



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 15 | Bereishis | Sichah 1

## Why does the Torah begin with a *Beis*?

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## 1.

### WHY START WITH A BEIS

There are many explanations as to why the Torah begins with the letter “beis,” “*Bereishis bara...* {בראשית ברא – In the beginning, Hashem created...}” and not with the letter “aleph,” the first letter of the *aleph-beis* {the Hebrew alphabet}.

### To mention a few:

a) The *Jerusalem Talmud*<sup>1</sup> writes that an *aleph* connotes (is the initial of the word) “*arirah* {ארירה – curse}” while a *beis* connotes (is the initial of the word) “*berachah* {ברכה – blessing}.” Therefore, the Torah begins not with an *aleph*, but with a *beis*.

b) The *Midrash*<sup>2</sup> writes that the shape of the letter *beis*, closed on three sides and open on the fourth (north) side,<sup>3</sup> resembles the world. For the world was created with three enclosed and partitioned sides, but its northern side was left open.<sup>4</sup> [The reason:<sup>5</sup> If someone comes and proclaims, “I am G-d,” we can respond: On the contrary! The world’s northern side was left needing repair; let him fix it by completing it.]

c) *Kabbalah* discusses<sup>6</sup> that in this world we only study {the dimension of} Torah as it has already descended from *Atzilus*<sup>7</sup> into the worlds *Beriah*,

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<sup>1</sup> *Chagigah*, ch. 2, sec. 1. (towards the end); similarly, in *Midrash Tanchuma*, parshas *Bereishis*, sec. 5; *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 1, sec. 10; *Tanna De’Vei Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 31 (towards the end); *Zohar*, at the beginning of parshas *Vayigash*; et al. This matter is explained in *Likkutei Torah*, parshas *Re’eh*, 19b; *Ohr HaTorah*, parshas *Bereishis*, 44b, (vol. 3) 565b, parshas *Emor* (vol. 3) p. 857. ff. and in many other sources.

<sup>2</sup> *Midrash Hanneham LeShir HaShirim*, (in *Zohar Hachadash*); *Rabboseinu Baalei Hatosafos (Daas Zekeinim and Hadar Zekeinim)*; and *Chizkuni*, at the beginning of this parshah.

<sup>3</sup> See also *Jerusalem Talmud* and *Bereishis Rabbah* in fn. 1 (regarding the shape of the letter *beis*) albeit a differing interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> *Bava Basra* 25b.

<sup>5</sup> *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 3; see also *Rabboseinu Baalei Hatosafos (Hadar Zekeinim)*; and *Chizkuni*, *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Sefer HaMaamorim*, 5700, p. 68, in the footnote.

<sup>7</sup> {*Atzilus* – *Atzilus* is the highest and most exalted of the four spiritual “worlds” emanated by Hashem. Each world is composed of ten *sefiros* or Divine attributes. *Malchus d’Atzilus* also serves as a bridge between the conclusion of the sublime world of *Atzilus* and the successive three lower worlds.}

*Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah*.<sup>8</sup> [As per the well-known interpretation<sup>9</sup> of the words, “and for Your Torah — which You have taught us”:<sup>10</sup> “and for Your Torah” **Your Torah** refers to the Torah as it exists in *Atzilus*; “which You have taught us,” refers to the Torah as it exists in the world of *Beriah*.] Therefore,<sup>11</sup> Torah begins with a *beis* in order to allude that the Torah which we study is already the **second** level (of Torah).<sup>12</sup> *Aleph*, the **first** level (of Torah)<sup>13</sup> is (the Torah in) *Atzilus*.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.

