

**First Things First:
A Sacred Exploration of
the First Letter, First Word and First Sentence of the Torah
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Introductions and Welcome

For the study of Torah

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.
Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam
asher kiddeshanu b' mitzvotov, v' tzivanu l' asok b' divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence,
who made us holy with Your mitzvot, and commands us
to “soak up”/ immerse ourselves in words of Torah.

Definitions:

What is a Midrash?

1. “A story about a story”
2. Faces in the Mirror (Rabbi Lawrence Kushner)

The text of the Torah:

Genesis 1:1-5

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ
וּבְהוֹי וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרִנְנָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ג וַיֹּאמֶר
אֱלֹהִים יְהי־אֹר וַיְהי־אֹר: ד וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל
אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לְאֹר יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קִרָּא
לַיְלָה וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.* 2. And the earth
was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And
a wind from God moved upon the face of the waters. 3. And God said, Let there
be light; and there was light. 4. And God saw the light, that it was good; and
God divided the light from the darkness. 5. And God called the light Day, and
the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning,
one day.

**What can be learned from a letter
(number, shape, connotation and more):
Midrash Rabbah: Genesis Rabbah 1:10**

י רבי יונה בשם ר' לוי אמר למה נברא העולם בב' אלא מה ב' זה סתום מכל צדדיו ופתוח מלפניו, כך אין לך רשות לומר מה למטה מה למעלה, מה לפניו מה לאחור, אלא מיום שנברא העולם ולהבא, בר קפרא אמר (דברים ד) כי שאל נא לימים ראשונים אשר היו לפניך, למן היום שנבראו אתה דורש, ואי אתה דורש לפניו מכאן, (שם/דברים ד') ולמקצה השמים ועד קצה השמים אתה דורש וחוקר ואי אתה חוקר לפניו מכאן, דרש רבי יהודה בן פזי במעשה בראשית בהדיה דבר קפרא, למה נברא העולם בב' להודיעך שהן שני עולמים העוה"ז והעוה"ב, ד"א ולמה בב' שהוא לשון ברכה, ולמה לא באל"ף שהוא לשון ארירה, ד"א למה לא באל"ף שלא ליתן פתחון פה לאפיקורסין, לומר היאך העולם יכול לעמוד שהוא נברא בלשון ארירה, אלא אמר הקב"ה הרי אני בורא אותנו בלשון ברכה והלואי יעמוד, ד"א למה בב' אלא מה ב' זה יש לו שני עוקצין, אחד מלמעלה ואחד מלמטה מאחוריו, אומרים לב' מי בראך, והוא מראה בעוקצו מלמעלה, ואמר זה שלמעלה בראני, ומה שמו, והוא מראה להן בעוקצו של אחריה ואומר ה' שמו, א"ר אלעזר בר חנינא בשם ר' אחא עשרים וששה דורות היתה האל"ף קורא תגר לפני כסאו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, אמרה לפניו רבש"ע אני ראשון של אותיות ולא בראת עולמך בי, אמר לה הקב"ה העולם ומלואו לא נברא אלא בזכות התורה, שנאמר (משלי ג) ה' בחכמה יסד ארץ וגו', למחר אני בא ליתן תורה בסיני ואיני פותח תחלה אלא כך שני' (שמות כ) אנכי ה' אלהיך, רבי הושעיא אומר למה נקרא שמו אל"ף שהוא מסכים מאלף, שנאמר (תהלים קה) דבר צוה לאלף דור.

“In the beginning (**B**'reishit), God created.” Rabbi Jonah said/asked, in the name of Rabbi Levi: “Why was the world created with a *bet*?”

Why is the first letter of the Torah a *bet*?
Why are we even asking this question?
Bet is the *second* letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
The first letter of the alphabet is *aleph*.

[First explanation:] Just as the *beth* is closed at the sides, but open in front, so are you not permitted to say [investigate; inquire about] what is below and what is above, what is behind and what is before and what is behind, but [you may inquire about] from the day of Creation and what comes from it.

What does this mean? What do we learn from the *shape* of the letter?
What is closed to us here? What is open? Is this about space, or time? Or both?

