

In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and the earth. (1:1)

Clearly, one's interest is piqued when he notes that the Torah begins with the letter bais, the second letter of the alphabet, rather than the first letter, aleph. Why? This question has not eluded the commentators, who offer their varied explanations. The simplest and most straightforward explanation offered by the Midrash is that bais is the language of brachah, blessing, while aleph is the vernacular of arrur, curse. Upon commencing any endeavor, one wants to infuse it with blessing. Creation is certainly no different.

How do we define blessing in contrast to curse? If we were to take the Midrash beyond its philosophical explanation, we could say that the gematria, numerical value, of the letter aleph is one, while the gematria of bais is two. Since the dawn of time, man has been able to decide how he wants to live his life. Should he live as a "one" – self-centered, caring only about himself, or does life go beyond the ani, I? Does life transcend his personal needs, his interests, his desires, and answer to the bais, "two," the mutual sharing of oneself with his fellow. One who lives only for himself is cursed. Hillel says, Im ani l'atzmi, mah ani? – "If I am for myself, what am I?" Life is about working with others, helping others, needing others, forming partnerships, affiliations, alliances and brotherhoods. One who thinks only of himself, to the exclusion of Hashem's "other" creations, does not fulfill the purpose of Creation.

The bais represents blessing and duality. It is the peaceful coexistence of two people that gives the greatest expression to the motif of Creation. When Hashem asked Kayin, "Where is Hevel, your brother?" his response was, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Kayin had just expressed his perspective on life: Me. He was an aleph person, caring only about himself. His brother did not fit into the equation. Kayin's life was determined by his needs – not those of his brother. Is it any wonder that when threatened by his brother's spiritual success, he responded with murder. He had no room for anyone else in his life.

Lo tov heh'yos ha'adam levado, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Bereishis 2:18). While this pasuk addresses the need for man to seek a mate, a companion for life, it may also be viewed as our mission vis-à-vis the Jewish community. Just as it is not good for man to be alone, caring only about himself, neither should we, as Jews, allow another Jew to be left alone. Just as it is incumbent upon us to share with others, so, too, it is our responsibility to see to it that no Jew be left alone. As I recently saw stated, the Hebrew word for life, chayim, is plural. This teaches us that life is essentially shared. To live for oneself alone is not to live.

The Maharal connects the bais of plurality with the bais of blessing and the bais of Creation. Hashem created the world with the bais, imbuing it with blessing, for He is blessed and only from Him does true blessing emanate. True blessing, however, is possible only when opposites work together towards a common, beneficial purpose. The harmonious interaction is demonstrated by the various phenomena: heaven and earth; light and darkness; man and woman; etc. Through such cooperation, the world and its inhabitants can continue to coexist, providing blessing for mankind. The bais is the beginning of plurality, and it best symbolizes the blessing of common endeavor.

We certainly cannot ignore, however, the “aleph.” Indeed, we may suggest that the goal of the bais, two people working together, such as husband and wife, is that they should meld together into one harmonious unit, so that they will transform the bais/plurality, into an aleph, unity. That is what achdus, unity, is all about.

This idea may be derived from a passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Meseches Chagigah 2:2. As we mentioned earlier, bais signifies blessing, whereas in earthly matters, aleph implies arrur, curse. Chazal tell us that after bais was chosen for Creation, aleph withdrew itself from the running. It did not compete for “first place.” Hashem turned to the aleph and asked, “Why do you remain silent?” Aleph replied, “In the presence of the other letters, I cannot render any claims, since they all request plurality, while I am only one.”

A very impressive response, but Hashem had already “decided” to create the world with the bais. Why did He question the aleph’s reason for keeping silent? The Baal HaTanya explains that the aleph was under a grave misconception concerning this world’s purpose in Hashem’s scheme of things. Aleph thought that a world in which the bais, plurality, plays such a preeminent role is not a place for the aleph, which represents oneness, G-dliness, uniqueness. To correct this misunderstanding, Hashem said to the aleph, “Do not be afraid, for you stand at the head of the aleph-bais like a king. As I am One, so are you one. My intention is to create a world in which My Divine Spirit prevails throughout. This will be achieved through My Torah, which I will give to My People. When I present them with the Torah, I will begin with the Aseres HaDibros, Ten Commandments, which begins with an aleph/Anochi Hashem, ‘I am G-d.’” From the above, we may surmise that the goal of duality is oneness. Diversity is good, as long as the various sides/perspectives share a common goal. Otherwise, they catalyze contention and controversy.

The letter bais is related to bayis, house or home. Horav Michel Munk, zl, explains that a home is

much more than a shelter from the elements. It is a place of refuge, a place where one has the feeling of belonging. A home is an enclosure in which one can develop his personality, where he can define himself emotionally and spiritually. One's abode symbolizes his stability, his coming of age. One who has a home has a presence.

It, therefore, makes sense that a home can be viewed as a focal point. When a Jew performs a mitzvah correctly, with the appropriate zeal, fervor and dedication, his very personality becomes a focal point – a veritable bayis – from which the holiness of this mitzvah emanates to all who come into contact with him. We may add to this that one becomes a bayis only when he is focused on the aleph of Anochi Hashem. Thus, the purpose of the world might be the “bais,” but it can only be achieved through the “aleph,” because a true “bais” is actually an “aleph.”