

## B'reishit

The Hebrew word *b'reishit* consists of the root word *rosh*, “head”, with a prefix and a suffix. It is usually translated as “In the beginning”, but I favor Everett Fox’s rendition, “At the beginning of God’s creating...”<sup>1</sup> because it presents the Creation as a continuing process. It symbolizes the constant human urge to adapt and to thrive, to change and to grow toward wholeness and completion. If we look a little further into the etymology of the word, we can see that it implicitly contains the concept of creation in it because the first three letters, *bet*, *resh*, *alef*, are the *shoresh*, the root, of the Hebrew word *baroh*, to create.

With one word, God began the process of creation. *B'reishit*. Its letters are *bet*, *resh*, *alef*, *shin*, *yod*, *taf*. I wondered if there was any significance to the word itself, or to the letters individually. I thought about using gematriya to divine the Divine in the Creation, but had a real cranial surge of inspiration.

I propose that the word *b'reishit* is a metaphor for the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe. Cosmologists who support the Big Bang theory say that in the beginning, the universe began as a small, compact ball of incredibly compressed matter. This ball exploded and formed, over unimaginably long eons of time and through immeasurably chaotic and complex interactions, the universe as we know it today. Where the ball originated and how it was formed is still an unsolved problem.

I propose that each sound in the word *b'reishit* signifies a Divine action:

- The sound of the *bet* is made with a puff of air forced out from between closed lips. It has echoes of the Big Bang explosion that announced the birth of the universe. It may be metaphoric of the human birth process, too.
- The *resh* starts deep in the throat. It represents the explosive force of the Divine will, the *ruach Elohim* that spanned the untamed oceans, metaphoric of the primitive depths of the unconscious mind.
- The *alef* continues the Divine exhalation that exalted the land above the sea, that differentiated human thought and will from primal desires.
- The *shin* is a sibilant, symbolizing the sound of the wind rushing over *p'nai hamayim* in those long Divine days and nights before there was any life on the face of the planet.
- The *yod*, a gentle lifting of the tongue close to the upper palate, is the breath of life that *Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu* sent into Adam’s nostrils, distinguishing and awakening him from the *adam*, the red earth matrix of his formation.
- The *taf* sound is made with the tongue against the teeth, cutting off the flow of air. It signifies the final acts of creation.

Each day of creation produced an increasingly complex scenario: on the first day of creation God created the heaven and the earth and light and darkness. He also indirectly gave Divine approval to vegetarianism. We know this because of the proximity of the phrase *tofu vavohu* to the phrase

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, Everett (tr.), *The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books, NY, 1995.

*ki tov*. On successive days, He made Heaven, dry land, brought forth grass, herbs, and fruit trees, and celestial bodies. The complexity factor increased when He populated the world with living creatures. Finally, He created His highest achievement, man, and gave man dominion over all of nature. I am not so sure that this was a good idea considering how we have abused our stewardship, but maybe you had to be there....

And finally, God rested after six days of Divine labor. This may be the longest birth process ever recorded. Even the Greek creation myth has God create the world from the primordial chaos. But Greek, shmeek! Our God starts with absolutely nothing but His intentions!

The next section in *B'reishit* is, in a sense, troublesome to me. It deals with the expulsion of the first humans from *Gan Eden*. God created "every tree that is pleasant 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."<sup>2</sup> But does the text really translate to "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"? The text reads "*v'ets hada'at tov vara*" which translates to "and the tree of knowledge; good and evil".<sup>3</sup> The proper form of the phrase ought to involve the *smichut* form, which would then read "*v'ets da'at tov vara*". The *hei ha'y'di'ah*, the definite article, ought to be absent if the common reading of the text is to hold true. Now I am faced with a problem: since the Torah represents the word of God and every letter in it is intentional and true, how am I to explain the translation of the Hebrew into the accepted phrase "tree of knowledge of good and evil"? I don't know. But let us move on to the sequel.

The serpent, "more subtle than any beast of the field" (verse 3:1), deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit of *ets hada'at*, the Tree of Knowledge. She did not die immediately, as God had foretold in verse 2:17. She gave it to Adam to eat, their eyes were opened to their nakedness, and here we are today, reading about *Gan Eden* instead of living in it. What is interesting to me regarding the use of the *naxash*, the snake, is that it is very often used as a symbol of "generativity, potency, and rebirth"<sup>4</sup> But in this context, it is a villain that is responsible for the fact that we all have to work for a living. There is a paradox inherent in the snake symbol that has continued to this very day. In the caduceus, the winged staff that Hermes holds upright and which is the symbol of the medical profession, there are two snakes entwined symmetrically. As Jungian analyst Edward Edinger says, "According to ancient belief, one of those snakes was poisonous and the other healing...."<sup>5</sup> Edinger claims that the snake represents the dual nature of the human unconscious, which can cause us to do good or to do evil. Why the serpent chose to seduce Eve into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is not explained to us in the text, but it is interesting to note a very ironic pun: the Hebrew word for "shrewd", *arum*, is spelled the same as *arom*, "naked".<sup>6</sup> Thus, the shrewd serpent has outsmarted itself in causing the first humans to be ashamed of their nakedness. It thereby incurred the Lord's wrath and is widely perceived as an enemy of man despite the many beneficial actions of snakes in controlling rodents or providing venom of medicinal value.

Ultimately, God feared that Adam would eat the fruit of the Tree of Life as well as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and in addition to having become a moral being, would become an immortal being. Since there can be only one regent in a kingdom, God threw Adam and Eve out of

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<sup>2</sup>The Jewish Publication Society, *The Holy Scriptures*, Ninth Printing 1976, Philadelphia, PA.

<sup>3</sup> Birnbaum, David, *God and Evil*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc. Hoboken, NJ, 1989, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Frankel, Ellen, *The Five Books of Miriam*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Edinger, Edward F., *The Eternal Drama*, Shambhala Press, Boston & London, 1994, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Frankel, p. 6.

Paradise and put cherubim and a flaming sword at the eastern gate of the Garden, thus giving John Steinbeck a book title.

Well, I still haven't resolved for you the issue that I raised earlier, about whether the phrase "*ets hada'at tov vara*" should be read as "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" or as "the tree of knowledge; good and evil".

I propose that the answer lies in the serpent as a symbol of duality. I described the serpent as a symbol of the unconscious mind. Perhaps the Tree of Knowledge represents the conscious mind. This makes sense to me because it completes the circle of consciousness. We use waking consciousness when we actively choose between Good and Evil actions, and the unconscious mind guides our actions in response to primal desires when we are not aware of our inner drives. Thus, the serpent is actually a positive symbol in the process of psychological individuation. This is a fancy phrase that Jungians use to describe the process of becoming who you were meant to be. And to go a step further, the serpent is an agent of the Divine will if you choose to describe the expulsion from *Gan Eden* as the birth of human consciousness and as a necessary step in the development of humanity.

And I rejoiced and James Joyce'd when I came to the reasonably profound insight that Torah is the DNA of the Jewish people.

Thank you for your attention.

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