

El Lissitzky's Red Wedge as the Hebrew letter Yud

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The analysis undertaken in this paper sets out with El Lissitzky's 1919 revolutionary poster entitled *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. This artwork, composed of simple geometric figures, in which an acute-angled red triangle splits the form of a white circle, was used by Soviet propaganda to affirm the so-called 'October events'. However, a thorough analysis of the poster, i.e. its sources, inspirations, borrowings and contexts, supports the hypothesis that the principal motif (the wedge) also constitutes a graphic equivalent of a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the letter yud, represented as a small comma or, significantly, an acute-angled triangle. Such a premise yields further consequences with regard to meanings, encompassing aspects related to the Jewish iconic tradition that involve mysticism, magic, and the kabbalah.

KEYWORDS: Jewish Art, Jewish iconography, Russian avant-garde, Constructivism, Suprematism, utopia, Abstractionism, Soviet Revolution, Messianism, Kabbalah, Yiddish, Hassidism

The incision

Lazar Mordukhovich Lisitsky, known as El Lissitzky, is one of the most acclaimed artists of the Russian avantgarde of the early 20th cen-

tury.[1] In 1918, the artist associated himself permanently with the Bolshevik movement, for whom he created *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* in 1919[2] (il. 1).

Examining the formal components, one sees the acute-angled red triangle emerge from the

[1] See e.g.: S. Tumarkin Goodman, *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change. 1890–1990*, New York 1996, pp. 29–33, 40–51, 60–64, 71–76; V. Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946*, Chicago 1997, pp. 9–45; K.-U. Hemken, *El Lissitzky: Revolution und Avantgarde*, Cologne 1990; P. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky 1890–1941*, New York 1987; S. Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, introduction H. Read, trans. H. Aldwinckle, M. Whittall, London 1968. See also: N. Perloff, B. Reed, *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, Los Angeles 2003. For further bibliographical entries see e.g.: https://monoskop.org/El_Lissitzky.

[2] See texts by this author: *Mistyczne narzędzia awangardy rosyjskiej. Przykład El Lissitzky'ego*, [in:] *Polska – Rosja. Sztuka i Historia*, eds. J. Malinowski, I. Gavrash, N. Mizerniuk-Rotkiewicz, Warszawa – Toruń 2013, pp. 87–94; *El Lissitzky, his Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge and their Jewish Inspirations*, [in:] *Russian Émigré Culture: Conservatism or Evolution?*, eds. R. Marti, H. Kea-



Il. 1. El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, [Клином красным бей белых] (Poster? Lithograph) 1919, (47.5 × 57.5 cm)
Source: Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

upper left section of the pictorial field, and rip open the outline of the white circle, suggesting a thrust towards its centre. The triangle dominates over the circle, which in addition is pushed slightly downwards and to the side of the geometric centre, into a kind of a black zone. The artist makes use of specific “forces” and geometric structures, as well as exploits the suggestions of gravity, movement and dynamism, and hence a particular figural narration. Thus, ideological-political significance is assigned to forms and colours, whereby the white passive circle denotes the White Guards, the tsarist rule and the Orthodox church, whereas the red dynamic triangle stands for the Bolsheviks and the Revolution. It is commonly assumed in the literature that the work is an affirmation of the revolution events and the victory of the forces of new order over the “old world”. In Lissitzky’s abstract composition, the straightforward geometric forms acquire a propagandistic import and in this sense exemplify the use of the new visual idiom (abstraction) in current campaigning and political struggle.[3] Nonetheless, the formal and political rationale ascribed to the work does not exhaust its semantic potential and does not confine the interpretations that venture beyond the historiographic limits. A more detailed analysis of Lissitzky’s poster, i.e. its sources, inspirations, borrowings and contexts, supports the hypothesis that the principal motif of the piece, the red wedge, is a graphic equivalent of a fundamental character of the Hebrew alphabet, the letter yud, represented as a small comma [·] or, significantly, an acute-angled triangle.

Naturally, such a premise yields further consequences with regard to meanings, encompassing aspects related to the Jewish tradition – which was Lissitzky’s background, after all – as well as Jewish mysticism, magic and the kabbalah.[4]

Therefore, the sign of the red wedge may be perceived as a motif rooted in a shared and integrally interwoven theoretical substrate, which fuses the notions of the Revolution on the one hand and the concept of Jewish messianism on

the other.[5] Such conjecture requires extensive and substantive explanations, and above all, requires one to supply the relevant facts concerning the oeuvre of that artist.

zor, Ch. Flamm, Cambridge 2013, pp. 89–104; *Czerwonym klinem bij Białych. Żydowskie inspiracje El Lissitzkiego*, “Studia Europaea Gnesnensia” 2011, no. 4, pp. 189–202.

[3] Specifically, this concerns Lissitzky’s collaboration with Kasimir Malevich and the development of the so-called Theory of Suprematism. Lissitzky discussed Suprematism at length in the article entitled *Dos gojwierzajn di Kunst* (Yid. *The Overcoming of Art*) published in “Ringel” 1922, no. 10, pp. 32–34. Published also as: El Lissitzky, *The Victory Over Art*, trans. S.L. Wolitz, [in:] *Tradition and Revolution. The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928*, ed. R. Apter-Gabriel, Jerusalem 1988, p. 232. See also: E. Levinger, *Art and Mathematics in the Thought of El Lissitzky: His Relationship to Suprematism and Constructivism*, “Leonardo” 1989, no. 22(2), pp. 227–236; A. Turowski, *Między sztuką a komuną. Teksty awangardy rosyjskiej 1910–1932*, Kraków 1998; idem, *Żydowski Malewicz [The Jewish Malewicz]*, [in:] *Polak, Żyd, Artysta. Tożsamość a awangarda*, ed. J. Suchan, Łódź 2010, pp. 80–94; T.J. Clark, *God Is Not Cast Down*, [in:] *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*, ed. idem, New Haven – London 1999, pp. 225–297.

