

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

Who does not know the opening words of the Torah? *Bereishis* – “In the beginning” seems to be a very appropriate way to commence what is Hashem’s Magnum Opus, His Book, our Heavenly guide to life. What does seem strange is that the Torah begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet – *bais*. One would think that a “beginning” commences with the first letter – *aleph*. Many and varied are the responses to this question. Perhaps the most notable is the one given by the *Midrash Rabbah* (1:10). *Bais* is the *lashon*, language, of *b’rachah*, blessing; *aleph* is the language of *arirah*, curse. This sounds like a proper distinction and an excellent reason for choosing the *bais*. Is this distinction, however, exclusive to the vernacular, or does the difference extend beyond the philological?

Numerically, the *aleph* represents the number one, while the *bais* symbolizes the number two. This is perhaps another reason why the Torah should have started with the *aleph*. Oneness is very Jewish. Hashem is One. Harmony is one. All Jews comprise one entity. Two depicts divisiveness, separation, dissension. This is all the more reason for opening the Torah with the letter *aleph*.

I recently saw an explanation that is worthy of reiteration, with a little personal supplementary exposition. *Bais* is the letter of choice. It represents one’s ability to choose, to discriminate, to decide. In the very first word of the Torah, we are given the option of choice, of selection. With regard to interpersonal relationships, one has a choice of either focusing on the *aleph*, himself, number one, or he can disregard his self-centered, egotistical, self-reliance and reach out to others. He can choose between his primary needs and the needs of others. Does he want to live by himself and for himself, or does he want to interact with others? This is the question which presents itself to all of us. Does human society live under the sign of the *aleph* – all for oneself, or is it an amalgamation of people, working together in harmony, unity, with a single-minded focus on Torah and *mitzvos*? Is it all about “me” or is it about “we”? Do I care about my fellowman, or is my primary concern my own self-gratification?

The Torah responds with a resounding, *Bereishis bara Elokim*, with the letter *bais* the Torah began. The individual is important as part of a community. One person alone is not good. He is here to form a society, a coalition, not to live as a loner. A person who does not care for others is not a person. One’s goal should be to transform the *bais* into an *aleph*: two people unified and living in harmony as one. We are given the opportunity from the onset to take the *bais* of *Bereishis* and unify it. This can only be executed by applying the *aleph* of *Anochi*, the first word of the *Aseres HaDibros*, Ten Commandments. *Anochi* Hashem, “I am Hashem,” is the way the Almighty introduced Himself to us. He began with an *aleph*, because He is One. He also presented the formula for transposing the *bais* into an *aleph*: make G-d a part of your life. Without His direction and guidance, one falls prey to his ego.

The above ideas, distinguishing *brachah* from *arur*, are to be derived from the actual words. *Arur*, curse, with an *aleph*, is related to *arur*, isolated, with an *ayin*. **Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl**, explains the curse placed on the serpent, *Arur atah mikol ha'beheimah*, "You are cursed above all the animals" (*Bereishis* 3:14), to mean that you are to be lonely, desolate, isolated from the company of others, without any future, without joy, without opportunity for blossoming. In his commentary to 4:11, *Arur atah min ha'adamah*, "You are cursed by the earth," *Rav* Hirsch explained that Kayin's punishment was the curse of isolation, loneliness, castigation.

Whereas everything flows harmoniously to the one who is *baruch*, blessed, to further his happiness and prosperity, the one who is *arur*, cursed, is isolated and out of touch with all that brings prosperity and the blessings of life. *Baruch* may also be derived from *breicha*, a reservoir or spring of life-sustaining waters, or from *berech*, the knee-joint that propels the body as it goes forward - all signs of upward growth, sustenance and prosperity.

Two examples of brotherhood demonstrate the distinction between blessing and curse. Kayin killed Hevel in the first act of fratricide. He compounded his sin with his response to Hashem's inquiry: *Ayei Hevel achicha*, "Where is Hevel your brother?" *Ha'shomer achi anochi?* "Am I my brother's keeper?" With this statement, Kayin defines himself as an *arur*, cursed one. My brother is not my responsibility. I have enough on my mind without also worrying about my brother. Reneging one's obligation towards others indicates that he is an *aleph* person. It is all about me. I am number one and I have no need for, nor do I care about anyone else. Is it any wonder that with such an attitude, one can descend to the nadir of slaying a brother? Life has no meaning or value if it challenges my needs.

This behavior is in stark contrast to that of Yosef *Hatzaddik* whose famous declaration, *Es achai anochi mevakeish*, "It is my brothers whom I seek," immortalizes the Jewish definition of care. We do not just respond to the needs of our brethren when they come to us. We go to them. We seek them out, searching for ways to help, finding out what truly are their needs. Yosef personified the *bais mentch*, one who viewed everything in the dual sense – me and him; me and them. It was not all about him; it was about us.

Many *gedolei Yisrael*, Torah giants, were well-known for their unusual erudition, their brilliance and analytical skills. The **Ponevezher Rav, zl**, *Horav Yosef Kahaneman*, was known for all these and an added virtue: his concern for *Klal Yisrael* in general, and each and every Jew individually. Whenever he addressed a group of Jews, he would begin with the word, *Briderlach*, "My dear brothers." This was much more than a term of endearment. This constituted his essence. He loved all Jews and viewed them as family – regardless of their background or religious persuasion. When one begins his words of rebuke with, "My brothers," he demonstrates that he is not out to put anyone down, to condescend, to heap scorn. He is there to share his love. Indeed, as observed by *Dayan Moshe Swift, zl*, a close student to the *Rav*, his *Rebbe* exemplified Shlomo *HaMelech's* concept of *cholas ahavah*, sickness born of love. He was literally sick all of his life with the love he harbored for his fellow Jew.

I include herein an inspiring tribute rendered by *Dayan* Swift to his illustrious *rebbe*, although this exposition was published years ago in an earlier edition of *Peninim*. When *Chazal* portray the passing of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, they speak of the Almighty eulogizing his death with the words of David *HaMelech*, *Mi yakum Li im mereim*, "Who will rise up for Me against these evildoers?" (*Tehillim* 94:16) There are two ways to translate this *pasuk*. The world needs two types of rabbis: The first will rise up against the evildoers; identify their sins; condemn them, when necessary; and reproach their shameful behavior. A second approach, one that may not be for everyone, is no less important. This rabbi is an advocate for the evildoer, pleading to others: forgive him. He may be ignorant. He does not know any better. The *Ponovezher Rav* was the latter. He sought good and found good in each Jew. He was an advocate for every Jew, despite his past and regardless of his current status.

Indeed, the future played a most significant role in the life of the *Ponovezher*. He did not care what the individual was or what he had done. It was always his potential, what he could do, that he considered. When the *Ponovezher Rav* established a *yeshivah* in Bnei Brak, he also opened an orphanage which he called *Battei Avos*, which means Homes of Fathers. Clearly, *Battei Avos* is not a typical name for an orphanage. *Beis Yesomim*, House of Orphans, is the standard name for such an institution. Undeterred, the *Rav* explained why he did this. He wanted both the children and the teachers to focus on their mission: the bright future that was in store for them. They should not dwell on their unfortunate past. "These little boys will one day be fathers in *Klal Yisrael*," the *Rav* said. "They will be a part of our future. It is called *Battei Avos*, Homes of Fathers, in order to emphasize their positive future."

I think it would be appropriate to close with the immortal words of the **Baal Shem Tov, zl**: "In order to love one who is not a complete *tzaddik*, righteous person, it is sufficient if one is himself not a complete saint; but to love one who is a complete *rasha*, wholly wicked, one needs to be a consummate *tzaddik*."