

# NOW I KNOW MY ALEPH-BAIS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan . . . (Devarim 1:1)*

One of the first things we teach Jewish children is the Aleph-Bais. Words (devarim) are made up of letters, the very building blocks of languages and communications. You want to talk to people and be understood and understand what they say, you have to know how to spell. How many misunderstandings, some catastrophic, have occurred because of spelling errors? The Hebrew language represents its vowels not with letters but with dots and dashes, like Morse Code. It certainly leaves more room for versatility - and misunderstanding. For example, the English word fruit can only really be pronounced one way. However, the Hebrew word for fruit (peiros) spelled: Peh-Raish-Vav-Tav, without its nekudot (vowels) could be pronounced either as peiros or as fruit if the letters are pronounced as they appear without the vowels.

The Hebrew word for orchard is pardes (Peh-Raish-Dalet-Samech). If you put the proper vowels in place below the letters, you could come up with a pronunciation that would be very close to the English word paradise, which the original orchard, Gan Aiden, was. And Parah Adumah (the Red Heifer) and the quintessential example of a paradox, can be made to sound awfully close to the word paradox itself.

We shouldn't be surprised, only amazed, because there are books written that trace English words back to the original Hebrew origins. Modern-day English emerged from Old English, which often based itself upon the Bible and the Hebrew language. On my last trip to the States, someone showed me the Jewish star that is on the US one dollar bill, and told me the story to go with it (the details of which I have forgotten).

Then again, if you look into Sefer Yetzirah, one of the most Kabbalistic works in our possession, you will see that G-d actually made Creation using the Aleph Bais. Just like everything in the physical world, as wide and infinitely varied as it is, is only the result of different combinations of molecules, so too is the physical world just the result of different combinations of letters from the Aleph-Bais, as conceptually difficult as that is to imagine.

Thus, the Talmud even explains each letter of the Aleph-Bais in terms of the concept it represents (Shabbos 104a), even why certain letters were placed side-by-side. Kabbalah goes even further to

show how the letters themselves are composites of other letters, except for the letter Yud. The letter Aleph is composed of two Yuds and a Vav. Since each letter of the Aleph-Bais has a pre-assigned numerical value (gematria), and Yud equals 10 and Vav equals 6, the total numerical value of the letter Aleph would be  $10+10+6$ , or 26, the gematria of the Four-Letter Ineffable Name of God.

As a word, Aleph is like the word aluph, which means chief, and its own gematria is one, and therefore alludes to THE One, the Chief of all chiefs, G-d Himself. This is why many Torah works, such as the Babylonian Talmud, do not begin with Page Aleph (Page 1), but Page Bais (Page 2) instead, in deference to G-d. In fact, even the Four-Letter Name of G-d, when expanded (for example, the letter Yud is spelled Yud-Vav-Dalet), results in different numerical totals, each one representing a different level of revelation of G-d's light, and these, the Names of G-d, are actually the true building blocks of all of Creation, including molecules.

Thus, many books have been written on the inherent wisdom of the Aleph- Bais, some in English, most in Hebrew, and many in Kabbalah. It is truly amazing how something so basic and simple can be so deep and so esoteric, and how something that is used in everyday life can at the same time belong to the holiest of spiritual realms. But that is simply the way it is.

Thus, though talk may be cheap in English, Italian, or French, but never in Hebrew, and this has to be appreciated especially during the Three Weeks that end with Tisha B'Av, as we shall now discuss, b'ezras Hashem.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*The entire assembly raised up and issued its voice; the people wept that night. (Bamidbar 14:1)*

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, "You cry for nothing?! I will establish crying for the generations!" (Ta'anis 29a)

Having said this, we can delve deeper into the Talmud's following question:

Rava said in the name of Rebi Yochanan: Why does the [letter] Peh precede the [letter] Ayin [Rashi: in the majority of the Aleph-Bais acrostics in Megillas Eichah]? Because the spies spoke about that which their eyes did not see. (Sanhedrin 104b)

These, of course, are two letters from the Aleph-Bais, which like the Aleph itself form words when pronounced. A Peh is a mouth and an Ayin is an eye, and therefore the Talmud is making a play on words. Or is it?