[4] It may be noted that between 1916 and 1919 El Lissitzky (together with another Jewish artist, Isachar Rybak) executed a series of sketches and drawings which documented Jewish monuments (synagogues in particular) located along the Dnieper and in Mohyliv in Ukraine. See in: A. Kampf, *Chagal to Kitaj. Jewish Experience in 20th Century Art*, London 1990, pp. 14–53. On the other hand, Alan Birnholz interprets the Suprematist oeuvre of Lissitzky’s in the light of the kabbalah and the prophetic concepts of Hassidism. A.C. Birnholz, *El Lissitzky and the Jewish Tradition*, “Studio International” 1973, no. 186(959), pp. 130–136. See also: A. Kantsedikas, *El Lissitzky: The Jewish Period, 19015–1923*, London 2017.

[5] See e.g.: *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. J. Frankel, New York – Oxford 1991; J. Neusner, *The Messiah in Context*, Philadelphia 1984; L. Kochan, *Jews, Idols and Messiahs. The Challenge from History*, Oxford 1990.

The year in which the poster was created (1919) saw Lissitzky produce a number of other works, including a series of illustrations (and the cover) for a children's book in Yiddish by Mani Leib (Brajiński) entitled *Jingl Cingl Hwat* (*The Mischievous Boy*)[6] (il. 2). The design conceived by Lissitzky relies on a visual play of letters, words and images. On the last page of the text, the artist represented the messianic rooster (as an allusion to himself) walking on the number 10, which is denoted by the letter yud in Hebrew. Underneath, he placed a stylized form of the kabbalistic expression *Ein Sof* (the endless), which is unrelated to the text. The latter ends there, but in a perverse fashion *Ein Sof* implies its continuation or simply refers to the broadly understood messianic aspects. Elucidation of *Ein Sof* must be necessarily relegated to a footnote (to be cited more broadly later), but it should be remembered that in general terms the expression also means "Absolute Fullness" and draws on the kabbalistic concept of world creation through the so-called Withdrawal of the deity itself.[7] Characteristically, that act of creation involves the (indispensable) "split" between the world created and the creative deity. In the kabbalistic tradition, the rift is represented precisely by the form of an incision, cut, puncture, or as any other sign in the shape of acute-angled triangle, or even a comma (the punctuation mark).

[6] Lissitzky won renown largely as the illustrator of around 30 books published in Yiddish and Hebrew. Besides *Jingl Cingl Hvat*, the best known include the novels by Moses Broderson, *Sikes Holim* from 1917 and *Had Gadia* from 1919. See e.g.: R. Apter-Gabriel, *El Lissitzky's Jewish Works*, [in:] *Tradition and Revolution. The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde art, 1912–1928*, ed. idem, pp. 101–124.

[7] See e.g.: R. Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God. The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, New York 1993; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1974, pp. 138–139.

[8] G. Scholem, *Kabała i jej symbolika*, trans. R. Wojnakowski, Kraków 1996, p. 186.

[9] See e.g.: Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Chagall and the Jewish Revival: Center or Periphery?*, [in:] *Tradition and Revolution...*, pp. 71–100.



Il. 2. El Lissitzky, Illustration for the Yiddish book *Jingl Tsingl Khvat*, by Mani Leib Brainsky, Kiev – St. Petersburg 1919. Uzi Agassi Collection, Raanana Source: *Tradition and Revolution. The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928*, ed. R. Apter-Gabriel, Jerusalem 1988, p. 111.

Coming back to the book illustrated by Lissitzky, the arrangement of letters evokes a graphic fragmentation of the phrase, yielding a kind of interruption or wedge, which spreads from bottom to the top. The pattern appears to have been derived from the 13th-century *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzirah*), whose reproductions were available in rabbinical schools and yeshivas at the turn of the 20th century[8] (il. 3). Lissitzky was acquainted with the reproduction, thanks to his teacher, Marc Chagall, who propagated the early kabbalistic iconic tradition among his students.[9]

Yud and the kabbalah

Sefer Yetzirah is also translated as the *Book of Formation* or *Book of the Forming Letter Yud*, whose numerical value is 10 and which is repre-



Il. 3. Fragment of the manuscript *Sefer Yecirah* (Vatican 299)

Source: M. Prokopowicz, *Księga Jecirah. Klucz kabaly*, Warszawa 1994 (in Polish), illustrative insert.

sented in the Hebrew script as an ordinary comma, a small wedge or a short stroke, sometimes slightly rounded.^[10] Importantly, that yud (on a page from the *Yetzirah*) is situated among the verses of fragmented text on the page, although in each verse it is turned upside down, suggesting the act of driving it forcibly in or splicing the page open from the bottom. Thus yud, as a pictorial motif, cuts through and simultaneously “creates the text”, since the Book of *Yetzirah* essentially speaks of the world being created by God by means of letters, which constitute an autonomous entity (more on this aspect below). For its part, the alphabet itself emerged (in the Jewish tradition) from an infinitesimally small point, which subsequently assumed (as script evolved) the form of a wedge and served as a basis to shape further letters. Yud was that very point; the smallest and the most essential, primeval letter of the alphabet; a graphic sign produced by the simplest gesture of touching the surface with a stylus, which commences the act of writing.^[11]

In this interpretation, and in an analogy to the characteristic cut in the final illustration of *Jingl Cingl Hwat*, it may therefore be presumed that the wedge motif in Lissitzky’s 1919 poster



Il. 4. El Lissitzky, Illustration for *Shlomo Hameelekh [King Solomon]* by Chaim Nahman Bialik, Shtilim (Saplings), no. 6–7, October 1917, p. 11, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem
Source: *Tradition and Revolution. The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928*, ed. R. Apter-Gabriel, Jerusalem 1988, p. 179.

is likewise a metaphor of the start of the act of “writing”, in which the letter yud (embodied in the wedge) is that primeval gesture of creation. By virtue of convention, it stands for the Revolution which brings forth a New Beginning.

