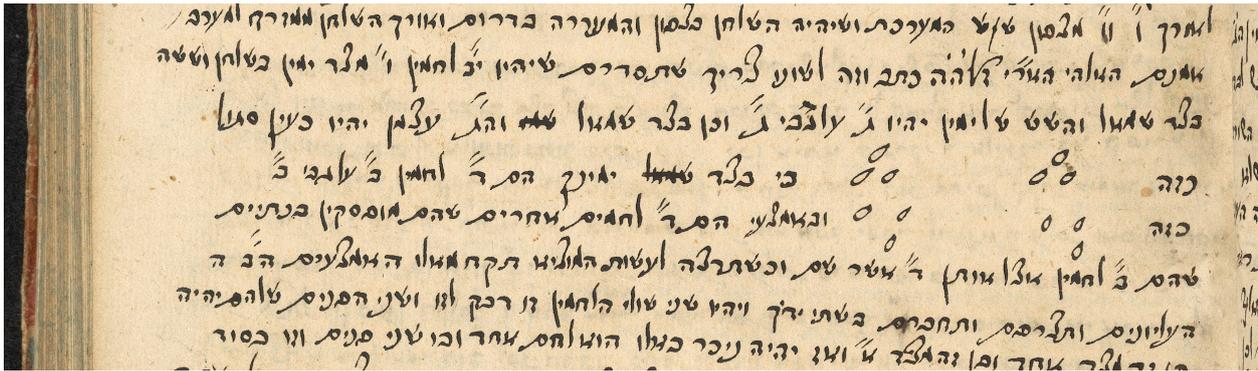
[76] Kuić 2014, 74.

Fig. 13: Detail from Azulai's *Ḥesed le-Avraham*, Sulzbach, completed in 1685. Erlangen-Nürnberg, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Universitätsbibliothek MS 1265, fol. 48ʳ (NLI: F 35864).

Fig. 14: Detail from Azulai, *Ḥesed le-Avraham*. Printed in Sulzbach in 1685, fol. 23ᵛ. From the Collections of the National Library of Israel, public domain.

namely, the ability to interpret visual representations against the background of their knowledge of a particular system of thought.[77] And just as literary competence is acquired through accumulated experience with a variety of texts, so visual competence is conditioned by regular exposure to graphical representations of a particular type. From this perspective, illustrations are a highly effective medium that can offer a greater degree of versatility than textual representations. Nevertheless, the written word is indispensable for conveying the significance of a two-dimensional representation of a four-dimensional experience. The value of visual representation lies in its capacity to encapsulate the spatial and temporal dimensions of such experiences in an abstract form. In contrast, language offers the distinct advantage of providing a more explicit description of both diachronic and synchronic processes. In other words, the visual and textual representations are mutually reinforcing, and in their combination, they are particularly suited to assisting (Lurianic) kabbalists to create a more holistic representation of divine reality.

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[77] Culler 1980; and cf. Kuić 2014, 77.

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