### REFUTING ALL THREE ANSWERS

Ostensibly, each of these three reasons requires explanation.

a) The first answer is difficult to understand, as *Ibn Ezra*<sup>15</sup> asks: We find many words that begin with a *beis* and which connote the opposite of blessings. [Conversely, there are quite a few words that begin with an *aleph*, which connote goodness and blessing].

b) The second answer {is also difficult to understand}: **The order of Torah** itself mandates that the Torah begin with an *aleph* — since *aleph* is the first letter of the *aleph-beis*,<sup>16</sup> this itself proves that *aleph* is also first in

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<sup>8</sup> {Following the loftiest world of *Atzilus*, in descending order, are the worlds of *Beriah*, *Yetzira* and *Asiyah*, each further and more concealed from Hashem. These worlds are created realms, which (from their perspective) are “separate” entities from G-dliness. In contrast, *Atzilus* is virtually united with Hashem Himself. This point is germane in the matter under discussion, as the Torah the way it is in *Atzilus*, is “Your Torah,” one with Hashem. The way Torah manifests in *Briah*, *Yetzirah* and *Asiyah*, however, is as the Torah is revealed to us, i.e., as created beings who perceive ourselves as something separate. (See also sec. 6 below).}

<sup>9</sup> See *Sefer HaMaamorim*, 5700, p. 68, in the footnote.

<sup>10</sup> *Grace After Meals*.

<sup>11</sup> *Likkutei Torah*, of the *Arizal*, at the beginning of our *parshah*; see *Midbar Kedeimos* (authored by the *Chidah*) *maareches taf, ois 9*.

<sup>12</sup> {As *beis* is the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of the *alef-beis*.}

<sup>13</sup> {Alluded to by *aleph*, the first letter of the *aleph-beis*.}

<sup>14</sup> Additionally, *aleph* is the first letter of the word *Atzilus*, and *beis* is the first letter of the word *Beriah* — *Likkutei Torah*, *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> In his introduction to his commentary on Torah; the *Tanna De’Vei Eliyahu Rabbah*, *ibid*. asks the same question; see also the commentators to the *Jerusalem Talmud* and *Bereishis Rabbah*, *ibid*; and *Tiferes Yisroel* of the *Maharal*, ch. 34.

<sup>16</sup> As is written in the *Tanchuma*, *ibid*.

rank, etc.<sup>17</sup> Thus, since the order of **Torah** warrants that the Torah begin with an *aleph*, it is difficult to suggest that the Torah deviates from its own order and begins with a *beis* to achieve “compatibility” with the world (which is similar to a *beis* in that it is closed from three sides, etc.). The world was created **by** and **to serve** Torah, as our Rabbis say, “Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world,”<sup>18</sup> “*Bereishis* {lit., ‘for *reishis*’} — for the sake of Torah, which is called *reishis* {the first}<sup>19</sup>” and not the reverse, G-d forbid.<sup>20</sup>

c) The third answer {is also difficult}: We recite,<sup>21</sup> “and gave **us His** Torah,” meaning, Hashem gave **us His** Torah. That is, He gave us down here the very same Torah (in the very same order) as it is with Him, “**His** Torah.” Thus, similar to our Torah, the Torah in *Atzilus* also begins with a *beis*. [And not only the Torah in *Atzilus* but even higher, wherever the concept of letters exist, the Torah begins with a *beis*]. Thus, the question stands: Why does the Torah in *Azilus* [and even higher] begin with the letter *beis*?

### 3.

KING PTOLEMY WOULD NOT ACCEPT ANY OF THESE ANSWERS

Another perplexing issue in the subject under discussion:

All of these previously mentioned answers indicate that Torah **needs** to start specifically with a *beis* and not with an *aleph*. However, the *Gemara* recounts<sup>22</sup> that when the Elders translated the Torah for King Ptolemy, “The Holy One placed {the idea} in the heart of each and every one” to all align his translation {with that of his colleagues} in exactly the same way. For example, they all translated the verse, “*Bereishis barah Elokim*” {In the beginning, Hashem created, lit., “the beginning created Hashem”} as if the verse said,

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<sup>17</sup> See *Zohar*, *ibid.* “*Aleph* is the letter of the supernal secret.”

