

GOD'S COMICS

The Hebrew Alphabet as Graphic Narrative

SUSAN HANDELMAN

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *ALL RIVERS RUN TO THE SEA*, THE LATE ELIE WIESEL describes learning to read Hebrew as a child:

My first teacher, the Batizer Rebbe, a sweet old man with a snow-white beard that devoured his face, pointed to the twenty-two holy letters of the Hebrew alphabet and said, “Here, children, are the beginning and the end of all things. Thousands upon thousands of works have been written and will be written with these letters. Look at them and study them with love, for they will be your links to life. And to eternity.”

When I read the first word aloud—*B’reshit*, “in the beginning”—I felt transported into an enchanted universe. An intense joy gripped me when I came to understand the first verse. “It was with the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-beth* that God created the world,” said the teacher, who on reflection was probably not so old. “Take care of them and they will take care of you. They will go with you everywhere. They will make you laugh and cry. Or rather, they will cry when you cry and laugh when you laugh, and if you are worthy of it, they will allow you into hidden sanctuaries where all becomes. . . .” All becomes what? Dust? Truth? Life? It was a sentence he never finished. (10)

The old rabbi brought the letters to life for the young boy. They became embodied characters, full of movement and emotion, anthropomorphic guides beckoning on to hidden worlds . . . like characters from “comics,” one could even say. But this wasn’t just a clever pedagogical trick to engage a

young child. The rabbi was teaching Elie one of the deepest ideas of Jewish rabbinic tradition: the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are not neutral marks on a page, but living cosmic forces, building blocks of the universe, whose specific graphic forms, combinations, and sequences continuously channel God's creative energies.¹

When I was a child like Elie and didn't know Hebrew, I used to look at an inscription of the biblical verse "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob" (Num. 24.25) sculpted in large, black, one-foot Hebrew letters, high above our heads on a beam over the synagogue pulpit. I didn't know then what verse it was or what the letters meant, nor did I understand the synagogue service. But the Hebrew letters transfixed me, danced and moved and beckoned me to other realms. They do so even now, after many decades of Hebrew study. In rabbinic tradition the graphic shapes of the letters have their own life; they tell "other stories" than the ones we are familiar with on the Bible's literal narrative level. In these depths I meet them anew again and again; it is where *the words become images, and the images, words.*

I would like in this chapter to probe the Jewish visual imagination of the sacred through a discussion of the Hebrew alphabet as "graphic narrative." How does the relation of text and image become deconstructed and redefined in classical rabbinic writings on the Hebrew alphabet and the forms of the letters? What reciprocal dialogue can we start between "comics" and "Torah," between theories of graphic narrative and rabbinic interpretation? What might a "theology of graphic narrative" look like? Even after decades as a professor of literature, I still ask myself: what is this magic of marking and writing, of seeing these black marks on a white page, that allows me to transfer my thoughts to you across time and space? We usually look "through" rather than "at" those marks, reading quickly for "meaning." Like the complex interplay of word and image in comics panels, the rabbinic focus on the graphic shapes of the Hebrew letters of the Torah forces us to slow down our reading. "Torah" is the word Jews use to refer to the entire corpus of the Bible (the "Written Torah") plus the thousands of years of oral and written interpretation of it (the "Oral Torah"). Like comics, Torah text then becomes "multi-modal," with parallel tracks of text and images colliding and interacting, sounding and resounding.

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How to begin, then? "All beginnings are difficult," say the ancient rabbis (*Mekhilta*, Ba-hodesh 2). Indeed, whether it's learning how to read, or beginning writing an essay, summoning an image, drawing a comics panel, or creating a cosmos. But everything is already implicitly there, in the beginning. So I'll

focus my discussion on the first letter of that first word of the Bible that Elie Wiesel learned to read—the Hebrew letter *beit* of the word *b'reishit* [בראשית]. *Beit* is the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet: the first is *alef* [א], and then comes *beit* [ב]. We'll explore these two letters independently and then in sequence as “graphic narratives” about beginnings.


Before proceeding, a few remarks are needed about the Hebrew language and biblical text. Hebrew is constructed around three-letter consonantal roots and written with twenty-two consonantal letters. Those twenty-two letters of Hebrew share with other ancient Semitic languages the pictorial-graphical symbols that are at the origin of *all* alphabetic writing. *Alef* and *beit* are the ancestors of the Greek *alpha* and *beta* and the Latin letters “A” and “B,” in which you are reading me now. Unlike Latin, however, Hebrew does not have vowels, and so reading Hebrew is like playing Scrabble. If you saw the two consonants “ct” and needed to decipher the word to which they referred, you could try various vowels: “cut,” “acute,” “act,” “coat,” “cat,” “cot.” The hand-written Torah scrolls, passed down since ancient times and composed according to strict Jewish legal prescriptions, also have no upper and lower cases, no sentence endings or pauses and no numbers separating chapters and verses. These scrolls contain an unpunctuated, unvocalized string of letters read from right to left—a visual feast, but how do you know what the letters and words mean, and how to combine them? On the one hand, the lack of vowels and punctuation opens the text up to many dimensions of meaning, to alternate narratives and various ways of reading every letter sequence. But that openness also risks incomprehensibility and distortion. During the Middle Ages, rabbinic scribes called *masorettes* (from the Hebrew word for “tradition”) added a system of diacritical marks and annotations in order to pass on the normative community’s traditional understanding of the text and boundaries for interpretation. Figure 2.1 depicts the first line of the book of Genesis, the way it appears printed in rabbinic Hebrew Bibles since the fifteenth century. Elie Wiesel was most likely looking at just such a printed page of the first verses of Genesis when he learned to read with his