Before this theme is explored in greater depth, it must be recalled that prior to 1917 Lissitzky had also created a series of cubo-futuristic illustrations for another children’s book: *Shlomo ha-Meleh (King Solomon)* by Haim Nahman Bialik^[12] (il. 4). In one of the images,

[10] M. Prokopowicz, *Księga Jecirah. Klucz kabaly*, Warszawa 1994, p. 19.
[11] M.A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabaly*, trans. K. Pruska, K. Pruski, Warszawa 2006, pp. 277–280.
[12] See in: J. Glatzer Wechsler, *El Lissitzky’s ‘Interchange Stations’: The Letter and the Spirit*, [in:] *The Jew in the Text. Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, eds. L. Nochlin, T. Garb, London 1995, pp. 187–200.

there is a stylized, black-and-white figure of Solomon blowing the shofar, while in the foreground in front of him, one sees a black outline of a sizeable crown with a white, large, and heavily stylized yud in the centre. According to the Hebrew legends derived from the verses of the First Book of Kings (6:7), God ordered Solomon to build the Temple, but at the same time forbade him from using any metal tools.[13] However, the instrument which was supposed to help Solomon to cut and work stone was a magical ring (shamir) with the engraved inscription gezi (gimel, zayin, yud). In other tales, Salomon was in possession of an unspoken name, and the knowledge of the name enabled him to cut stones and erect the temple as a result. One of those unspoken and at the same most complex Divine Names is Tetragrammaton, which begins with none other than yud.[14] Thus, legends put faith in the magical powers of yud, as well as other letter-based signs.

The *Sefer Zohar*, or the *Book of Radiancy*,^[15] contains a tale in which the letters of the al-

phabet stood one by one before God, pleading to start the act of creation from them in particular. The letter yud spoke with these words: “[...]It would be good to create the world by me, for Your Holy name begins with me [yud, he, waw, he]”, to which God responded: “It is sufficient that you are inscribed in My Name, in Me, and all of your aspirations are to Me, and you should not be uprooted from it all.”^[16] As Mariusz Prokopowicz observes in his commentary to the *Sefer Yetzirah* “the letter *yud* is the beginning of the unfolding of Reality, while the remaining letters of the name (HWH) are embedded into that primeval sign and essentially cannot be divided from one another.”^[17] Yud is not only a measure for other letters but also a fundamental “image” of action and propagation of the mysterious power of the deity, and it is from it (yud) that “the pre-forms of all subsequent letters are born.”^[18]

In numerous places in the *Zohar*, the “rupture” [of God] from Nothingness into Being tends to be presented as a symbol of the primeval point, also in the mathematical sense.^[19] For Moses ben Shem Tov de León, a 13th-century Spanish kabbalist, this additionally includes the symbolism of a point as the centre of a circle where the primeval point – “shining forth from nothingness” – is a mystical core around with the processes of theogony and cosmogony concentrate. That point, in itself dimensionless and standing between Nothingness and Being, represent the “very onset of Being”. Furthermore, many other kabbalists who adopted geometric symbolism define the Divine Wisdom (primeval Will) precisely as the “pre-point” of all things which, though it “is not” in the actual sense, constitutes the source of all being.^[20] “From that most hidden place”, as Gershom Scholem writes, “from which *Ein-Sof* begins to descend, [towards creation], there emanates the as-yet-unidentifiable subtle light concealed in that hidden place like the tip of the needle.”^[21] As can be seen, numerous kabbalistic writings recognize that primeval point as the very source from which all divinity and all blessings spring.^[22]

[13] After: T. Schrire, *Hebrew Amulets. Their Decipherment and Interpretation*, London 1966, pp. 77, 93.

[14] Ibidem, p. 93. See also: B. Black Koltuv, *Amulets, Talismans, Magical Jewelry. A Way to the Unseen, Ever-Present, Almighty God*, Berwick, ME 2005, pp. 114, 127–129.

[15] See: I. Kania, *Opowieści Zoharu. O Kabale i Zoharze*, Kraków 2005, pp. 5–12.

[16] After: ibidem, p. 9.

[17] M. Prokopowicz, op. cit., p. 17.

[18] After: G. Scholem, *Judaizm. Parę głównych pojęć*, trans. J. Zychowicz, foreword by M. Galas, Kraków 1991, p. 65; G. Scholem, *O mistycznej postaci bóstwa. Z badań nad podstawowymi pojęciami kabaly*, trans. A.K. Haas, Warszawa 2010, pp. 45–48.

[19] G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm żydowski i jego główne kierunki*, trans. I. Kania, Warszawa 1997, p. 272.

[20] Idem, *Judaizm...*, p. 98.

[21] Ibidem, p. 65; G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm...*, p. 272.

[22] G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm...*, p. 274; idem, *Kabala i jej...*, p. 115.

Rachel Elior notes that in the *Sefer Yetzirah* the process of creation is explicitly linked to the letters of the Hebrew language. The transition from the “abstract, creative divine power to the concrete reality of enduring creation sustained by ‘divine breath’ is effected through letters and ciphers, the source of both divine creativity and human perception.”[23] Therefore, Elior continues, the Jewish tradition approached the Hebrew language in a way that is special, in all of its aspects; from single letters and their combinations, vowel diacritics and cantillation marks, to the shape of letters and their pronunciations, while the shift from abstraction to concreteness and back again takes place through language. Hebrew letters are perceived as a physical manifestation of the divine utterance, a creative force which constantly makes and sustains the universe. That demiurgic power of languages, which guides the entire existence from chaos into created being, remains an enduring element in numerous mystical doctrines and is linked to the description of creation (in ‘Genesis’), where the divine utterance and earthly existence are identified.[24]

Cuneiform writing

In general, for the kabbalists (and the biblical peoples of the Middle East), script possessed magical properties, while the essential signs from which the alphabet emerged was yud, the notional wedge that gave rise to the alphabet, or cuneiform writing (il. 5). This is one of the earliest variants of script, developed by the Sumerians ca. 3500 BCE.[25] Its name (from the Latin *cuneus*, but cf. Slavic *klin*, and the English *wedge*) derives from the shape of signs impressed on clay tablets using a piece of reed, bone or stylus with a triangular shape, although the earliest script forms (from Sumer and Elam) consist of sequences of dots. Throughout the history of cuneiform writing, the styluses and their tips were cut using a range of techniques, but the basic gesture here is touching, or rather furrowing or cutting in the surface of the material. The sets of vertical, horizontal and oblique incisions made up



