



BEREISHIT

Bereishit

G-d's Alphabet: The ABCs of Creation

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G-D'S ALPHABET: THE ABCS OF CREATION

ABSTRACT

What is the secret to true communication? How do we reach another's heart and soul?

We can find the answer in the way G-d communicated in creating the universe.

The Mishnah teaches that G-d created the world with *Asarah Maamarot*, Ten Utterances, as delineated in the opening of this week's Torah reading – Bereishit/Genesis.

But who created the letters and alphabet that make up these utterances? Why is there no mention of that in the Torah?

Also, the verses of Genesis include only nine actual utterances. The word *Vayomer*, “And G-d said,” which indicates an utterance, is stated only nine times. Where is the tenth utterance?

Explains the Talmud, that the first Utterance is *Bereishit*, “In the beginning.” But how is *Bereishit* an utterance?

The Maggid of Mezritch offers us a revolutionary and magnificent teaching, by a fascinating reading of the first verse of the Torah, and in the process redefining the essence of creation itself – and the secret to effective communication.

Bereishit is the genesis and beginning of the creative process: the formation of the holy letters themselves.

A memorable teaching of the Lubavitcher Rebbe related to the famous haunting Yiddish melody, *Oifien Pripertchik*, and how Jewish children were classically trained in the Aleph Bet throughout the generations, inspires us to engrain into our children the essence of Aleph, Bet, and the entire Torah!

1. Opening Joke: Beginning or End?

Farmers Berel and Schmerel were fishing on the side of the road. They made a sign, saying: “THE END IS NEAR! TURN YOURSELF AROUND NOW BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!” and waved it energetically to each passing car.

One driver that passed didn't appreciate the sign and shouted, “Leave us alone you religious nuts!”

All of a sudden they heard a big splash.

Fred grinned at Luke. “Do you think we should just put up a sign that says: ‘BRIDGE OUT’ instead?”

2. Why the Word, Et, “The”?

Some religions focus on the end: “Repent, the end is near, repent!” Today, Shabbat Bereishit, we focus on the beginning, the creation of it all, the genesis of our purpose.

When one starts on the right foot, one does not have to worry about the end. As the Chassidic masters tell us that “as one establishes oneself on Shabbat Bereishit so goes the rest of the year.

We just read the opening of the Torah: *Bereishit bara Elokim et hashamayim v’et ha’aretz – In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth*¹.

This opening – and most famous – verse of the entire Torah contains a multitude of lessons for us in helping us lead productive and meaningful lives, and fulfill our calling on this earth.

I will touch upon one personal and powerful lesson, which teaches us the secret to true communication. How do we reach another’s heart and soul?

We can find the answer in the way G-d communicated in creating the universe.

And it is hinted to in a single word in this verse.

The word *et*, “the,” seems to be superfluous. The verse could have stated, *Bereishit bara Elokim hashamayim ha’aretz* – *In the beginning, G-d created heavens and earth*. Why add the word *et*?

3. 10 Utterances

To understand this seemingly extra word let us explore the dynamics of the *Bereishit* creation process.

The Mishnah² teaches that G-d created the world with *Asarah Maamarot*, Ten Utterances, as delineated in the opening of this week’s Torah reading.

Just like there are Ten Commandments (*Aseres HaDibrot*) which encapsulate the entire Torah, the Ten Utterances – and all their permutations³ – encapsulate all of the creative energy necessary to sustain and vivify

¹ Genesis 1:1.

² Avot 5:1.

³ See Tanya, Shaar haYichud VeHaEmunah Chapters 1 and 11-12.

every detail in existence.

They are the Divine DNA which created and perpetually create all of existence.

Unlike the Ten Commandments, however, it isn't readily clear from the verses what exactly constitute the Ten Utterances.

The Midrash⁴ helps us out by enumerating the ten, which are all found in the beginning of Genesis, in the verses we just read in today's Torah portion:

1. Bereishit...In the beginning.⁵
2. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let there be light."⁶
3. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let there be a firmament."⁷
4. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let the water gather."⁸
5. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation."⁹
6. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let there be luminaries."¹⁰
7. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let the waters swarm."¹¹
8. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let the earth bring forth."¹²
9. Vayomer...And G-d said, "Let us make man in our image."¹³
10. Vayomer...And G-d said, "It is not good that man is alone."¹⁴

You probably noticed that the first of these Ten Utterances is an outlier. The other nine are actually *mamaraot*, "utterances", delineated by the word *vayomer*, "and G-d said," or uttered. The first "utterance," however, doesn't seem to be an utterance at all. *Bereishit* means in the beginning. The word *vayomer* is not used there at all. How then is it considered an "utterance"?