Last week in Jerusalem Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, shlita, spoke about this idea. He explained that this is really the idea of shochad (bribery) where a person's biases dictate the way he or she perceives reality. The spies entered Eretz Yisroel with a preconceived notion because they didn't want to go there, and therefore everything they saw was different than it really was. Before a person speaks, he should look, analyze, and then form an opinion. Vision should dictate speech, not the other way

around.

But, said Rabbi Shapiro, this goes far deeper than the level of parable. The world was created according to a very specific order - nothing is random or left to chance. As G-d tells Iyov, who questioned whether or not the Master of the Universe had erred in choosing him to suffer:

Many hairs did I create on a person, and for each one there is a specific follicle so that two hairs should not derive nourishment from the same one. For, should this happen, the light of a person's eyes would be dimmed. Now, if I do not err between one follicle and the next, can you say that I err between one Iyov and another Iyov? (Bava Basra 16a)

We see what happens when we change the molecular structure of a substance, and how dangerous and catastrophic it can be. Likewise, when man acts in a way that runs contrary to the order of Creation established through the Aleph-Bais, then he creates *tohu* - null, void, chaos, and therefore, measure-for-measure, he is punished with the order of the Aleph-Bais, as the Book of Eichah emphasizes.

Thus, when the Jewish people sit down to celebrate their redemption from Egypt, they make a Seder (order). It is the reminder why Klal Yisroel was redeemed from Egypt was to put right that which was wrong in Creation, to establish the world according to the Holy Aleph-Bais, or suffer the consequences of not doing so. Not because G-d goes out of His way to punish us, but because if you move into an apartment built upon a structurally flawed foundation, it will collapse with you in it, G-d forbid.

The crying of the Jewish people, a function of the eyes and one's perspective on a situation had to be rectified by an accurate vision of reality, which could only result in a real crying. But wow, what it took to shake the Jewish people up from the lie of the spies! How many catastrophes have occurred on Tisha B'Av throughout the generations to make us understand what is wrong with our vision of life and reality!?

Thus, the Talmud concludes:

Anyone who mourns over Jerusalem will merit to SEE it in its joy. Anyone who does not mourn over Jerusalem will not MERIT to see it in its joy. (Ta'anis 30b)

That's why Amalek is the antithesis of the Jewish people. Amalek is spelled: Ayin-Mem-Lamed-Kuf, which can be read as Ayin-Malak (the severed eye). Amalek comes to cut off the Jewish eye, preventing Jews from seeing reality as it is so that we can fool ourselves into dealing incorrectly with life and suffer the built-in, G-d-ordained consequences of doing so.

In fact, if the previous generation was the "Me-Generation," then ours is the "I-Generation," or rather, the "EYE-Generation." Everything is a matter of appearances, created in such a manner as to seduce a person through his or her eyes to Eisav's way of life. Balak and Bilaam did not have to kill us, but just curse us, and let history run its course against the Jewish people.

Thus, the parshah of the spies ends off with the warning to not spy after our eyes.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*The vision of Yeshayahu, son of Amotz, which he saw . . . (Yeshayahu 1:1)*

These are the opening words of the Haftarah for Shabbos Chazon - the Shabbos in advance of Tisha B'Av. Last week the Haftarah began speaking about hearing, and the week before that, about speech. As the Pri Tzaddik points out, the three haftarot follow a progression up from the mouth to the eyes, from speech to vision, a rectification for the sin of the spies.

As scientists will tell you, physical life is an optical illusion. Things seem solid through-and-through, like an oak table for example. However, if you were to take the molecules making up the oak table and enlarge them to a much larger size, so that the nucleus would be about the size of an apple, the distance between the electrons and their nucleus around which they are buzzing about would equal a couple of miles, between which there would be nothing else. Doesn't sound too solid, does it.

For example, the magnetic pull that keeps the electrons in orbit around the nucleus is so strong that separating the table's molecules becomes a matter of physically tearing them apart from one another with a saw. But since this takes place beyond the view of the physical eye, on a sub-atomic level, the brain is quite content to make the assumption that the molecules of the oak table are packed next to each other with no space in-between, perhaps with the help of crazy glue or the like.

Thus, history is a matter of rectifying the eyes, and that is an understatement. Everything goes wrong because of the eyes:

The yetzer hara only has power over what the eyes see. (Sotah 8a)

Indeed, the Leshem explains that the initial sin that led to the actual eating came about because Adam HaRishon first looked at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And he did this for the right reason, in order to subdue the evil associated with it, and bring Creation to perfection. His problem was his timing, because he had not just achieved the spiritual greatness necessary to enter the realm of evil and take it head on, and therefore it subdued him instead, lowering him and the world around him until his intellectual clarity was so weakened that he could actually come to eat from the Tree.