Il. 5. Cuneiform writing. Umma, Sumer, modern Iraq 5th year of King Amar-sin, ca 2041 BCE Ur III Period (2112–2004 BCE) 1913.14.0550
Source: <https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/collections/notable-collections/profiles/mesopotamian-tablet.html>.

the entire words, transforming over time into syllabic script. In the Middle East, cuneiform writing was universally adopted and propagated by the Acadians, who adapted Sumerian script to the Semitic language they spoke. Cuneiform writing, adapted subsequently by the Assyrians, was modified when around the 7th century BCE they embraced the Old Hebrew script, which in the centuries that followed was subject to Greek influences. Ultimately, in the 2nd century in Judaea, it assumed the form that resembled its contemporary one. It is worth noting that the Hebrew alphabet today, in fact, since the Talmudic era, is referred to as *Ktav Ashuri*,[26] meaning “Assyrian script”, while throughout the centuries yud (as a small comma) has invariably echoed the original sign of the wedge.[27]

[23] R. Elior, *Mistyczne źródła chasydyzmu*, trans. M. Tomal, Kraków –Budapest 2009, p. 60.

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] See e.g.: A. Mierzejewski, *Tajemnice glinianych tabliczek*, Warszawa 1981; *idem*, *Sztuka starożytnego Wschodu*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1981; Ch.B.F. Walker, *Pismo klinowe*, trans. A. Reiche, Warszawa 1998.

[26] See also: *Żydzi w Polsce. Dzieje i kultura. Leksykon*, eds. J. Tomaszewski, A. Żbikowski, entry: *Hebrew „iwrit”* (elaboration R. Gromadzka), Warszawa 2001, pp. 195–204.

[27] Another, similar reminiscence of that script is ‘vav’, a simple, vertical stroke.

It may also be underlined that the motif of the wedge functioned since antiquity (especially in Babylonian art) as a characteristic symbol or attribute, whereas the dictionary of Mesopotamian mythology states in the entry for “wedge” that it is both a fundamental element of writing and the writing tool, the stylus.[28]

Given the above symbolism and iconography, one cannot overlook the form of the modern Jewish yads, or reading pointers. The word yad (Hebr. hand) is derived from yud and denotes not so much a writing but a reading instrument.[29] Yads are usually short rods, several centimetres long (but may be even 40 centimetres long), whose tip is shaped like the index finger, to make it easier for the reader to trace the verses of the text. Certain sources claim that as early as antiquity they were sometimes used as weapons to defend synagogues, and therefore they epitomize the potential or force, rooted in the original concept of the wedge, to pierce, puncture, or cause other harm.

However, coming back to the concept of cuneiform script, the physical contact between the sharp stylus and the soft clay tablet cuts through its structure and “enlivens” the matter. Clay (Hebr. *cha dam*; aleph, dalet, mem) is the material (usually reddish) from which according to the Bible the human was moulded, the Primordial Adam (Adam Kadmon). The Hebrew stem of the word Adam (aleph, dalet, mem) refers not only to the words soil, earth, and human, but also to blood and, which is

highly eloquent with respect to the Revolution, to the colour red.[30] Furthermore, in Old Hebrew, the word meaning “to write” (write down) is identical with the word open and unroll (Hebr. *pa'atah*), which numerous researchers associate with the magical actions that cannot do without the faith in the power of letters and their combinations.[31]

Yud is therefore the basic, primordial and form-giving matrix of all subsequent letters; it is their integral component, while according to the *Zohar* and the *Sefer Yetzirah*, Adam Kadmon was created not only from clay but also through a configuration of letters. “Letter” in Hebrew is “ot” (pl. *otiot*), which is identical to the notion of “sign” but also displays an evident connotation with the word “creation.”[32] The creational potency of the letters of the alphabet, as already noted, is most extensively endorsed in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar*, according to which they are the building blocks of the world.

In his numerous texts, lectures, and other articulations, Lissitzky also believes in what is not so much the creational but constructive power of letters, their parts or elements; as the artist wrote, “the letter is an element composed of elements.”[33] Letters, modules, signs and their pictorial-semantic properties are explored and examined by the artist on many occasions, also in terms of essential and universal communication, i.e. the rudiment of the catchwords “revolution” and “messianism” in the form of the red wedge. The work, as a lucid metaphor of piercing through to (and forming) a new reality may therefore be situated in the above context of yud as the basic and primeval sign of creation (through breach). In this sense, that yud-wedge may be considered a messianic instrument of cosmic (or cosmogonic) upheaval, as a result of which the world would henceforth be ordered according to new rules. Yud, the primeval letter that emerged from an infinitesimally small point, “writes down” or literally creates the world anew.

Linguistic magic

Such an interpretive framework inevitably involves the magical context, particularly the

[28] See: J. Black, A. Green, *Slownik mitologii Mezopotamii*, trans. A. Reiche, Warszawa 1998, entry: *klin*, p. 96.

[29] A. Eder, *The Star of David. An Ancient Symbol of Integration*, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 60–61.

[30] See: E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, Jerusalem 1987, p. 7.

[31] After: B. Black Koltuv, op. cit., pp. 31–32.

[32] Ibidem, p. 61.

