



Dance First, Think Second

Sicha Summary

Chelek 15 | Breishis | Sichah 1

The Question:

The Torah opens with the word “*Bereishis* (In the beginning),” which starts with the letter *beis* (בראשית). Why does the Torah begin with the second letter of the *Aleph-Beis*, the letter *beis*, and not with the first, seemingly more prestigious letter, *alef*?

The Explanation:

In a prophecy explaining the cause of the exile and destruction of the Land of Israel, G-d says, “For what reason did the land perish...? Because of their forsaking My Torah...” (*Yirmiyahu* 9:11-12)

The *Talmud* elaborates: This does not mean that the Jewish people ceased Torah study altogether; rather, “they did not recite a blessing on the Torah prior to studying it.” (*Bava Metziah* 85b)

Torah study contains two elements: a) It is a spiritual experience, a transcendent connection between the person and the Divine; b) It is an intellectual pursuit, whereby one masters concepts, themes, and laws that guide and illuminate daily life.

To “Recite a blessing on the Torah prior to studying it” means recognizing that Torah study is not a mere intellectual exercise, but rather, a sacred endeavor. Exile was decreed because the Jewish people “forsook” the

Divine essence of Torah, and saw it only as an intellectual discipline to be mastered (See *Bach to Orach Chaim* 47) .

This is why the Torah begins with the second letter of the *Aleph-Beis*: The “words” — the intelligible, contained ideas of the Torah — are of secondary importance. The “*aleph*” of Torah, the first step, is the dedication to the Divine element of Torah that transcends rationality, and comes “prior to studying it.” Only once this foundation is laid in place, the intellectual endeavor of Torah study can begin.

Lost in Translation:

The *Talmud* relates that King Ptolemy of Egypt assembled seventy-two elders from among the Sages of Israel, segregated them into separate rooms, and asked them to translate the Torah into Greek. Miraculously, they all introduced the same changes into the translated text, in cases where misunderstandings might arise.

Amongst the changes: They reversed the word order in the first verse of the Torah, writing “G-d [*Elokim*] created in the beginning [*bereishis*],” so that the verse would not be misinterpreted that “*Bereishis* created G-d,” i.e., that G-d was created by another being, G-d forbid (*Megillah* 9a).

Beginning the Torah with “*Elokim* — G-d” puts an *alef* (אלוקים) as the first letter of the Torah. With the aforementioned explanation, this is readily understood.

For non-Jews, the Torah gives direction on how to create a just and G-dly society and live a meaningful, Divinely-inspired life. But the transcendent divinity of the Torah, the ineffable sanctity that connects one to G-d’s Essence, can only be appreciated by Jews, whose souls are all “part of the Divine.”

The Torah is practical and useful for the nations of the world, but for them, it is not sacred. Thus, the Torah commissioned by the Egyptian king begins

with an *alef* because, for him, the primary role (*alef*) of the Torah is its intelligibility and comprehension.

Dance First:

This is also why we begin reading the Torah on Simchas Torah day, after we have danced with the Torah throughout the previous evening. Dancing with the Torah expresses our love for, and dedication to, the Divine essence of the Torah, and not its intellectual appeal. Once we have danced with the G-dliness of the Torah, we can begin to study and read it, beginning with “*Bereishis* — In the beginning.”