<sup>18</sup> *Zohar* vol. 2, 161b.

<sup>19</sup> *Osiyos De’Rabbi Akiva*, sec. 2.

<sup>20</sup> See, *Kuntres Acharon*, s.v. “*Dovid Zemiros*,” et al.

<sup>21</sup> In the blessings of Torah.

<sup>22</sup> *Megillah* 9a.

“*Elokim barah bereishis*” {Hashem created in the beginning, lit., “Hashem created the beginning”}.<sup>23</sup>

Since they were enlightened from On High to translate the Torah as if it would have said, “*Elokim bara bereishis*,” — beginning with an *aleph* — this proves that reason dictates that the Torah should have begun with an *aleph*; and King Ptolemy would not have accepted any explanation to the contrary. Therefore, a **miracle** was necessary, in that, “The Holy One, planted {the idea} in the heart of each and every one....”

Furthermore, this narrative itself presents an even more perplexing question: The Torah **of truth** offers many reasons why the Torah does not begin with an *aleph*. Would King Ptolemy not have accepted any of them?

#### 4.

FIRST RECOGNIZE THE G-DLY ELEMENT

The explanation:

On the verse,<sup>24</sup> “For what reason did the land perish... because of their forsaking My Torah,” our Sages say<sup>25</sup> (what does “their forsaking My Torah” mean?) “That they did not recite a blessing on the Torah prior {to studying it}.” *Bach* explains<sup>26</sup> (and, this explanation is alluded at by *Rabbeinu Yonah*)<sup>27</sup> that although they learned a great deal of Torah, they did not do so with the intention “to become one and to cleave to the holiness and spirituality of the Torah, and to reveal Hashem’s presence.” This is the meaning of the phrase, “did the land perish”: “This means, it became desolate, and remained materialistic without the holiness of Hashem’s presence.”

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<sup>23</sup> {As Rashi writes, *ibid*, they did this to negate the implication that “*Bereishis*” refers to some deity who created Hashem.}

<sup>24</sup> *Yirmiyahu* 9:11,12.

<sup>25</sup> *Nedarim* 81a; *Bava Metzia* 85b.

<sup>26</sup> *Orach Chaim*, sec. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by *Ran*, *Nedarim*, *ibid*; *Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chayim*,” beg. of sec. 47.

That is to say, Torah contains two elements: a) the study of Torah with comprehension and understanding; and b) the bond and unity with the **Giver** of the Torah, who constitutes the holiness and essence of Torah, surpassing intellect.

The process is as follows: **First**, even before beginning to study Torah, a person must devote and attach himself to the essence of Torah, which is beyond intellect. As indicated by the *Gemara's* wording, “recite a blessing on the Torah **prior** {to studying it},” and **afterwards**, he must learn Torah with the aim of comprehending and understanding it.

This also explains, in a **simple, straightforward** way, why the Torah begins with the letter *beis* and not with an *aleph*. *Aleph* symbolizes what comes first, and *beis* symbolizes what comes second. When a Jew reads and studies Torah, this is already the *beis* of Torah, i.e., the **second** component of Torah. The **first** component — the *aleph* of **Torah** — is the Torah's connection to the Giver of the Torah, which is beyond comprehension and understanding, beyond the imagery of letters.<sup>28</sup> This is necessary even before the “**B(ereishis)**” of Torah, for it prepares a person for the study of Torah.

[Therefore, **all** the levels of Torah — even the Torah of *Atzilus* and higher — begin with a *beis*; for at every level of Torah, there are these two parts: a) the Torah as it has been revealed in the vessels and letters of that world; and b) the **Giver** of the Torah, beyond letters.]

