

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Braesheet

There is always a lot of talk about predictions that people find in biblical texts. Did you realize that the Torah predicted the World Series? In fact, it is one of the Torah's first predictions. "In the Big Inning, God created ..." Okay, yes, this is a bad joke, but I am often not amused when confronted by people who seek to prove absolutes in the bible. I sat on a panel discussion on Religion and sexuality and listened to a co-panelist go on and on about biblical proofs, and how they made -- by edict of God -- almost any act of sexuality immoral - any act except the ones of which he approved. He was not appreciative of my response that the Bible can be made to say just about anything, including the prediction of baseball, especially when manipulated in translation. The Hebrew text is written without vowels, and it is only 1000 years ago that the Masoretes created the symbols for vowel and punctuation that we take for granted, today. They took the way in which the majority of people had been reciting the Torah and put the sounds to paper, overlapping them with the existent words of the text. We know that the readings and the written vowels are not always in synch, and we know further that the creation of this system was intended for ceremonial purposes, but not for the most sacred use of the scripture: study. The commentators never defaulted to this standard as being uniform or mandated. Commentaries based on alternative readings and understandings proliferate still today.

"Braesheet bara Elohim." These are the first three words of the Torah. Commonly, people translate them into English as, "In the beginning, God created" Of course, this translation begs a great many questions, "In the beginning of what?" is only one. In fact, the variations of vocalization that are possible for each word in the text provide us with some of the most amazing insights.

Some teach that the word *Braesheet* is actually two words, "*Bara Shaet*." Effectively this could mean "At the point of the sixth attempt of creation (*bara* is create and *shaet* would be a form of the word for six)."
There were many other creations before us, and presumably many others after. The fact that the first word of the Torah begins with the second letter of the alphabet is a topic of many commentaries. Why begin everything with the second letter? Well, the commentaries will range from, "making the statement that this was the second attempt or second world, not the first," to "In the Genesis story there are two differing accounts of creation (chapter one verses chapter two), using the second letter reminds us that both are of equal value in our study." I read another today that argued that the second letter reminds us that even while the first thing created is light; it is only one of two forms of light. The sun and stars do not appear until day four. The light of the first day is a greater light source that transcends that of the sun and hence, two different lights). One can then wrestle with the use of the plural noun "Elohim," attached to the singular verb "bara." Why might that be? Are there more gods than one? No, that would require the plural verb. Ultimately, the word, :Braesheet has a numerical equivalent of 813, exactly three times a Hebrew word for pregnancy and the name of the prophet Jeremiah, and, by the way, the Reform Jewish Prayer book (Gates of Prayer) has 779 pages. The difference between 813 and 779 is 34 - the numerical equivalent of the word Laevav (heart). When one brings one's heart together with the teachings in this book, the world is recreated, after all, when one begins with the realization that the commentary is everything, anything can be possible.

I could go on with a great many such examples, but as I rolled the Torah back to Genesis from its final words of Deuteronomy, I could only think, "So few words. So many variations." And then I thought, "How is this different than anything else we encounter in life?" Each of us sees the world through unique lenses. Each of us writes a different history of the very same events; our histories colored by our perceptions of what happened ... which are in turn colored by our family and community upbringing, D.N.A, and a whole host of things. I thought that perhaps the best way to acknowledge this new cycle of reading was to affirm that we will be reading from the same pages, but not one of us will actually be on "the same page." For us to build a stronger community, we will have to be intentional about doing so. We will have to commit to paying closer attention to each other, to listen and share more than speak and impose. For the many blessings and valued meanings that we can draw from text and from each other, may this Sabbath lead us to appreciate those blessings and share in each other's journey. Shabbat Shalom.