4 Genesis Rabba 17:1. In the Midrash there is a debate as to what constitute the actual ten. Cf. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, where "Bereishit" is not listed as one of the ten. See the Radal ad loc and commentaries to Avot 5:1 for various explanations.

5 Genesis 1:1.

6 Genesis 1:3.

7 Genesis 1:6.

8 Genesis 1:9.

9 Genesis 1:11.

10 Genesis 1:14.

11 Genesis 1:20.

12 Genesis 1:24.

13 Genesis 1:26.

14 Genesis 2:18. Some switch this with Vayomer...And G-d said, "Behold, I have given you" (Genesis 1:29), and some for, and the spirit of G-d was hovering (Genesis 1:2).

The Talmud¹⁵ addresses this question, which Rashi cites in his commentary on the abovementioned Mishne: Which are they [the Ten Utterances by which the world was created] – the word “Vayomer” is stated only nine times? [The answer is that] “Bereishit” too is an utterance, as it is written¹⁶, *By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made, and with the breath of His mouth, all their host.*

4. How Do We Speak?

This Talmud needs explanation:

1. How are we to understand that *Bereishit* is also an utterance, when in fact it is not?
2. If *Bereishit* is indeed an utterance, why does the Torah not explicitly say *Vayomer Elokim* on *Bereishit* as it does in all the other nine utterances? It could have easily said: *Vayomer Elokim* – G-d said there should be heaven and earth.

To answer these questions we need to take a step back and explain an even more fundamental question: What does it mean that G-d created the world with utterances? Why does G-d need utterances to create the universe?

Furthermore: Even if we were to explain that G-d created existence with the Ten Utterances in order to help us understand the process and the relationship G-d has with each aspect of creation (light, firmament etc.), this only evokes the question: who created the letters and alphabet that make up these utterances? And why is there no mention of that in the Torah?

Every word and utterance is made up of letters. Without letters one cannot form words. So when G-d created the world with utterances, which letters did G-d use?

5. The Maggid: The ABCs of Creation

The answer to all these questions can be found in a revolutionary and fascinating reading of the first verse of the Torah by Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, the disciple and successor of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism.

The Mezritcher Maggid explains:¹⁷

The mystics teach that first, before all things, G-d created letters, and then with the letters G-d created all the

¹⁵ Rosh Hashana 32a. Megilah 21b. Cf. Zohar III. 11bff, correlating the Ten Utterances and the Ten Commandments.

¹⁶ Psalms 33:6.

¹⁷ Maggid D'varov L'Yaakov (2004), Remozei Torah, Bereishit, p. 2.

worlds and everything else.

This is the mystery of the verse, *Bereishit bara Elokim ET* – with the addition of the word *et*:

ET is Aleph Tof, the first and last letters of the Aleph Bet. Thus the verse reads: In the beginning, G-d created Aleph-Tof, the alphabet! And with this alphabet G-d uttered and created the rest of creation.

Now we understand why “*Bereishit is also an utterance*” but it is an utterance unlike the other nine utterances: *Bereishit bara Elokim et* is the creation of the Alef-bet – the creation of all utterances.

That is why it does say *Vayomer Elokim on Bereishit* as it does in all the other nine utterances, because the “utterance” of *Bereishit* is one that precedes actual speech; it creates the letters that allow for speech to manifest. It is the power to speak, which precedes the speech itself.

In other words, the Ten Utterances are divided into two categories:

Utterance number one, *Bereishit*, is the primal creation of language itself, the very letters of Aleph-to-Tof (*et*). The latter nine utterances, numbers two-through-ten, use these letters to create the individual elements of the universe. And thus they each begin with *Vayomer*, “And G-d said let there be light,” “And G-d said let there be a firmament,” and so on.

This is why the word *Bereishit* is translated by the Targum Yerushalmi as *Bechuchmata*, “With wisdom:” G-d’s wisdom, not His speech (*Vayomer*) created language, because at that point there weren’t yet any letters by which to form speech. Only after the alef-bet was created came the following nine utterances, formed with the letters of the alef-bet.