[33] After: J.G. Wechsler, *El Lissitzky's Interchange Stations: The Spirit and the Letter*, [in:] *The Jew in the Text. Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, eds. L. Nochlin, T. Garb, London 1995, p. 194, note 30.

linguistic magic of script and letters. It is directly rooted in antiquity, more specifically in the Babylonian culture, and it is often referred to as the Hekhalot literature (literature of Mystical Palaces).[34] It includes such mystic Jewish books as the *Sefer ha-Yashar* (known also as the *Sefer ha-Malbush*), *Harba de-Moshe*, *Sefer ha-Razim* (in its various versions) and above all the *Sefer Raziel*, the most popular book of Jewish mysticism and magic. The tradition relies on the faith in the power of magical formulas, which encompass divine names, the names of angels and demons, and the *nomina barbara*, or formulas without semantic meaning, which are nevertheless accompanied by the belief in their apotropaic potency or other supernatural properties.[35]

In this context, Maureen Bloom underlines that since antiquity people have expressed their aspirations and sought to avert misfortune through script, i.e. spells and magical words written e.g. on scrolls, bowls, amulets made of parchment, clay, fabric or metal, which were given various geometrical forms among which acute-angled triangle predominated.[36] These artefacts are a practical equivalent of texts, all of which are normative in nature and provide material evidence of magical practices in Jewish culture.[37] In particular, Jewish religious literature and poetry, widely copied and distributed in the 19th and at the turn of the 20th century, tends to be defined as mystical as it contained numerous supernatural themes, mysterious rituals, names, hymns of angelic glory and invocations. In particular, the concept of angelic and demonic names as “maximum concentrations of potency” represents a link between the real of ideas (originally construed in the categories of magic) with mystical speculation in the proper sense of the word.[38]

It may be noted that to exorcise demons, rabbis would often use the general formula: “Be split, be accursed, broken, and banned...”[39] The invocation should be related to the eloquent slogan in Lissitzky’s poster, namely “beat the whites”, as a suggestion of a spell whose power is contained both in the “imperative formula” and

in the geometrical form of the triangle and the circle. In general, as Bloom notes, the principal notion of magical spells (linguistic magic) and their intention stems from the conviction that the disorder caused by demons and evil forces can be “reversed” by the spell, thus restoring the order.[40] Such a conviction, it seems, also informs the works by Lissitzky, since it suggests the return of (utopian/messianic) harmony through intervention into the so-called “evil” pre-revolutionary forces. Moreover, Lissitzky’s red wedge strikes into the enemy (which by default is presumed to be evil), while the aggressive intention of “beat” or even “crush” the whites is amplified by the iconic fragmentation of the white circle.

The very word “белых (the whites)” was banished to the bottom right corner, thus validating the original semantic idea of the entire

[34] See e.g.: D. Sperber, *Magic and Folklore in Rabbinic Literature*, Tel Aviv 1994.

[35] According to Gershom Scholem, even the Torah was frequently used for magical purposes, as one invoked the divine names it provided or magical names derived from the combinations of letters. That, Scholem underlines, was but a step away from an even more radical view that the Torah not only consists of the names of God, but in fact constitutes one great name of God. As Scholem further emphasizes, this is not no longer a magical but a purely mystical notion. G. Scholem, *Kabala i jej...*, pp. 48–49.

[36] M. Bloom, *Zydowski mistycyzm a magia*, trans. P. Sajdek, Kraków 2011, pp. 180–181, 221, 274.

[37] See also: I. Gafni, *Babylonian Rabbinic Culture*, [in:] *Cultures of the Jews. A New History*, ed. D. Biale, New York 2002, pp. 223–265; S. Sabar, *Childbirth and Magic: Jewish Folklore and Material Culture*, [in:] *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. D. Biale, pp. 671–722; J. Trahtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition. A Study in Folk Religion*, Philadelphia 1961.

[38] See also: G. Scholem, *Kabala i jej...*, pp. 47, 190.

[39] After: M. Bloom, op. cit., p. 94. See also: F. Vukosavović, *Angels and Demons. Jewish Magic Through the Ages*, Jerusalem 2010, pp. 60, 61, 154.

[40] M. Bloom, op. cit., p. 267.

motif: the “reduction” of the enemy. The distinct “клином (with the wedge)” emerging from the upper left edge is an extension of the sharp head of the triangle, repeating the dynamism of its direction on a diagonal. Hence, on the iconic and linguistic plane, Lissitzky evinces a conviction that the poster will have its effect in the struggle against the demons of evil (all evil), while the essential force in that “action” is, first and foremost, the shape of the acute-angled triangle. In this context, one should perhaps note other magical formulas inscribed in that geometrical figure which functioned in the Jewish tradition.

Talmudic literature offers numerous instances of various names used in spells, especially when one sought to drive evil forces away or banish and destroy demons.[41] Written down, the spell is usually given the shape of the letter yud, a triangle with the tip pointing down and containing the name of the demon, reduced in the successive verses to one letter as a pterygoma.[42] The sympathetic magic of such a spell causes the power of the demon to dwindle gradually, i.e. through the purposeful and conscious visual reduction of the form, shape and dimensions of the word which makes up their name. For instance, the name of shabriri, the demon of blindness, was written in the following manner: shabriri, briri, riri, iri, ri, i, placing each, shortened version of the name underneath to form a triangle ending with the letter yud[43] (il. 6). This was accompanied by the faith in diminish-



Il. 6. The Shabriri motive

See: Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906, <http://dzb4hhdjix-s9hu.cloudfront.net/JC1CC83Z.jpg>; <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/359-abracadabra>.



Il. 7. Triangular pterygomas against scorpions. Ink on paper, Tunis, 1929 (21.4 × 19.5 cm). William L. Gross Family Collection (GFC 027.011.289)

Source: F. Vukosavović, *Angels and Demons. Jewish Magic Through the Ages*, Jerusalem 2010, p. 68.

ing its power and thereby erasing, annihilating the demon. As Schrire notes, the progressive reduction of a single word in the inscription weakened the demon to the point where it was ultimately obliterated.[44]

There are many such “amuletic” formulas, an interesting example of which is an amulet against scorpions, dated to 1929 (il. 7). At the bottom edge of a parchment page, one placed schematic and fairly “naive”, folk-like drawings of two scorpions. Above them, there are three typical pterygomas, formed through the iteration of the same expression, each of which

[41] T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 60–61; M. Bloom, op. cit., pp. 203–204, 241–242, 245. See also: P. Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifested God: Some Major Themes In Early Jewish Mysticism*, Albany 1992; R.M. Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations and Revelations in Early Jewish mysticism*, Cambridge, MA 1998; M.D. Swartz, *Magical Piety in Ancient and Medieval Judaism*, [in:] *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, eds. M. Meyer, P. Mirecki, Leiden 1995, pp. 167–183.

