

**Traditions I: An Introduction to Midrash -- Genesis Rabbah  
Temple Shalom Fall Beit Midrash  
November 7, 2006**

**Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach**

**Introductions and Welcome**

**For the study of Torah**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam  
asher kiddeshanu b'mitzvotav, 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)**
3. **Form and Function, Structure and Surprise  
(P'tichta/The Proem, Nechemta/The Comforting Conclusion)**
4. **Date and Place, Purpose and Method. (Jacob Neusner)**

Genesis Rabbah: late fourth century, Palestine

Constantine had converted to Christianity,

but Julian, his successor, seemed poised to return the Roman empire  
to its pagan roots -- and raised the hopes of the Jewish community

by promising them a return to Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Temple.

But Julian dies on a battlefield in Iran, paganism is outlawed once again.

Christian authorities, having tasted how tenuous their grip on power had been,  
lay the groundwork for never being out of power or threatened again.

And the Jewish community's brief hint of hope for glory and vindication  
goes out with a sense of cruel conclusion.

Oppressed, despised, facing a Christian majority even in the Land of Israel,

the sages who compiled this material looked back into the past,

and (deliberately? consciously?) reread the stories of their origin

in order to recast the picture of the future.

History is used in the service of destiny.

What happened once is a hint for what is to come.

Esau = Rome/Christianity/the power of today.

Jacob = Israel, the Jewish community/the one to be vindicated tomorrow.

It is not *his*-story or *her*-story, but *our* story.

It is not about them and then, but about us, and now.

**The text of the Torah:**

**Genesis 1:1-5**

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ  
וּבְהוֹ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרִזְזֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ג וַיֹּאמֶר  
אֱלֹהִים יְהִי־אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר: ד וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיְבָרֶךְ  
אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הָאֹר וַיִּבְרַךְ הַיּוֹם: ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא  
לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־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.

**Before the beginning...**

**Genesis Rabbah 1:1**

א רבי הושעיה רבה פתח (משלי ח) ואהיה אצלו אמון ואהיה שעשועים יום יום וגו' אמון  
פדגוג, אמון מכוסה, אמון מוצנע, ואית דאמר אמון רבתא, אמון פדגוג, היך מה דאת  
אמר (במדבר יא) כאשר ישא האומן את היונק, אמון מכוסה היאך מה דאת אמר  
(איכה ד) האמונים עלי תולע וגו', אמון מוצנע היאך מה דאת אמר (אסתר ב) ויהי אומן  
את הדסה, אמון רבתא, כמה דתימא (נחום ג) התיטבי מנא אמון, ומתרגמינן האת  
טבא מאלכסנדריא רבתא דיתבא בין נהרותא, ד"א אמון אומן, התורה אומרת אני  
הייתי כלי אומנתו של הקב"ה, בנוהג שבעולם מלך בשר ודם בונה פלטין, אינו בונה  
אותה מדעת עצמו אלא מדעת אומן, והאומן אינו בונה אותה מדעת עצמו, אלא  
דיפתראות, ופינקסאות יש לו, לדעת היאך הוא עושה חדרים, היאך הוא עושה  
פשפשין, כך היה הקב"ה מביט בתורה, ובורא את העולם, והתורה אמרה בראשית  
ברא אלהים, ואין ראשית אלא תורה, היאך מה דאת אמר (משלי ח) ה' קנני ראשית  
דרכו.

Rabbi Oshaya opened/commenced [his exposition thus]: “Then I was by God as a nursling (*amon*); and I was daily all delight (Proverbs 8:30).”

Huh? What does this have to do with creation? Why are we bringing in this unconnected verse from Proverbs. And what does the verse even mean? ‘*m.n.* is a tricky route, with many meanings. First I will provide the full Hebrew and English of the original verse here, and then the Midrash goes on to try to derive new meaning for the words through various understandings of the word “*amon*.”

וְאֶהְיֶה אֶצְלוֹ אֱמוּן וְאֶהְיֶה שְׂעֵשְׂעִים יוֹם | יוֹם מִשְׂחֻקָּת לְפָנָיו בְּכָל־עֵת:

Then I was by him, like a little child; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;

We will soon see that in all of these readings “I” is seen as a reference to the Torah as a whole, a notion of a primordial, preexistent and external “companion” which God uses in the creation of the world.

‘*Amon*’ means tutor; ‘*amon*’ means covered; ‘*amon*’ means hidden; and some say, ‘*amon*’ means great. ‘*Amon*’ is a tutor, as you read, “As an *omen* (nursing father) carrieth the sucking child” (Numbers 11:12).

The context is Moses’ complaint to God, that he must bear the weight and responsibility for the people. It is one of the most striking images in the entire Hebrew Bible, that of a nursing father. The Midrash must see the father’s role here as that of teacher -- rearing a child and teaching a child are conflated into one act. Indeed the words for “parent” and “teacher” and “Torah” in Hebrew are all linguistically related, all from the same root, *y.r.h.*, having to do with “pointing,” “shooting straight,” “showing the way.”

הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעַם הַזֶּה אִם־אֵנֹכִי יִלְדֹתִיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ  
בְּחִיקוֹד כְּאִשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאֱמוּן אֶת־הַיֶּלֶק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאֲבוֹתָיו:

Have I conceived all this people? Have I fathered them, that you should say to me, carry them in your bosom, like a nursing father carries the sucking child, to the land which you swore to their fathers?

‘*Amon*’ means “covered,” as in the verse, *Ha'emunim* (they that were clad, that is, “covered”) in scarlet (Lamentations 4: 5). ‘*Amon*’ means hidden, as in the verse, “and he concealed (*omen*) Hadassah.” (Esther 2:7).

הָאֲכִלִּים לְמַעַדְנִים נִשְׂמוּ בְּחוּצוֹת הָאֲמֻנִים עָלַי תוֹלַע חֲבָקוּ אֲשִׁפְתוֹת:

Those who fed delicately are desolate in the streets;  
those who were reared/brought up/dressed? [by implication] in purple embrace dunghills.  
Lamentations 4:5

וַיְהִי אִמּוֹן אֶת־הַדָּפָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בֵּת־דָּדוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעָרָה  
יִפְתֹּתָאֵר וְטוֹבַת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹת אָבִיָּהּ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחְתָּהּ מִרְדְּכָי לֹו לְבַת:

And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter;  
for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was beautiful and of good presence;  
and, when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as a daughter.

Esther 2:7

Both of these readings are major “stretches. In the Lamentations reading, the sense of ‘*m.n.*’ as “reared” or “tutored” or “raised” is consistent with what we have seen so far, but the reference to “purple” implies clothings, as in: those who were brought up wearing certain kinds of clothes. The Midrash therefore seems to read the verb as “covered.” A similar stretch takes place with the Esther passage: the immediate context of the verb is still “raised” or “brought up,” but the Midrashic reading here relies on yet another, unstated tradition: that Mordecai basically kept Esther out of sight, out of the public gaze, until she made an “appearance” at the contest of the king. Both readings of this verb, as they relate to the Torah, would reinforce a similar idea: the Torah was “reared,” as it were, by God... but kept under wraps, “hidden,” “covered,” and not “revealed”... until Sinai. Perhaps (according to the Sonsino) part of the Torah is hidden even after Sinai, meaning that the reasons for some of the laws are not known.

’Amon’ means great, as in the verse, “Art thou better than No-amon?” (Nachum 3:8) which is rendered, “Art thou better than Alexandria the Great, that is situated among the rivers?”

הֲתִיטִיבִי מִנָּא אָמוֹן הַיְשָׁבָהּ בְּיַאֲרִים מַיִם סָבִיב לָהּ אֲשֶׁר־תֵּיִל לָם מַיִם חֹמְתָהּ:

Are you better than No-Ammon, that was situated among the rivers, waters surrounding her,  
whose rampart was the sea, and her wall was from the sea?

Nachum 3:8

This is even more of a stretch than the last reading. Here we link the *amon* from our verse in Proverbs to what seems to be a proper name, mentioned in the infrequently quoted book of Nachum. If *amon* is seen here in the sense of “greatness,” then the Proverbs verse can be understood to mean: I (the Torah) was there with God in greatness and glory.”

Now we arrive at the final link, the “bridge” that will bring us back to the verse from the Torah we expected to see when we opened Genesis Rabbah in the first place. To “cap” this linkage, this “new” insight on Genesis 1:1 which emerges from the new reading of the opening verse from Proverbs, we will have to bring in another verse, from the very same place in Proverbs, which reads the problematic word *reishit* in a new way as well.

Another interpretation: 'amon' is a workman (*uman*). The Torah declares: 'I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be God.' In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus *God consulted the Torah and created the world* (emphasis added), while the Torah declares, **"In the beginning, God created..." (Genesis 1:1)** "beginning," (*reishit*) referring to the Torah, as in the verse, "The Eternal made me as the beginning of God's way (Proverbs 8:22).

יְהוָה קִנְּנֵי רֵאשִׁית דְּרָכָיו קִדְּם מִפְּעֻלָּיו מֵאָז:

The Lord created me at the beginning of His way, the first of His acts of old.

The "new" reading of the first verse of the Torah, then, is: The Torah predates the Universe, as a blueprint, as a master plan, as an underlying purpose, the foundations of the heavens and the earth. And we are to read, really, not "In the beginning, God created..." but, rather: "*With the Torah*, God created the heavens and the earth..."

Thus the part refers to the whole; the very first word of the Torah implies the entire concept of Torah.

