

## Weekly Dvar Torah Parshat Breishit

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### Starting Anew- from *Bet*

The Torah begins with the letter *bet*. Many have asked: why not begin the Torah with an *alef*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet? One popular answer is that starting with the letter *bet* is an expression of humility; there are certain things about God that are beyond our human comprehension. Just as the letter *bet* is closed on three sides and only open facing towards the left (the direction that Hebrew is written), so too we approach the Creation story with an awareness that we cannot comprehend what came “before the *bet*” ie before Bereishit.

A second explanation as to why the Torah begins with a *bet* is as a reminder that we should always be building our Torah knowledge and understanding upon some precedent, and never from absolute *aleph*. Our understanding of Torah should be built upon what we learn from our teachers and from earlier commentators and traditional sources. While it is appropriate and commendable to seek out new and personal relevance in the Torah, these efforts cannot be an approach that starts from scratch/ starts from *aleph*. Our new understandings must start from *bet*, ie remain loyal to the traditional understandings of Torah, as have been incorporated into our Mesorah.

Lastly, the Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 1:10) suggests that the Torah begins with the letter *bet* because the word *bracha* (blessing) begins with a *bet*. Torah is a blessing in our lives and to the world, so we begin the Torah with the letter *bet*. The letter *aleph* starts the word “*arur*” (cursed) so *bet* is a better letter to begin with. The Ibn Ezra asks: we find many negative words that begin with a *bet*! What exactly is the Midrash trying to tell us?

The Maharal explained that the Midrash is teaching us that the letter *bet* symbolizes blessing; not because it begins the word “*bracha*” but because of the nature of the letter. *Bet* is the second letter in the alef-bet. Its gematria (numerical value) is 2. Whereas the *alef* is singular, the *bet* is plural. When you add to a single entity, you create the blessing of multiplicity. The three letters that comprise the root of the word *bracha* are all letters whose gematriyas each note a multiplicity:

*Bet*- 2 (double one)

*Reish*- 200 (double 100)

*Chof*- 20 (double 10)

Throughout Parshat Bereishit we read how blessing can be found in multiplicity. For example, Hashem says that it is not good for man to be alone. So woman is created so that the blessing of multiplicity can be found in the husband-wife relationship. In each generation, blessings are manifested through a multiplicity of children: “*Peru Urevu*”.

Parshat Bereishit is read this year in the midst of a very important and very contentious election season. I encourage you to exercise your democratic right to vote. I also encourage you to learn about the issues and the candidates in order to make an educated decision. I believe that the lesson of the *bet* can be helpful as we prepare to vote. Hearing from and considering a multiplicity of opinions is not only helpful in making educated choices, but it can also be the source of blessing in our lives.