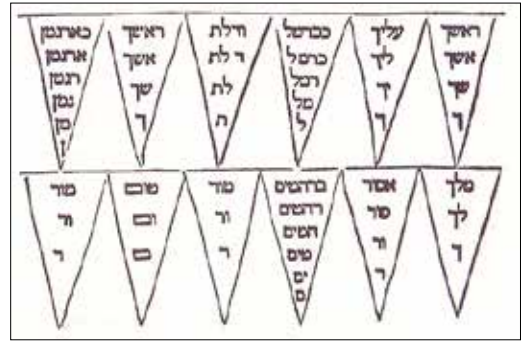
[42] See: B. Black Koltuv, op. cit., p. 105.

[43] Ibidem, p. 136.

[44] T. Schrire, op. cit., p. 60. See also: M. Bloom, op. cit., pp. 203–204.

is reduced by one letter in descending order. Such an arrangement produces an acute-angled triangle with its tip directed downwards. The scorpion stings, represented next to the triangles, inescapably bring the shape of yud to mind.[45] Other typical formulas arrayed into a triangle (or triangles) is e.g. abracadabra,[46] and the name *Argaman*, which originates from the aforementioned popular volume of mysticism and magic, the *Sefer Raziel* (the Book of Mysteries)[47] (il. 8).

This is the oldest surviving book concerned with the practice of making amulets, but it also contains a collection of angelic names, “secret” recipes, spells, incantations and magical formulas. The formula Argaman (Hebr. lit. purple) found on one of the pages was composed of the first letters of angelic names: Uriel, Rafael, Gabriel, Michael and Nuriel (aleph, resh, gimel, nun). The mystical meaning of the word is based in the interpretation of a fragment in the Song of Songs 7:6-7 (“king held captive in the purple”, meaning “God is like Argaman”). The allusion to the angels owes to the belief in their intercession, which is why their names are encountered on various amulets.[48] In the *Sefer Raziel*, the formula (Argaman) was enclosed in an outline of wedges pointing downwards, although in that case the intention was not to diminish their power but to exploit the triangle as a “deterrent” shape because, as Schrire argues, any inscription rendered in a geometric form possessed magical properties.[49] Executed using a ruler, the distinct outline in the form of acute-angled triangles that envelop individual letters enhances and intensifies the expression of the entire pattern on the page. In the early 20th century, reprints of the *Sefer Raziel* were extremely popular among both religious and secular Jews, including the students of Marc Chagall, with whom Lissitzky collaborated. The above magical formulas, phrases and incantations may therefore have been known to Lissitzky himself; furthermore, one cannot forget the strictly religious disposition of his mother,[50] the erudite education his father had received, or the artist’s own knowledge of the



Il. 8. The “Argaman” formula depicted in *Sefer Raziel* 40b

Source: T. Schrire, *Hebrew Amulets. Their Decipherment and Interpretation*, London 1966, p. 61.

traditional Yiddish legends for which he created illustrations. Consequently, Jewish pictorial sources, especially the manuscripts El Lissitzky had been exposed to since childhood may have been a major interpretive impulse behind the intrinsic formula of the *Red Wedge*.

The double yud

The works created by Lissitzky in 1919 also include a series of watercolours for the song-legend *Had Gadia*, which is traditionally attached to the last fragment of the Haggadah, the text read during the Passover, at a time of heightened expectation of the Messiah.[51] Again, on the last page the artist included a characteristic motif of the double yud, i.e. two identical, spike-like signs which, positioned next to each other, overlap to some extent (il. 9). The motif uses a singular, cubo-futuristic font, which is

[45] F. Vukosavović, op. cit., p. 68.

[46] (meaning: “the Lord created as he spoke”).

See e.g.: T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 59–64.

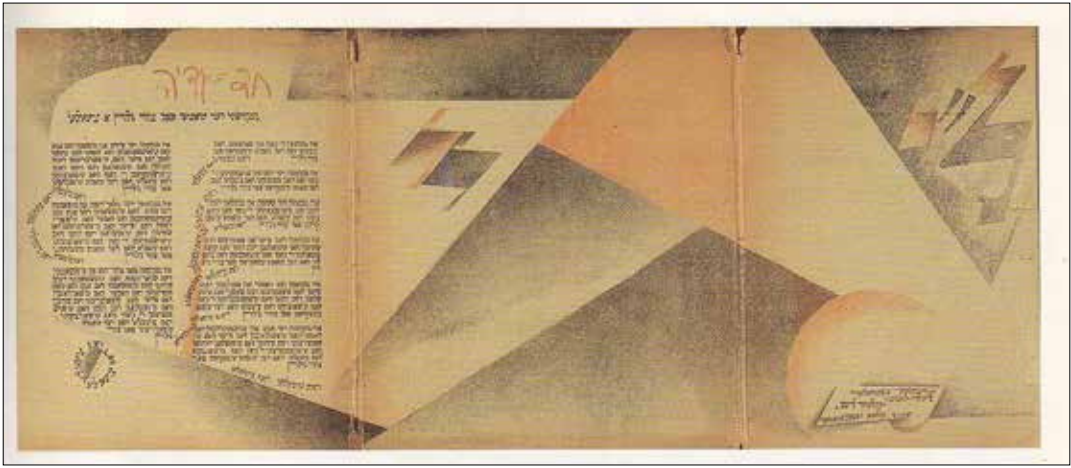
[47] See e.g.: *Sefer Raziel Hamelech: The Book of the Angel Raziel*, ed. S. Savedow, Newburyport, MA 2000; F. Vukosavović, op. cit., p. 20; B. Black Koltuv, op. cit., p. 38.

[48] B. Black Koltuv, op. cit., pp. 76, 105; T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 61–62, 104.

[49] T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 59, 61.

[50] S. Lissitzky-Küppers, op. cit., pp. 20–21.

[51] See: H. Friedberg, *Lissitzky’s Had Gadia*, “Jewish Art” 1986–87, no. 12–13, pp. 292–303.