According to the Maggid’s interpretation, the first verse of the Torah reads as follows: *Bereishit bara Elokim ET hashamiyim v’ET ha’aretz* – With wisdom (*bechuchmata*), G-d created the Alphabet from Aleph to Tof by which he created heaven, and the Alphabet, Aleph to Tof, by which he created earth.

And the following nine *Maamarot*, Utterances, implement and shape all the details of creation with its respective letters.

6. In Practical Terms

How do we translate this esoteric idea in palatable language? What relevant message does it offer us in our personal lives?

G-d created the world with Ten Utterances to teach us how to “create” and change this world; how to effectively communicate and impact others.

True and successful communication requires two elements:

1. Conveying the feeling and spirit of the message, which is really beyond words and language. You can say all the right things but still not reach your listener, because you are not speaking from the heart. Only words from the heart enter the heart.

Remember: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

2. The actual language, words and phrases you use in your delivery. This too is vital, because even if you have the best intentions, sensitivity and care, and your words are heartfelt, people may not grasp or understand what you are saying if you use poor or inadequate language.

Element one is the *Bereishit*.et of communication. The wisdom behind the message. It is the first critical step in creating anything new and making any significant impact. It also is an "utterance" and expression, but it is a language beyond language. Between the lines of your words – the spirit of your message.

If element one is function, element two is the form in which you express the function. The actual instruments – the wordology and phraseology – of your content. If element one is energy, element two are the containers.

Element one is the heart and soul of the message. Element two is the body of the message.

Both are necessary. But obviously, element one – the et (alef-tof) – comes first and is the primary force and secret of effective communication.

Here is a great story that captures the power of the *Bereishit*.et in communication.

7. You May Know the Psalm: I Know the Shepherd (Story)

The great opera singer, Luciano Pavarotti, who was known for his renditions from the classics, often ended his performance with a dramatic chant of Psalm 23. As the tenor began – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" – the crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the singer's moving rendition.

One night, right after the great tenor offered his customary recital of Psalm 23 and following the ovation, an old Yid in the audience spoke up. "Sir, would you mind, if I too could recite Psalm 23?"

The tenor was surprised by this unusual request. However, he invited the frail old man to come onto the stage to recite the psalm; curious to see what would happen.

Softly, the old man began his prayer, reciting the psalm as only a Jew can do. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience

had been so moved by his recitation that every eye was filled with tears.

Amazed by what had happened, the world-renowned tenor asked, “I don’t understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training – but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. I receive a thundering ovation. But never tears. Tell me, what is your secret?”

The tiny old man looked at the towering tenor and humbly replied in a thick Yiddish accent: “Vell my good sir, vayl you may know de psalm – I know de Shepherd.”

The tenor was able to offer and utter a beautiful rendition of the psalm. But the *Bereishit..et* utterance conveyed the spirit of the Shepherd Himself!

8. Knowing What

Oifn Pripertchik, a famous tear-jerking Yiddish melody, from the second half of the 19th Century in pre-Holocaust Europe, captures the power of the primal *Bereishit..et* Hebrew letters of the Aleph Bet.

*Oyfn pripertchik brent a fayerl,
Un in shtub iz beys,
Un der rebe lernt kleyne kinderlekh,
Dem alef-beys.*

*Zet zhe kinderlekh, gedenkt zhe, tayere,
Vos ir lernt do;
Zogt zhe nokh a mol un take nokh a mol:
Komets-alef: o!*

*...Ir vet, kinder, elter vern,
Vet ir aleyh farshteyn,
Vifl in di oysyes ligh trern,
Un vi fil geveyn...*

On the hearth, a fire burns,
And in the house it is warm.
And the rabbi is teaching little children,
The Aleph Bet.

See, children, remember, dear ones,
 What you learn here;
 Repeat and repeat yet again,
 “Komets-alef: o!”

...Learn children, don't be afraid,
 Every beginning is hard;
 Lucky is the one has learned Torah,
 What more does a person need?

When you grow older, children,
 You will understand by yourselves,
 How many tears lie in these letters,
 And how much lament.

When you, children, will bear the Exile,
 And will be exhausted,
 May you derive strength from these letters,
 Look in at them!