[Proof texts are given for this explanation, citing verses from the Torah and

elsewhere, even if the verses are taken out of their original context.] Bar Kappara quoted: *For ask now of the days past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth* (Deuteronomy 4:32): you may speculate from the day that days were created, but you may not speculate on what was before that. *And from one end of heaven unto the other* (ibid; this comes from the second part of the same verse) you may investigate, but you may not investigate what was before this. Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazzi lectured on the Creation story, in accordance with this interpretation of Bar Kappara.

Here is the section of Deuteronomy being quoted, in its original context:

כִּי שְׂאֵל-נָא לַיָּמִים רִאשִׁינִים אֲשֶׁר-הָיוּ לְפָנֶיךָ לְמִן-הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים | אָדָם
עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְלִמְקַצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעַד-קַצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה אוֹ הַנְּשִׁמֵּעַ
כְּמוֹהוּ: לֹא הִשְׁמִיעַ עִם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים מִדְּבַר מִתּוֹךְ-הָאֵשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר-שִׁמְעַתְּ אֶתְּהָ וַיִּזְוֶי: לֹד אוֹ |
הַנִּסֶּה אֱלֹהִים לָבוֹא לְקַנּוֹת לוֹ גּוֹי מִקָּרֵב גּוֹי בְּמִסַּת בְּאֵתוֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים וּבְמִלּוֹזְמוֹה וּבִיד
וְזוֹקָה וּבְזָרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֻלִים כָּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לָכֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרָיִם
לְעִינֶיךָ: לֹה אֶתְּהָ הָרְאֵת לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ:

For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether there has been any such thing as this great thing is, or has been heard of? 33. Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? 34. Or has God ventured to go and take him a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by a stretched out arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35. To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other beside him.

[A second explanation:] Why was it created with a *beth*?

To teach you that there are two worlds: this world, and the world to come.

How did they derive this? It is from the tradition of *gematria*, ascribing numeric value -- and importance to that value -- to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *Bet* is the *second* letter; it has the numeric value of "2."

But why make such a comment? To what does it refer, and why is it important?

Important background concept, from the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin, 90a):

כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא, שנאמר (ישעיהו ס) וְעַמּוּךָ כָּלָם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם
יִירְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ נִצְרָה מִטְּעוֹ [מִטְּעִי] מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי לְהַתְּפָאֵר. ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא:
האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה ואין תורה מן השמים, ואפיקורוס.

All Israel [meaning: all Jews] have a portion in the world to come, for it is written (Isaiah 60:21) “Your people, they are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.” But the following have no portion in the world to come: the one who says that the doctrine of resurrection is not found in the Torah, the one who denies the divine origin of the Torah, and heretics.

Another interpretation: why with a *beth*? Because it connotes blessing (*berakah*). And why not with an *alef*? Because it connotes cursing (*arirah*).

This one seems the simplest explanation yet. But it is not.

This is a deeply powerful response to Persian Gnostic dualistic Zoroastrianism.

What is dualism, and why was it such a threat to the monotheistic religions?

Another interpretation: Why not with an *alef*? In order not to provide a justification for heretics to plead, “How can the world endure, seeing that it was created with the language of cursing?” Hence the Holy One, blessed be God, said, “Lo, I will create it with the language of blessing, and would that it may stand!”

The background here is a tradition from the Talmud (Pirkei Avot 5:1), where it is stated that “the wicked destroy the world.” Had the world been based on a foundation of cursing, they could have claimed that it would not have endured anyway.

Another interpretation: why with a *beth*? Just as a *beth* has two projecting points, one pointing upward and the other backward, so when we ask it, ‘Who created thee?’ it intimates with its upward point, ‘The One who is above created me.’ And if we ask further, ‘What is that One’s name?’ it intimates to us with its back point [to the previous letter]: “Adonai is God’s name.”