And, the truth is, that was only possible because of what happened before Creation, when the pre-Creation sefiros came out through the eyes of Adam Kadmon as opposed to the mouth.

Don't ask. But, suffice it to say that everything in history has been a test for the eyes, and therefore, rectification must come through the eyes, especially since as of 1990 we entered the 83.33-year period of time that corresponds to the tenth hour of Day Six when Adam sinned. That's right: we are 14 years into the period of history that is specifically for rectifying the flaw associated with the concept of eyes, and in the millennium that corresponds to Yesod and the spiritual energy that most

challenges the eyes. Could it have been any other way?

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*The secrets of G-d to those who fear Him. (Tehillim 25:14),*

Which leads me to a discussion about Kabbalah. While traveling through the States, a very close friend of mine handed me a sefer called Sod HaBerit, another tremendous act of Hashgachah Pratis. For, though it is a book that is a compilation of the sections of the Zohar meant to be learned the night before a Bris is to occur, along with an English translation and a short commentary, at the back of the book is a compendium of source after source about the importance and necessity of the learning of Sod in the final generation.

But, who is the final generation? Obviously the one during which Moshiach arrives. But which one is that? Who really knows?

However, at the back of this sefer, the Chesed L'Avraham, Rabbi Avraham Azzula, the highly regarded grandfather of the great Kabbalist, the Chida, says that he had in writing that THE final generation began in 5250 - 514 years ago! Then he, and countless other great rabbis stretching back in time hundreds of years say with certainty that the only way to bring Moshiach peacefully is through the learning of Sod.

Why? Well, the Talmud says:

Anyone who becomes settled through wine has the knowledge (da'as) of his Creator . . . has the knowledge (da'as) of the Seventy Elders; wine was given with seventy letters [Rashi: the gematria of yai'in (wine) is 70], and the mystery (of Torah) was given with seventy letters [sod (mystery) also equals 70], when wine goes in, secrets go out. (Eiruvin 65a)

Seventy, of course, is the gematria of Ayin. Sod is the tikun for Ayin, and according to one quote, it will be crucial for inspiring teshuvah since the regular understanding of Torah and mitzvos won't be sufficient for such a spiritually weak generation. It's like taking a double dosage of medicine for twice the illnesses.

In fact, it is fascinating how the revelation of Pardes - Pshat, Remez, Drush and Sod has worked in the opposite direction of the spiritual decline of the generations. As we have moved farther away in time from Mt. Sinai and the Torah experience, we have become less spiritually capable and less clear about Torah. As a result, the Mishnah, the level of Remez in Pardes, was recorded in 186 CE.

About 300 years later, the Talmud (the level of Drush in Pardes) was recorded to help the generations being spread out throughout the Diaspora. However, it wasn't until the 1300s that the Zohar (the level of Sod of Pardes) was finally published and made available to the masses, and explained in more detail by the Arizal in the 1500s and also other great Kabbalists.

Thus, as the generations have weakened, the intensity of the revelation of Torah has been

increasing, allowing glimpses of Torah that previously were reserved for Jews on far greater levels of Torah genius and spiritual purity. And if anything, science and technology have helped us to understand very abstract concepts making Kabbalistic ideas even more accessible than before, but with one caveat, which never will change.

The psalmist wrote:

The secrets of G-d to those who fear Him. (Tehillim 25:14)

There will always be a difference between those who learn Kabbalah for their own personal ends, and those who do it to become closer to G-d, to become a partner with Him in Creation. To my knowledge, no one's eyes ever fell out of his head for learning Kabbalah for selfish reasons (at least not in this world), though other detrimental things may happen. But, no one who learned Sod for selfish reasons ever became a conduit for its light and wisdom either, nor have they felt so much impact by it to be elevated to higher levels of spiritual consciousness.

For one to develop the eye that Kabbalah comes to build, and see the world as G-d intends for it to be seen, they must first and foremost fear/SEE G- d. Then they will only speak about what truly is, and become the rectification for Creation that all of us are expected to become in whatever way that is relevant to each and every one of us.

May we be comforted and merit to see the end of exile,  
Good Shabbos.  
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