Intellectual humility: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Our sages contemplated why the Torah begins with the letter *bet*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We might have expected it to have opened with an *aleph*, the first letter.

Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, in his new book "Torah Travels," offers his insight. "The Torah begins with the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet to teach us that this world is one of *bet*—two-ness, a world filled with disparate energies and opposites that must be integrated into a unity-based consciousness." Life confronts us with numerous conflicts between good and evil, righteousness and wickedness, truth and illusion. Our task is to recognize the various forces within us and our world—and to seek to achieve as harmonious and wholesome a life as possible.

The letter *bet* also teaches humility. No matter how much Torah we know, we only start from the second letter as if to say we don't even know the first thing, the *aleph*. Interestingly, the first page of every Talmudic tractate is *bet*; those who established the pagination were thereby hinting that we don't know everything and can't know everything. We start from page 2; page 1 is missing altogether, it's not available, it's beyond us. The lesson: study hard, learn as much as possible; but recognize that there is much that will be out of reach.

Intellectual humility is the first step in the acquisition of wisdom. This does not mean that one should be intellectually timid. One should think carefully and uphold principles of truth…but not be so dogmatic as to shut off other points of view.

The Talmud (Taanit 4a) cites the opinion of Rav Ashi that any rabbinic scholar who is not hard as iron is no rabbinic scholar! A Talmid Hakham must hold strong convictions and must not bend under pressure. Yet, a few lines later, the Talmud reports the opinion of Ravina: "even so, a person must teach himself the quality of gentleness." Yes, commitment to principles is very important; but so is maintaining a compassionate and loving attitude. We must be strong in upholding truth as we understand it; but we must also have the gentleness and humility to

take into consideration the views and needs of others.

Dr. Fred Hoyle, an English astronomer of the 20th century, made an astute observation. “It seems to be characteristic of all great work, in every field, that it arises spontaneously and unpretentiously, and that its creators wear a cloak of imprecision…The man who voyages strange seas must of necessity be a little unsure of himself. It is the man with the flashy air of knowing everything, who is always on the ball, always with it, that we should beware of. (“Of Men and Galaxies,” Prometheus Books, NY, 2005, p. 28).

The letter *bet* that opens the Torah is a reminder that no matter how much we may know, there is so much more that we do not know. Intellectual humility is the first step in the acquisition of wisdom.