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, in a 1982 talk,¹⁸ explained that this song did not become popular by chance but rather conveys the depth and profundity of the Jewish people's inherent and intrinsic connection to the holy letters of the Torah, as well as the accents, the *Nekudot*, all of which were given to Moses at Sinai.

In the Old Country the Jewish mothers and daughters for generations sang their children to sleep with this lullaby, that there is a candle that burns, and the teacher teaches the child *kometz aleph ub* – even before the infant could speak or read.

The great Rebbes of our generations explained the importance of rocking newborn children to sleep with the words *kometz aleph ub*. It instills in the child, even before he or she could read write, with the first letter of the Ten Commandments.

This is the Aleph of *Anochi*, “I am,” which encapsulates the entire first Commandment, “I am the L-rd your G-d,” which encapsulates the entire Ten Commandments, which together encapsulates the entire Written Torah, which encapsulates the entire Oral Torah – and all of this is captured in the Aleph of *Anochi*, with the *Komatx*, which becomes the *Ub* of *Anochi*.

18 30 Menachem Av 5742, http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/942199/jewish/And-the-Rebbe-Teaches-the-Small-Children-Alef-Beis.htm.

And *Anochi* itself, as the Talmud teaches, is an acronym that manifests the very essence of G-d: *Ana nafshi kesavit yehavit* – *I have inscribed and given My Soul in Torah*.¹⁹ Thus, by first hearing Aleph, that there is One, then by hearing *komatz Aleph uh*, that the One is the One of *Anochi*, the child at his *Bereishit* stage, even before he or she speaks is already ingrained with the fundamentals and foundations of Judaism. All from one single letter!

9. Lesson for the New School Year

The above talk was delivered by the Rebbe as the summer was coming to an end and the new school year was about to begin.

The Rebbe concluded this beautiful teaching with a practical takeaway, one all of us can implement in our personal lives, to teach ourselves and teach our children.

As the new school year is about to begin, it would be a beautiful and essential thing to teach the children (and, we may add, our inner children as well) in schools based on holy foundations, where they will learn Aleph, that there is One, and that Komatz Aleph Uh, the One is the One of *Anochi*, and surely then, with this foundation set in stone, our children will grow up to be righteous Jews, saturated with Torah and overflowing with Mitzvoth.

True education, like true communication, is not just about imparting knowledge and conveying facts. It is about shaping lives. It isn't simply about learning skills and gaining tools to make a good living. It is about developing the soul's potential in fulfilling its calling in this world. It isn't only about survival. It is about transcendence.

10. Conclusion: Bereishit all Year Long

This Shabbat – called Shabbat Bereishit – has special potency to impact the entire year. As mentioned above: as one establishes oneself on Shabbat Bereishit so goes the rest of the year.

“Bereishit” (literally ‘in the beginning’) contains the word “rosh” (and “reishis”), which means ‘head.’ Like Rosh Hashana and this entire month of Tishrei (the letters of Tishrei can be rearranged into the word “reishis”), “Bereishit” tells us that this is not just the beginning of the new year, but it is like a head – it is the central nervous system that controls the entire body of time. Every moment of this month that concludes with the reading of “Bereishit” is concentrated energy that has the power to affect the entire year ahead, like the head and mind that controls the entire body.

Especially this year, when Simchat Torah flows right into Shabbat Bereishit.

So let us conclude – or, Bereishit, begin – with this blessing:

¹⁹ Shabbat 105a.

On Shabbat Bereishit, as we read how the first step in creating the world was G-d creating the holy letters of the Aleph Bet, and creating the world with them, so may we create our worlds, our children, our families, our communities, our selves, and our environments by embedding them all with the holy letters of the Aleph Bet.

Starting with Aleph – One G-d, who gave us the One and only Torah!

May we learn from *Bereishit..et* how to truly communicate with our children, our spouses, our friends and all people we come in contact with --

So much talk today is either nonsense or at best eloquent words and phrases, but lacking the heart and soul of the Bereishit..et root of all language.

Let us learn from *Bereishit..et* to communicate heart to heart, soul to soul.

Imagine what kind of world we would have if we were able to touch each others souls with the Bereishit..et language!

Good Shabbos! Shabbat Shalom! And a very blessed year to each one of you!

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