Figure 2.1. Genesis 1:1 (Hebrew: Bereishit בראשית) in the traditional Hebrew script. “Bereishit” from page 2 of the Rabbinic Bible (Hebrew: Mikraot Gedolot גדולות מקראות), Jerusalem 1931 printing. In the public domain

teacher. Jews use these printed texts for study, but they are not permitted for the official, ritual, chanted reading of the Torah in the synagogue, where only the handwritten, unpunctuated scrolls can be used.

Some of the little added dots and lines around the letters are called vowel points, *nekudot*; others mark chapter and verse; others are cantillation marks, called *te'amim*. Like the soundtrack of a film, the marks for chanting add sense and dramatic impact to the verses. Or, to use another metaphor, the masoretic diacritical marks are like a set of “stage directions,” telling the actors how to move, talk, and animate the script. Jewish mystical traditions refer to the letters as “bodies” and to the vowels and chant marks as the “souls” that breathe and sing the letters to life. From the point of view of graphic narrative, these marks parallel devices comics artists use called “emanata”—the lines and squiggles and icons around an object or a character, revealing what is going on in the character’s head—or the words the comics artist uses to add sound dimensions to a silent object on the page, such as “BOOM!” or “THWACK!” In sum, the meaning of the Hebrew letters comes both from active seeing and from performance. The root of the Hebrew word for “reading” is also the root for “calling”: *kara* קרא. The reader/viewer/chanter calls the meaning of the silent letters into being, reciprocally participating in their life. As Elie Wiesel’s teacher told him: “Take care of them and they will take care of you. . . . [T]hey will cry when you cry and laugh when you laugh. . . .”

Now, let’s take a breath—or, to use the technical term for one of those masoretic diacritical marks, an *etnachta*, a “pause.” The *etnachta* looks like a little upside-down horseshoe ; it signals to the person reading or chanting where to stop for a moment. That pause helps establish grammatical structure and meaning in an unpunctuated text. But it’s something *every* speaker, singer, artist or writer needs to do: incorporate moments of pause, breath, blank space into the onrushing flow of letters, images, sounds, words. There is an especially interesting rabbinic law, among the thousands about how to handwrite a Torah scroll: the letters can’t touch each other (*Menakhot* 29a). If even one letter touches another letter slightly, the *entire scroll* is invalidated. Rabbinic law prescribes other types of empty space, including spaces *inside* the letters, between words, between different biblical sections, special spacing for poetic passages, and even for the white character of the parchment upon which the black letters are written. On a deeper level, as we’ll see below, in those “hidden sanctuaries” of Jewish mysticism to which Elie’s teacher alluded, the empty spaces and white background upon which the black letters are written, and the spaces inside of the letters, are seen as

more charged with meaning, more significant, and on a “higher” level than the black letters.

Those blank spaces parallel the function of “negative space” in art and of what in comics is called “the gutter,” the crucial white space between panels. Scott McCloud, in his classic book *Understanding Comics*, argues that the gutter is what makes comics distinctive, different from film and other media. As he stresses, it also requires the reader to be an active participant. She or he has to create meaning from the sequence of two juxtaposed images or panels and the blank space between them to create “closure,” to fill in the gaps; that is part of the pull and magic of comics. It parallels the way the reader of a Hebrew Torah scroll has to actively fill in the gaps of the consonantal text, give it sense, and become pulled into its intonation and rhythm. Writes McCloud, “If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar, and since our definition of comics is the arrangement of elements—then, in a very real sense comics *is* closure” (67).

McCloud’s definition of comics has been challenged by other comics theorists, and the academic debate about how to define them is endless. But I’m choosing to use the word “comics” here the way McCloud understands it: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Comics also involve a special relation and tension between word and image. The visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell broadens the definition even further:

[C]omics is a transmedium, moving across all boundaries of performance, representation, reproduction, and inscription to find new audiences, new subjects, and new forms of expression. . . . Comics is also transmediatic because it opens audiences onto a deep history that goes back before mass media, perhaps even before writing and drawing, to the fundamental moment of the mark, the graphic sign. . . . (259)