Two possibilities here. Since the text refer’s to the Tetragrammaton, which, of course, begins with a *yud*, this could be a reference to the common substitute word we use in place of YHVH, which is Adonai, which, of course, begins with an *aleph*. It is *also* possible, and testified to in a different Midrashic tradition known as the *Yalkut Shimoni*, that this is a reference to the concept of the Oneness of God, using the *aleph*, then, *either* as the first letter of the word *echad*, or for its numeric value of “one.”

[A final explanation:] Rabbi Eleazar ben Abinah said in the name of Rabbi Aha: For twenty-six generations the *aleph* complained before the Holy One, blessed be God, pleading: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! I am the first of the letters, yet You did not create Your world with me!’ God answered: “The world and its fullness were created for the sake of the Torah alone, as it says: ‘God with wisdom founded the world, etc.’” (Proverbs 3:19) Tomorrow, when I come to reveal My Torah at Sinai, I will commence with none but you:

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
I (*anochi*) am the Lord your God’

(Exodus 20:2)

The world is created with a *bet* because the *aleph* is being saved for something even more important -- not the (material) *creation* of the world, but the (spiritual) *reason why* the world is created in the first place, expressed in the opening of the Ten Commandments. Sinai is seen, then, not as the chronological beginning, but the essential center and the scene of the giving of the Torah.

The quote from Proverbs is a bit mysterious here. One reason is that the Midrash, in typical fashion, quotes only the first part of the verse, and expects you to know the rest. Here is the full verse:

יְהוָה בַּחֲכָמָה יָסַד אֶרֶץ כִּנְיָן שְׁמַיִם בַּתְּבוּנָה:

Adonai by wisdom has founded the earth; by understanding established the heavens.

Here, God’s “wisdom” and “understanding” are both seen as referring to the Torah. This is the notion of a primordial Torah, one with which God consulted to create the world. This idea will be important in the text from Rashi we will examine shortly. Here, the quote from Proverbs supports the idea that the Torah is the purpose and culmination of creation.

Bar Huta said: Why is it called *aleph*? Because it denotes the sum of a thousand, as in “The word which God commanded for a thousand (*eleph*) generations. (Psalms 105:8)

This is based on a pun: the *aleph* of the opening of the Ten Commandments is the same as the *eleph* which implies the enduring nature of that covenant. Some sources indicate that this refers, instead, to the notion that God contemplated the giving of the Torah for a thousand generations before the creation of the world.

Trivial Pursuit is wrong!
What does the first word mean?
What is the first sentence of the Torah?
Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) on Genesis 1:1f

בראשית – אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא (שמות יב ב) מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית, משום (תהלים קיא ו) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים, שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

בראשית ברא – אין המקרא הזה אומר אלא דרשני, כמו שדרשוהו רבותינו ז"ל בשביל התורה שנקראת (משלי ח כב) ראשית דרכו, ובשביל ישראל שנקראו (ירמיה ב ג) ראשית תבואתו. ואם באת לפרשו כפשוטו כך פרשהו בראשית בריאת שמים וארץ והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך ויאמר אלהים יהי אור. ולא בא המקרא להורות סדר הבריאה לומר שאלו קדמו, שאם בא להורות כך, היה לו לכתוב בראשונה ברא את השמים וגו', שאין לך ראשית במקרא שאינו דבוק לתיבה של אחריו, כמו (שם כו א) בראשית ממלכות יהויקים, (בראשית י י) ראשית ממלכתו, (דברים יח ד) ראשית דגנך, אף כאן אתה אומר בראשית ברא אלהים וגו', כמו בראשית ברוא. ודומה לו (הושע א ב) תחלת דבר ה' בהושע, כלומר תחלת דבורו של הקב"ה בהושע, ויאמר ה' אל הושע וגו'. ואם תאמר להורות בא שאלו תחלה נבראו, ופירושו בראשית הכל ברא אלו, ויש לך מקראות שמקצרים לשונם וממעטים תיבה אחת, כמו (איוב ג י) כי לא סגר דלתי בטני, ולא פירש מי הסוגר, וכמו (ישעיה ח ד) ישא את חיל דמשק, ולא פירש מי ישאנו, וכמו (עמוס ו יב) אם יחרוש בבקרים, ולא פירש אם יחרוש אדם בבקרים, וכמו (ישעיה מו י) מגיד מראשית אחרית, ולא פירש מגיד מראשית דבר אחרית דבר. אם כן תמה על עצמך, שהרי המים קדמו, שהרי כתיב ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים, ועדיין לא גלה המקרא בריית המים מתי היתה, הא למדת שקדמו המים לארץ. ועוד שהשמים מאש ומים נבראו, על כרחך לא לימד המקרא סדר המוקדמים והמאוחרים כלום:

