

LETTERS TO THE EARTH

The Alef Bet of Creation

Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport

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The story of how Adam came from Adamah

Genesis 2:7-10 & 15 (Which, when taken more directly from the Hebrew might read like this...)

Then the LORD God formed Adam, [the first human being] out of the dust of Adamah [out of the earth herself], and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and Adam became a living soul.

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there God placed Adam, the work of God's hands.

And the LORD God planted, Adamah, the earth, with every tree that is pleasing to the sight, and good for food; the Tree of Life also in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

And a river flowed forth out of Eden to ever water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became four great streams...

And the LORD God placed Adam in the garden of Eden to guard and to serve her.

איש אשה

A Disciple once asked the Baal Shem Tov, how is it that a man and woman can become so connected as to feel within them a single soul. The Baal Shem replied: It is because of our beginnings in the Garden: "God drew woman from out of Adam's side and brought her to him as his bride." She is "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh," he said. It is a small wonder that we would feel a kinship between us, a sense that there is one soul which dwells within us both. This is why God's name is written within the spaces of the letters of our names. Man is called *Ish*, woman is called *Ishah* and the difference between the two represents the letters of God's name.

אדם אדמה

But Master, said the disciple, were *we* not taken from earth as well? For it is written: "And God formed Adam out of the dust of Adamah." God's name is written within the spaces of these names as well. The first human being was called Adam and the Earth from which we were drawn was called Adamah. And the difference between the two, this too is a symbol of God's name. To this the Baal Shem replied: So it is, that there is a spirit which connects us with the Earth. We, too, are connected as if by a single soul. But just as a man and a woman can, at times, lose sight of the soul that binds them as One, so too can we forget our Oneness with the Earth.

The remedy for both can be found in the letters of God's name. For when we recognize the Presence of God which dwells within us, we can recognize, as well, the Oneness which makes us One.

The lesson for us today is simply this: Adam, the first human being, was drawn by God's own hands from Adamah, from the earth herself and God charged us to guard and protect her. We are of this earth, not apart from it. We share a single soul and whatever we do to this planet we do to ourselves.

ב

בראשית

There is a Midrash, a legend of our people, on the first word of the Torah, *B'reisheet*, which we usually translate as: "In the beginning." Actually, it is not a Midrash on the first word of the Torah, it is a Midrash on the first letter of the Torah, the letter that begins the first word, *B'reisheet*, which is, of course, the letter Bet. But why does the first letter of the first word of the first book of the Torah begin with the letter Bet? Shouldn't the first letter of the first word of the first book of the Torah begin with the first letter of the Alef Bet, which is, of course, Alef?

This is the sort of question which a rabbi loves to ask. Because One has to think that God thought very carefully before writing the first word of the Torah. Because, when God says things, after all, things begin to happen. "Let there be light and there was light." A simple word and the world begins to be. So why does the first word begin with a B? Why does *B'reisheet* begin with a Bet which is not the first letter of the Alef Bet, but the second? Shouldn't it begin with an Alef?

I understand, of course, that *B'reisheet* begins with a Bet simply because it does and if it didn't begin with a Bet, it would no longer be *B'reisheet*. The rabbi who wrote this ancient Midrash understood that too. But this is not a Spelling Bee, it is a Midrash, and the point of a Midrash is not simply to find the right answer, it is to find out why the right answer is right.

So bear with me here as I mention, just briefly, that an excellent case might be made for beginning the Torah with an Alef. After All, the 10 Commandments begin with an Alef, And According to some accounts, the 10 Commandments were written Before the Torah itself ever Began. The 10 Commandments begin: *Anochi Adonai Eloheichem*, I am Adonai your God. In fact, the first commandment not only begins with a word which begins with an Alef, One could also say, that the first three words of the first commandment all begin with the silent sound of Alef.

Alef is not just the first letter, it is the first number as well, which makes it the perfect beginning for the first commandment and the first letter of the name of God, who is after all One. Alef is silent, Alef is secret, Alef is a symbol in itself of God's Holy Name. So why would this magical mystical first letter of the Alef Bet, not be the obvious choice to Become the first letter of the first word of the first book of the Torah just as well?

But you see, that first B, that first letter Bet, it was clearly intended from the Beginning. The first letter of every Torah scroll is written big and fat and boldly upon the page. That Big Bet which Begins the Torah with the word *B'reisheet* is clearly not an accident. God really seemed to want to make a point of beginning the Torah with the letter Bet. This assumes, of course, that God wrote that first letter, with a quill pen and a deep brown ink upon a parchment scroll, just as scribes have done in writing that first word of Torah again and again for thousands of years.

It is a mystery, you see, why the Torah begins with a Bet, and like all the great mysteries of the Torah, one can find a key to unlock this mystery within the pages of the Zohar, the great Midrash of Kabbalah. According to the Zohar, God considered beginning the Torah with the letter Alef for all these reasons and more. But God decided against the Alef because, among other words, Alef is the beginning of the word *Aror*, which means curse, whereas Bet is the beginning of the word *B'rachah*, which means, blessing.

God chose to begin *B'reisheet*, in the beginning, with a letter of Blessing, not a letter of Curse. And each time we reach out our hands to write our own beginnings upon the work of God's creation, we too must consider the possibilities. Will we create things of blessing, or will we bring a curse upon ourselves and upon our Earth.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said:

Our concern with environment cannot be reduced to what can be used, to what can be grasped. Environment includes not only the inkstand and the blotting paper, but also the impenetrable stillness in the air, the stars, the clouds, the quiet passing of time, the wonder of my own being.

I am an end as well as a means, and so is the world: an end as well as a means. My view of the world and my understanding of the self determine each other. Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the world becomes a market place for you.

The complete manipulation of the world results in the complete instrumentalization of the self.

Heschel's words are deep and densely packed with meaning and so I am always wary of trying to explain exactly what they might mean. But there is within these words a more profound lesson than the simple ink upon this page. There is a recognition here that the words we write effect the world in which we live. That we too are a part of that world. That our words matter more, that our deeds matter more, that we matter more than any of us might ever think. We stand not apart from this environment we must protect, we are a part of it, and the Earth too is a part of us.

For Heschel:

"A person who is not affected by the vision of earth and sky, who has no eyes to see the grandeur of nature and to sense the sublime, however vaguely, is not human."

When we cease to feel the wonder of the Earth, our Adamah, we cease too to be truly human, we can no longer claim the name Adam.

This is my last Sabbath Sermon for the year and the last in my series of sermons on the Earth and our responsibility to till and to tend it. But it is my hope and prayer that this too will be a beginning of sorts for you who hear these words. A *B'reisheet* of its own, a new beginning. May each of us write our works upon this earth with blessing, and may we together become repairers of the breach, builders of a better world. Amen.