

PARASHAS BEREISHIS

Wholeness Is Within

The Hebrew alphabet is a rather feisty collection of letters. Every once in a while, we find these letters vying with each other for prime position in one verse or another. In fact, the very first verse of the Torah was the occasion for one such heated dispute.

The first word in the Torah is *bereishith*, which begins with the letter *bet*, the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The Midrash relates that the *aleph*, the first letter in the alphabet, immediately protested to Hashem. "Shouldn't I be the first letter in the Torah?" said the *aleph*. "Wouldn't it be more fitting for the Torah to begin with me?"

"I have decided to begin the Torah with the bet," Hashem replied, "but do not be distressed. I have chosen you to be the first letter in the Ten Commandments."

What is the point of this contentiousness? What difference does it make if the first letter is an aleph or a bet or even a gimmel?

The commentators point out that the Midrash is obviously alluding to an underlying mystical issue implicit in the choice of letters. Unlike the letters in other alphabets, the Hebrew letters are more than arbitrary marks than indicate a particular vocal sound. Their shape and numerical value hold deep divine secrets.

Let us now consider the numerical values of the aleph and the bet. The numerical value of the aleph in its most basic form is one, and thus it represents the concept of unity. The numerical value of the bet, however, is two, representing ambivalence and duality.

By opening the creation story with the letter bet, the Torah is telling us that there were actually two disparate creations, the creation of the spiritual heavens in which the presence of the Almighty is manifest and the creation of a material world in which His presence is often obscured.

But why must it be this way? the aleph protested. Why can't every part of creation, the spiritual and the physical, reflect the presence of the Almighty? Why couldn't the Torah start with the aleph, the symbol of ultimate unity in the world?

Not so, replied Hashem. Unity in this world can only derive from faith. Only when people have faith can they rise above their environment and see the presence of the almighty everywhere. Therefore, the aleph would be the first letter in the First Commandment, the article of faith.

A very successful businessman visited a great sage who lived on a remote mountaintop.

“I want to come live here with you,” said the businessman. “I am not satisfied with the life I have been leading.”

“Indeed?” said the sage. “And what do you expect to find here with me?”

“I feel my life is incomplete. I have built a large and successful company. I have many properties, lots of money, power and honors. I struggled for these things very hard, but now that I have achieved them, I feel emptiness inside. I expect to find wholeness here.”

“Wholeness comes from within,” said the sage. “If you have faith, you will find wholeness even in your place of business.”

In our own lives, we can realistically aspire to this wonderful ideal. The Torah gives us the tools to reach high spiritual levels even as we enjoy the material rewards of our businesses and professions. During the Festival of Sukkoth, we lived in a small island of the divine. We experienced an intense spiritual encounter with the Almighty, and we came away with our spiritual batteries recharged. But now, as we step out of our *sukkah* booths and back into the mundane world, we cannot let those batteries run down. Those moments of transcendent inspiration can easily fade away. But if we reinforce the strong faith engendered in our hearts by the High Holidays and the Festival, we can infuse our daily lives with spirituality and truly find the wholeness we all seek.