1:1 “In the beginning” (*Bereshit*) [Rashi opens by quoting from a Midrash]: Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have commenced with the verse (Exodus 12:1) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel.

What a place to begin! Ignore all of Genesis? What kind of Torah would this be? Why would anyone want to start at Exodus 12:1 -- even as a rhetorical question, who would say such a thing? Note that the Silbermann translation of Rashi adds a key phrase here: The Torah... “*which is the Law book of Israel*”

Note also that the italics below are Silbermann’s interpolations, meant to “clarify the clarifier,” to make Rashi’s point more clear to us.

What is the reason, then, that it commences with *the account* of the Creation? Because of *the thought expressed in the text* (Psalm 111: 6) “He declared to His people the strength of His works (in other words, God gave an account of the work of Creation), in order that God might give them the “heritage of the nations.” For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of *Canaan*”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be God; God created it and gave it to whom God pleased. When it was God’s will, God gave [the land] to them, and when it was God’s will, God took it from them and gave it to us” (Yalkut Shimoni. Exodus 12: 2).

The whole purpose of the Torah is to secure our claim to the land of Israel?
What might lead to such a view of the world?
On the other hand, this is an important reminder:
The Zionist dream is not new, nor is it peripheral to Judaism.
It is the heart and core, one of the purposes of our existence,
read back in to the very first words of the Torah.

We are now going to look at the unusual -- perhaps incomprehensible -- grammar of the first word of the Torah. For the word, as Rashi will point out, does *not* actually mean “in the beginning.” *That* word would have been “*barishonah*.” The word *B’reishit* is in conjunctive form; it means “in the beginning of,” which is why the new JPS translation has “When God began to create the world...” Even that, though, is an odd formulation. Perhaps, thinking outside the box, the concept here is that “with *reishit* God created the world.” If so, the question becomes: what is *reishit*? And here, we turn to all other significant references to the word *reishit* (which means “first of” or “head of”) that appear in the Tanakh. The results are startling.

“In the beginning God created” (*Bereshit bara*): This verse calls aloud for explanation [literally: this verse says nothing except “come and interpret me!"]. in the manner that our Rabbis explained it: *God created the world* for the sake of the Torah which is called (Proverb 8:22) “The beginning (*reishit*) of God’s way.”

The point here is the equation of “Torah” with “wisdom.”
The full citation, beginning with Proverbs 8:12 and then skipping to 8:22:

אֲנִי־חָכְמָה שָׁכַנְתִּי עִרְמָה וְדַעַת מִזְמוֹת אֲמָצָא:
יְהוָה קָנָנִי רֵאשִׁית דְּרָכּוֹ קָדָם מִפְּעֻלּוֹ מֵאָז:

12. I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and find knowledge and discretion.
22. The Lord created me at the beginning of his way, the first of his acts of old.

This is a technique similar to what might be called a *g'zeirah shavah*, an explanation of one term (*B'reishit*) through the comparison with an identical or very similar term (*reishit*) elsewhere, using the context of the second instance to shed light on the first. The first sentence of the Torah is now seen to read: “With *reishit* = wisdom = the Torah God created the world.

But we are not done with the possible meanings of the word *reishit*.

[Alternatively/additionally we can read that God created the world] for the sake of Israel who are called (Jeremiah 2:3) “The beginning (*reishit*) of God’s increase.

The text here:

קָדָשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַיהוָה רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָה
Israel is holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his produce

Thus: “For the sake of *reishit* = Israel = the Jewish people God created the world.

If, however, you wish to explain it in its plain sense...