Il. 9. El Lissitzky, Dustjacket for *Had Gadya* (outside), 1991, color lithograph. Private collection
 Source: *Tradition and Revolution. The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912–1928*, ed. R. Apter-Gabriel, Jerusalem 1988, fig. 75.

markedly larger than the remaining verses. This double yud draws, of course, on the traditional interpretation of the “divine name”, one of the most popular ways to indicate God’s “presence”, i.e. as a digrammaton.[52] Moreover, it has been previously noted that the Hebrew yud is ascribed (and denotes) the numerical value of 10, but in the full name of the letter yud (/j/) is made up of two further letters, vav (/u/) and dalet (/d/), which also amount to 10, since vav = 6 and dalet = 4. Hence the very form of yud often comprises 2 yuds, where one symbolizes the human and the other the divine part. Given that yud, as the minutest point and the symbol of beginning, is the first act of the emanation of God, it cannot simultaneously be the symbol of his creation; the “creation” itself is not God, and

therefore the two (partly superimposed) yuds epitomize “integrity”, the indivisibility of the deity and its work. Naturally, the Star of David, combining two interwoven triangles, is a perfect example of such a symbolism.[53] Since that heretic “severability” has been mentioned, it may be worthwhile to refer to yet another piece by Lissitzky which draws on the same theme, i.e. the cover to the periodical *Apikojres* (il. 10). In it, a large, dark, acute-angled triangle smashes into the circular symbol of the globe, separating the figure of a religious Jew from his synagogue. Another massive triangular spike points in the opposite direction, but within its outline there is a secular procession of people, not unlike the May Day march, who walk “upwards”, in the direction indicated by the tip of the triangle. Thus, both figures pass each other by (semantically and graphically), evoking separation, or unbelief in the unity of the Creator and his creation, symbolized by the Magen David, or else undermining faith in the religiously sanctioned creational powers. Moreover, virtually identical triangles – like two large intersecting yuds – may be seen in Lissitzky’s *Shifs Karta* [*Ship Ticket*] from 1922 (il. 11). There, the triangles make up a skewed Star of David, as a motif composed of two, slightly deformed

[52] T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 95–96. Schrire notes that two types of such amulets are particularly popular in the Jewish tradition, both consisting of two triangles within a circle. The first arrangement produces the Star of David in a circle, while in the second a rhombus shape (also in a circle) is obtained by connecting the bases of the two triangles, T. Schrire, op. cit., pp. 62–63.

[53] A. Eder, op. cit., p. 45; M. Idel, *Kabala. Nowe perspektywy*, trans. M. Krawczyk, Kraków 2006, pp. 124–125.



Il. 10. El Lissitzky, A cover of “Apikojres” (Moscow: Association of Militant Atheists, May 1931, no. 3) (30.5 × 21.6 cm), YIVI Institute for Jewish Research, New York. 1995 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
Source: *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change 1890–1990*, ed. S. Tumarkin Goodman, Munich – New York 1996, p. 15.



Il. 11. El Lissitzky’s “Shifs Carta”. An illustration for Ilya Ehrenburg, *Shest’ poviestei o legkikh kotsakh* [*Six Stories with Easy Endings*], Moscow – Berlin 1922. Photomontage with watercolour and drawing
Source: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

figures, thanks to which the entire composition yields a fairly dynamic structure. It should be stressed once again that the intersecting triangles of the Magen David essentially rely on the same principles of triangles which vitiate evil and concentrate the protective power of the amulet.^[54] In short, the formula of the Star of David is one of the most popular amulets in Jewish mysticism, and its intrinsic nature is also elucidated in the aforementioned *Sefer Raziel*. According to the legends, the motif was used by Moses, whom the six-pointed star served as a prayer amulet, as well as by David, as the emblem of his royal house;^[55] Moses, after all, is said to have traced his lineage to David.

Bearing in mind the amuletic-messianic facet of the Star of David, *Shifs Karta* appears to draw on that very context. Lissitzky created the collage in 1921–1922 Berlin while he was collaborating with Ilya Ehrenburg, and represents one of the six illustrations for his *Shest’ poviestei o legkikh kotsakh* (*Six Stories with Easy Endings*).^[56] The composition is a symbolic design

of a ticket, but it does not refer literally to the text and constitutes Lissitzky’s metaphorical interpretation of its substance.^[57] It shows the sea route from Hamburg and New York, the bows of a ship sailing to America, the American flag as well as a section of the face of a clock and the imprint of a hand with the letters peh and nun, all enclosed within the outline of the Star of

[54] After: B. Black Koltuv, op. cit., p. 107.

[55] Ibidem, p. 108.

[56] However, its distribution was forbidden in the USSR by the Glavlit (General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press). I. Ehrenburg, *Shest’ poviestei o legkikhkotsakh* [*Six Stories with Easy Endings*], Moscow – Berlin 1922. See also: G. Wechsler, op. cit., pp. 187–200; K. Wagner, *Rooms against Forgetting – Architecture as Medium of Remembrance*, [in:] *Die verborgene Spur. Jüdische Wegedurch die Moderne: The Hidden Trace. Jewish Path through Modernity*, catalogue, curator and editor: M.R. Deppner, Osnabrück 2008, pp. 66–68; R. Apter-Gabriel, op. cit., p. 111.

[57] See also: S. Lissitzky-Küppers, op. cit., p. 386.

David.[58] The main protagonist of the work is an elderly religious man, Hirsch Igenson, a watchmaker from Berdyczów (Berdychiv) in Ukraine, whose son had emigrated to the United States and had mostly forgotten his native language. However, there is a revolution in Russia and the popular sentiment culminates in pogroms, so in one of the letters the son writes to his father that the long awaited, joyful time is near, as soon as the *Shifs-Karta* arrives[59]: “Do wait a while. Things should be well. The *Shifs Karta* will be delivered to you soon [or: reaches you].”[60] The father does not understand the curious phrase “Shifs-Karta” and finds it to be a token (sign) of the coming of the Messiah, or a “promise of salvation”. In the meantime (Ehrenburg’s story goes further), the communists take over the local synagogue and turn it into a clubhouse. As a result, when the counter-revolutionaries come just after the Tisha B’Av, a pogrom ensues. Hirsch, relying on the rabbinical interpretations, links those catastrophic facts with the promise of Messiah’s coming (Shifs-Karta), and believes he recognized him in an officer approaching on a horse. He calls out “Shifs-Karta” to him, after

[58] I. Dukhan, *El Lissitzky– Jewish as Universal: From Jewish Style to Pangeometry*, “Ars Judaica” 2007, no. 3, p. 66.