## 5.

### TYING BACK TO THE THREE ORIGINAL INTERPRETATIONS

As mentioned many times,<sup>29</sup> all of the interpretations of a single word (or idea) {in Torah} share a connection to each other. We can say the same in our context: the three aforementioned reasons and interpretations (mentioned above

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<sup>28</sup> {*Oisiyos*, lit. “letters.” A reference in Kabbalistic and Chassidic literature to the parameters of any finite being.}

<sup>29</sup> See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, p. 782; and others.

in section 1) all emanate from one general point — based on the simple explanation, mentioned above (in section 4) — that the *aleph* of Torah symbolizes the bond and unification with a realm beyond understanding; and **studying** Torah with comprehension and understanding is {symbolized by} the *beis* of Torah. This central point and explanation is manifest in three specific elements of Torah and its effect (which are hinted to by the three aforementioned interpretations).

a) Regarding Torah itself — the Kabbalistic interpretation that the *aleph* of Torah symbolizes the Torah of *Atzilus*; and the *beis*, the Torah of *Beriah*.

b) The impact on a **person** who studies Torah — By a person recognizing that comprehension and understanding of the Torah is only the *beis* of Torah, he will approach his study in the manner of (*beis*, which is the initial of the word) “**berachah**” {blessing}, and not, G-d forbid, in the manner of (*aleph*, which is the initial of the word) “**areirah**” {cursed}.

c) Torah’s impact on Creation — when a person studies Torah properly by prefacing with the *aleph* of Torah, he repairs the northern side {of the world} which is not enclosed (as alluded to by the letter *beis*).

## 6.

TORAH, THE PERSON, AND THE WORLD AT LARGE

The explanation:

The meaning of {the imperative to} “recite a blessing on the Torah prior {to studying it}” is not that a person should fulfil his obligation by intending on attaching his soul to G-dliness. Rather, this {blessing} needs to serve also as a preparatory step which must motivate a person to learn Torah, as implied by the nuanced wording of our Sages, “recite a blessing on the Torah **prior** {to studying it}.” [Meaning, after “a blessing on the Torah,” a person **must** proceed to study Torah using his comprehension and understanding.] As such, this will

clearly express itself in a) the Torah itself that he studies; b) in the person studying Torah; and c) in the impact that the Torah has on the world.

a) When a person studies Torah without devotion to the Giver of the Torah, the Torah that he studies is then separated, G-d forbid, from G-dliness. Ultimately this can then result in it becoming a source of energy for the negative forces, etc. This is hinted at by the fact that the first letter of the word “*Bereishis*” also refers to the world of *beriah*, for the word of *beriah* is where the concept of separation begins, as the verse says,<sup>30</sup> “and from there it separates.”

In contrast, when a person studies Torah after first reciting “a blessing on the Torah prior {to studying it},” the (studied) Torah is completely unified with the Giver of the Torah. This is similar to the way that the world of *Atzilus* is the world of unity, where “G-dliness is a given and {Creation’s} existence is a novelty.”<sup>31</sup>

b) Our Sages teach,<sup>32</sup> “If a person merits, the Torah becomes a potion of life for him. If he does not merit, the Torah becomes a potion of death for him.” This, then, explains the idea of the letter *beis* standing for “*berachah* {blessing}” (and *aleph* standing for “*areirah* {curse}”): When a person studies Torah in the manner of “*zachah*”<sup>33</sup> — i.e., in a pure, refined manner, by first recognizing the holiness of Torah — this serves as the ***aleph*** for his Torah study. Then, the *beis* which follows will be ***berachah*** {blessing}, “the Torah becomes a potion of life for him.” However, “if he does not merit” — meaning, the *aleph* of his Torah study is his comprehension and understanding, and he lacks the level of “*zachah*” and holiness of Torah (the true *aleph* of Torah) — then, G-d forbid, the *aleph* stands for “*areirah* {curse},” “the Torah becomes a potion of death for him.”

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<sup>30</sup> *Bereishis* 2:10.

<sup>31</sup> See *Sefer Hamaamorim* 5706, s.v., “*Basukkos Teishvu*,” ch. 27; et al.

<sup>32</sup> *Yoma* 72b.