**Conquest and Creation:  
Who Owns the Land?  
Genesis Rabbah 1:2**

ב רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי פתח (תהלים קיא) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו וגו' מה טעם גילה הקב"ה לישראל מה שנברא ביום הראשון, ומה שנברא ביום השני, מפני עובדי כוכבים ומזלות שלא יהיו מונין את ישראל, ואומרין להם הלא אומה של בזויים אתם, וישראל משיבין אותן ואומרין להם, ואתם הלא בזויה היא בידכם, הלא כפתורים היוצאים מכפתור השמידום וישבו תחתם, העולם ומלואו של הקב"ה, כשרצה נתנה לכם, וכשרצה נטלה מכם ונתנה לנו, הה"ד (שם /תהלים קיא/) לתת להם נחלת גוים וגו', הגיד להם את כל הדורות.

Rabbi Yehoshuah of Siknin opened, in the name of Rabbi Levi: "God has declared to God's people the power of God's works, in giving them the heritage of the nations." (Psalms 111:6).

Here is the *pt'ichta* verse, the verse from Psalms, in its original context:

כַּח מַעֲשָׂיו הִגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתַתּ לָהֶם נַחֲלַת גּוֹיִם  
He has declared to His people the power of His works,  
that He may give them the heritage of the nations.

Certainly this opening is a surprise. We are not sure where this is going. But *perhaps* a hint comes later in the Psalm. Just a few verses on, we see one of the telltale words in the Hebrew Bible linked with the famous opening word of the Torah. In verse ten of the same Psalm we read:

יְאֻשִׁית חֲכָמָה | יִרְאַת יְהוָה  
10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...

Why did the Holy One, blessed be God, reveal to Israel what was created on the first day and on the second day, etc.? So that the worshippers of stars and constellations/idolators/the nations of the world might not taunt Israel, saying to them: "A nation of robbers you are [in taking possession of the land of Canaan from those who previously dwelt there]!" But Israel can retort: "Do you not hold spoil in your hands? For do we not read 'The Caphtorim, who came from Crete, wiped them [the previous inhabitants of the land] out and settled in their place.'" (Deuteronomy 2:23)

Here is the full context, from Deuteronomy: a recitation of the chain of possession of territory in the land of the Ammonites. It is not part of the biblical heritage of Canaan, but it is an illustration of the general point -- that land changes hands, but God controls it all:

16. So it came to pass, when all the men of war had perished and died from among the people, 17. That the Lord spoke to me, saying, 18. You are to pass over through Ar, the border of Moab, this day; 19. And when you come near opposite the sons of Ammon, harass them not, nor contend with them; for I will not give you of the land of the sons of Ammon any possession; because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession. 20. That also was considered a land of Refaim; Refaim lived there in old times; and the Ammonites call them Zamzummim; 21. A people great, and many, and tall, like the Anakim; but the Lord destroyed them before them; and they succeeded them, and lived in their place; 22. Like he did to the sons of Esau, who lived in Seir, when he destroyed the Horim from before them; and they succeeded them, and lived in their place even to this day; 23. And the Avim who lived in Hazerim, even to Azzah, the Caphtorim, who came out of Caphtor, destroyed them, and lived in their place.

[So you see, as it were, that]: The world and all its fullness belongs to God. When God wished, God gave it to you, and when God wished, God took it from you and gave it to us. Hence it is written: "In giving them the heritage of the nations, God declared to God's people the power of God's works."

Thus reversed, the verse from Psalms now makes more sense in the context of creation, bringing about (at least in theory) a reaction of "aha!"

God declared the beginning to them, as in "In the beginning, God created, etc."

**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 אותן 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 לְפָנַיָּךְ לְמִן-הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים | אָדָם  
עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְלִמְקַצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְעַד-קַצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם הַגְּדוֹלָה פֶּדֶבֶר הַגְּדוֹלָה הֲיָה אוֹ הַנְּשִׁימָע  
פְּמֹהוּ: לֵאמֹר הַשָּׁמַיִם עִם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים מִדְּבַר מִתּוֹךְ-הָאֵשׁ פֶּאֲשֶׁר-שִׁמְעַתְּ אֹתָהּ וַיִּזְוֶי: לֵד אוֹ |  
הַנְּסֶה אֱלֹהִים לָבוֹא לְקַנּוֹת לוֹ גּוֹי מִקָּרֵב גּוֹי בְּמִקְרָב גּוֹי בְּמִסֵּת בְּאֹתוֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים וּבְמִלּוֹזְמָה וּבִיד  
וְזוֹקָה וּבְזָרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֻלִים כָּכֵל אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לָכֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרָיִם  
לְעִינַיִךְ: לֵה אֹתָהּ הֲרֵאתָ לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבָדוֹ:

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) וְעַמְּךָ כָּלֵם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם  
יִירְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ נֶצֶר מִטְעוֹ [מִטְעֵי] מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי לְהַתְּפַאֵר. 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 כִּוְנוֹן 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.