[59] *The Hidden Trace*, 66: (“soon a joyous event will take place, for he is sending his father a ‘Shifs-Karta’, a passage on a ship to America”).

[60] I. Dukhan, op. cit., p. 66, note 46.

[61] Ibidem, p. 66. See also: J. Bowlt, *Manipulating Metaphors: El Lissitzky and the Crafted Hand*, [in:] *Situating El Lissitzky*. Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow, eds. N. Perloff, B. Reed, pp. 129–153.

[62] I. Dukhan, op. cit., p. 66.

[63] See e.g.: J. Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and Russian Jews, 1862–1917*, Cambridge 1981; B. Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2002.

[64] Y. Slezkine, *Wiek Żydów*, trans. S. Kowalski, Warszawa 2006, p. 169.

[65] Cited after: S. Lissitzky-Küppers, op. cit., p. 335.

[66] Cited after: S. Lissitzky-Küppers, op. cit., p. 325.

which he is shot. That naive faith in redemption through a ticket, as Igor Dukhan underlines in his analysis of Lissitzky’s works, feeds on the promise of the coming of the Messiah.[61] In an iconic interpretation of Ehrenburg’s piece, the *Shifs-Karta* is therefore nothing but an element endowed with the properties of an amulet (composed of two yuds). After all, Hirsch Idelson does not understand that it is a ticket for a sea voyage; the idea does not even cross his mind, but he does believe in its power. Here, Lissitzky included two juxtaposed yuds and, as Dukhan claims, it was his last work to demonstrate such evident Jewish overtones.[62]

It should be stressed that the ideas of the revolution had been quite directly derived from Jewish Messianism construed as a faith in imminent redemption, class equality and universal justice, as well as in the vanquishing of time and the introduction of a (utopian) permanent ideal state.[63] Marxism (especially in its Menshevik variety) became attractive because it similarly envisaged a world of equality and brotherhood that young Jews wanted to join, not to mention that it seemed to admit the Jewish masses among the “saviours and the saved”. [64] Lissitzky himself genuinely hoped that the young generation would fully embrace the agenda of the Revolution: “The intellectuals, the highly-educated, were expecting the ‘new era’ to arrive in the shape of a Messiah, with aureole and white robes, with manicured hands, mounted on a white horse. But in reality the new era came in the shape of the Russian Ivan [...] with tattered and dirty clothes, barefoot [...] only the youngest generation recognized this [...]” [65] Elsewhere, the artist wrote: “In 1918 in Moscow, I experienced an epiphany in which I saw the world divided in half. The illumination was torn by time that divided the past from the future like a wedge. My efforts would henceforth focus on driving the wedge even deeper. We must decide whether we belong to the reality of yesterday, or the reality of tomorrow. There can be no middle way here.” [66]

It would therefore appear that the complex relationships between Jewish tradition and

the revolutionary ideology, actively exploited, yielded the foundations on which El Lissitzky based his notions of the role of art. Consequently, *The Red Wedge* is not only legible in the light of the Russian avantgarde and Malevich's Suprematism but can also be an explicit metaphor of cosmogonic "transgression" and utopian belief in the improvement of the world. Here, the new constructivist aspirations of the technologically minded modernism intertwines with the Chasidic (messianic) sources of the old pictorial traditions of the religious Jewry. On the one hand, the piece appears to manifest the despair of loss of faith and doubt in the role of the creator, but on the other, somewhat surreptitiously and subliminally, it hands one a different key to interpretation, precisely in the realm of the mystical, kabbalistic aura. The acute-angled triangle is a vivid, kabbalistic and cosmogonic metaphor of the world being created by breaking or cutting, which left the primeval trace in the shape of yud. Like the fundamental, archaic sign of cuneiform writing, yud is not only the very first link of all graphic communication, but also constitutes a motif whose capacity as a vehicle of meaning is tremendous, enabling interpretations and explanations that fuse the semantic domains of Judaism and revolution simultaneously. Moreover, Lissitzky as well as many other artists born to traditional Jewish families, found modern art (constructivism) to be more than just an instrument of emancipation and a way to partake in a new secular culture without the fetters of the religious, conservative environment. The Jewish tradition was often an important, though hidden, component of artistic inspirations and worldviews. It provided a vital ingredient in the ostensibly secular creative concepts, and *The Red Wedge* is one of the most eloquent examples.

Conclusions

Lazar Mordukhovich Lisitsky, known as El Lissitzky, is one of the most acclaimed artists of the early 20th-century Russian avantgarde. In 1918, he became permanently involved with the Bolshevik movement, for which he created

the poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* in 1919.

The work, composed of simple geometrical figures, in which a red acute-angled red triangle smashed into a white circle, was used for the purposes of Soviet propaganda to affirm the October events. However, a detailed analysis of the poster, i.e. its sources, inspirations, borrowings and contexts makes it possible to presume that the principal motif (the wedge) is a graphical equivalent with the basic glyph in the Hebrew alphabet, the letter yud, represented as a small comma or, significantly enough, an acute-angled triangle. Like the basic, archaic sign in cuneiform writing, yud is not only the first link of all communication in the graphical sense, but it is also very capacious in terms of meaning, and therefore enables interpretation and elucidation in the light of semantic elements in the Judaic-revolutionary domain. It is thus a pictorial, kabbalistic metaphor of creation of the world through an act of "breaking" or "cutting".

Consequently, this seemingly abstract, geometrical and non-representational piece become an incredibly eloquent declaration of (symbolic) destruction of the "old order", where the very act (of breaking) is perceived in absolutist, total categories, even as a cosmogonic event. In this sense, the *yud-wedge* may be considered a messianic instrument of a cosmogonic upheaval that established a new order of the world. As the primordial letter which had emerged from an infinitesimally small point, "writes down" or literally creates the world anew, it smashes the old vessel and breaks the door leading into the new times.

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