<sup>33</sup> {*Zachah* (lit., “merit”) is etymologically similar to “*zach*” — pure.}



c) In order for the Torah to affect the world and bring it to the awareness that “there is a master to this edifice,”<sup>34</sup> a person studying Torah needs to recognize and feel {the presence of} the **Giver** of the Torah within the Torah being studied. This connects to the imagery of the letter *beis* which resembles the world in that it is delineated on three sides but open on its northern side. When a person recognizes that the comprehension and understanding of the Torah is {only} the *beis* of Torah — realizing that the the Giver of the Torah is its *aleph* — this repairs and completes the world’s unenclosed, northern flank (alluded to by the letter *beis*).

## 7.

### A DIFFERENT VERSION FOR THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD

Based on all the above, we can also appreciate the reason why the Elders translated the Torah for King Ptoleny directly into a format wherein Torah begins with an *aleph*. For the above discussion — that studying Torah with comprehension and understanding is {but} the *beis* of Torah — is of relevance only to Jewish people and not to the nations of the world.

The law stipulates that “a gentile who studies Torah deserves death.”<sup>35</sup> Meaning, a gentile may not study the Torah {exclusively} for the sake of **Torah study itself**. A gentile may study only those parts of Torah that he must know in order to fulfil “the seven *mitzvos* of theirs.”<sup>36</sup>

Since a gentile studies Torah in order to know how to conduct himself, clearly he can relate only to the comprehension and understanding Torah, but not to the essence of Torah which is beyond intellect. This unique relationship of the Jewish people to the essence of Torah is alluded to and is cultivated through the blessings recited over the Torah prior to its study. [As is evident from the

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<sup>34</sup> {Cf. *Bereishis Rabbah* 39:1.}

<sup>35</sup> *Sanhedrin* 59a; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 10, par. 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

wording of the **Torah blessing**, “Who has **chosen us from among all the nations** and gave **us His Torah.**”]

Therefore, when the Elders translated the Torah for King Ptolemy — i.e., when they translated the Torah into a format germane to Noahites — it turned out as if the Torah had written, “*Elokim bara bereishis*,” beginning with an *aleph*. The reason: for gentiles,<sup>37</sup> comprehension and understanding is the primary objective (not a secondary one).

## 8.

### THE CONNECTION TO *SIMCHAS TORAH*

The reading of *parshas Bereishis* begins on Simchas Torah, and this timing is also relevant to the above discussion.

On Simchas Torah, we dance with the Torah. Specifically by dancing with our feet do we take hold of the Torah’s core.<sup>38</sup> As *Zohar* says,<sup>39</sup> “The custom is for the Jewish people to rejoice with it; it is called *Simchas Torah*, and they adorn the *Sefer Torah* with its crown.” Meaning, rejoicing of Simchas Torah is connected with them adorning “the *Sefer Torah* with its **crown.**” A crown is placed above the head, and this placement represents diffusing *Ein Sof*<sup>40</sup> into the Torah, i.e., the Torah’s (and the Jewish people’s) bond with the Giver of the Torah.

Through this celebratory preparation and eliciting {of the *Ein Sof*}, we can afterwards, on the day of Simchas Torah itself, begin reading and studying *Bereishis*. It begins with the letter *beis*, acknowledging that all the Torah we study is only a **secondary** consideration of Torah. The start of {our connection with} the Torah is our devotion to the Giver of the Torah.

-Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Bereishis*, 5725 (1964)

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<sup>37</sup> {In the original, “*umos ha’olam*”; lit., “nations of the world.”}

<sup>38</sup> See the end of the *mammar* entitled “*Lehovin Inyon Simchas Torah* 5705.” Et al.

<sup>39</sup> Vol. 3, p. 256b; explained at length in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 19, p. 382 ff.

<sup>40</sup> {Lit., “the Infinite”; used to refer to the infinite dimension of G-dliness.}