Rashi is fully aware of how much of a stretch these opening readings are, and therefore wants to hew closer to the line of explaining the text in its contextual and surface meaning.

explain it thus: “At the beginning of the Creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the deep, the spirit of God hovered over the water, God said “let there be light,” and there was light. (emphasis here added for effect)

In other words, the first sentence of the Torah is much longer than that which we are accustomed to hearing. It *does not say* “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In fact, there are major implications for reading the sentence according to the proper rules of Hebrew grammar.

One implication: this is *not about* creation *ex nihilo!*

It also assumes a primordial state of chaos, upon which order is imposed.
That is the fundamental act of creation.

The text does not intend to point out the order of the *acts* of Creation — to state that these (heaven and earth) were created first; for if it intended to point this out, it should have written “*barishona*” [meaning] “At first God created...”

And for this reason: Because, wherever the word *reishit* occurs in Scripture, it is in the construct state (it “clings” to another word), as, for example, (Jeremiah 26:1) “In the beginning of (*b*)*reishit* the reign of Jehoiakim”; (Genesis 10:10) “The beginning of (*reishit*) his kingdom”; (Deuteronomy 18:4) “The firstfruit of (*reishit*) your corn.” Likewise, here, too, you must translate *b’reishit bara* as though it read *b’reishit b’ro’*, “at the beginning of God’s creating.” Similar to this (a similar grammatical construction, a noun in construct followed by a verb) is: found in Hosea 1:2, where we read *t’chilat dibber Adonai b’hoshiya*, “in the beginning God spoke through Hosea,” which really implies/means *t’chilat diburo shel HaKadosh Barukh Hu b’Hosiyah*, “at the beginning of God’s speaking through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea.”

If, however, you insist that it [really does] come to show/intend to point out that these (heaven and earth) were created first, and it’s interpretation should be “*b’reishit hakol bara elu*; at the beginning of everything God created these,”

Silbermann’s commentary takes some time to explain this maneuver. Those who still want to say that this familiar text refers to the order of creation would have to concede the grammatical point that the word *reishit* is in the construct state, but could continue to hold onto what they thought was the original meaning by claiming that this is an elliptical text, that a word is missing here. Rashi goes on to provide some examples of elliptical texts.

you do have [cases of] Biblical verses which “shorten their language,” as for example (Job 3:10) “for closed not the doors of my womb” where it does not explicitly explain who it was who was doing the closing, or (Isaiah 8:4) “shall take away the spoil of Samaria” without explaining who shall take it away; and (Amos 6:12) “if plows with oxen,” and it does not explicitly state, “if *a man* plows with oxen”; or (Isaiah 46:10) “declares from the beginning the end,” and it does not explicitly state, “declaring from the beginning of *a thing* the end of a thing’ - if so (if that is your argument, that this is simply a case of an elliptical text, and you still assert that this verse intends to point out that heaven and earth were created first), you should be astonished at yourself, because as *a matter of fact* the waters were created first! For is it not written (Genesis 1:2) that “the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters”? -- and the Bible had not yet revealed/said anything about when the creation of the “water” took place. Thus you must learn [from this] that the “water” preceded the “earth.”

And further (*that the heavens and earth were not created first*): that the heavens (*shamayim*) were created from fire (*esh*) and water (*mayim*)

This is based on an assumed etymology of the word *shamayim*, consisting, as it seems, to be a combination of the Hebrew words for “fire” and “water.”

from which it follows that fire and water were in existence before the heavens.
Therefore you must admit that the Biblical verse teaches nothing whatsoever about what preceded or followed [the order, the sequence of Creation]!

So if the opening of the Torah is *not* about the *order* of creation, what *is* it about?
Here a new picture emerges: the imposition of order on a pre-existing state of chaos, the creation of the world through words, the focus on the binary patterns: light and darkness, day and night. Meaning emerges through the act of perception and separation, division and distinction.

Let us read the newly translated words, and discover for ourselves what each of us sees... in the opening sentence:

**When God began to create heaven and the earth --
the earth being unformed and void,
with darkness over the surface of the deep,
and a wind from God sweeping over the water --
God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.**

(Genesis 1:1-3, JPS translation)