Those primal gestures of marking underlie the origins of alphabets. So let’s now narrow our focus down again to the juxtaposed graphic images of *alef* and *beit* in the word *b’reishit*. The Hebrew letter “*beit*” [ב] begins the word *b’reishit* (בראשית) and is the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*alef-beit*). In the rabbinic scheme in which each Hebrew letter also has numerical value, *beit* has the value of “two.” About *b’reishit*, the word that “begins the beginning,” the rabbis ask a simple but profound question: Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate for the Torah to begin with the *first* letter of the alphabet,

the *alef* [א], since we are dealing with beginnings? Here is a famous midrash (rabbinic form of exegesis), which adds graphic analysis of the letter *beit* to the answer. It comes from the collection known as *Bereishit Rabbah*, a set of commentaries on the book of Genesis compiled from generations of popular rabbinic interpretation and redacted sometime around the fifth century CE:

R. Yonah said in R. Levi's name: Why was the world created with a *beit*? Just as the *beit* [ב] is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind [the metaphysical secrets of creation, time and history]. . . . You may speculate from the day that days were created, but not on what was before that. . . . And why not with an *alef*? Because it connotes cursing [the word *arur* ארור]. . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I will create it with the language of blessing, and would that it may stand!" (*Ber. Rabb.* 1:10)

The rabbis are connecting the graphic shape of the *beit* to deeper philosophical and epistemological questions about creation, and how much we can penetrate God's secrets. (We'll examine why they connect those issues to the "blessing" of the *beit* and "curse" of the *alef* later.) The midrash then elaborates a "graphic dialogue" between the *beit* and *alef*:

Why [did creation start] with a *beit*? Just as a *beit* has two projecting thorns [*oketzim*] one pointing upward and the other below and behind, so when we ask it, "Who created you?" it intimates with its upward point and says, "He who is above created me." And if we ask further, "What is His name?" it intimates to us with its back thorn, and says "The Lord is His name."

The *beit* is graphically coming to life and speaking like a "cartoon" character. Where are those "thorns," and how are they pointing? Look at an image of the *alef* and the *beit* on the following page to see how the forms and sequence of these two letters convert into a graphic narrative relating and enacting a complex metaphysical process. In figure 2.2, in which the letters are handwritten by a contemporary Torah scribe according to traditional Jewish law, the *alef* is on the right and the *beit* on the left, just as they appear in the order of the Hebrew alphabet, which is read from right to left.

Look at the top thick horizontal line of the *beit*, called the "roof" in scribal language, and then move your eyes back to the far right where it intersects

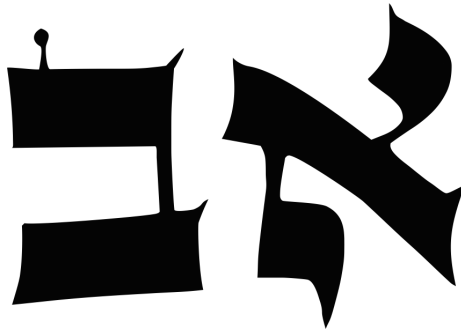


Figure 2.2. The first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet written right to left in a font rendered digitally based on hand-drawings of the traditional Hebrew scribal script (Hebrew: Ktav Stam (כתב סת"ם). Alef Beit, by Izzy Pludwinski. Copyright © 2017 Izzy Pludwinski

at the top corner with the vertical line. At the far top right of the intersection, attached to the top right end of the line is a tiny diagonal, thorn-like protrusion, pointing backwards. The protruding point is called an *oketz* or *kotz* (“thorn”) in rabbinic scribal terms. There are other names for the various separate strokes and parts that compose the letters, such as “heel,” “neck,” “arm,” “leg,” “face,” and so forth. They direct and express the life of the strokes that create the letter, their movement and “intention.” Now look at the bottom of the vertical base line composing the *beit*, and to the right, to its “back” and “heel.” There you see a second large, protruding thicker thorn, also pointing up and backwards. Looked at this way, the “back” of the *beit* has also come alive and is pointing *backward* toward the *alef*.

These two protruding thorns on the tail of the *beit* pointing back at the *alef* are the *beit*’s answers to the eternal questions: Who created the world—and how? “Look back and above,” the *beit* is graphically saying to us, according to the midrash: “Look back to the *alef*, and you will see the One, and you will also find out God’s name.” *Alef* is the first letter of the word *adon* (“Lord”) and also of the word *aluf* (“leader, general”). As the first letter of the alphabet, *alef* also has the numerical value of “one.” The rabbis are interpreting not only the shapes of each individual letter-image, but the sequence, juxtaposition, and spaces between them, parallel to the way we would begin to construct and analyze a set of comics images or panels. The answer to all the questions, “What’s above; what’s below; what came before; what’s behind?” is: “*Alef, Beit.*”

Jewish mystical sources explain that answer more deeply by probing further into the life, forms, and meanings of the letters. Among the most

important sources is the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Illumination), one of the earliest and most foundational Kabbalistic texts.² This short, enigmatic book is a redaction of many ancient traditions and part of the literary emergence of Kabbalah in Spain and Provence in the thirteenth century CE. The *Sefer ha-Bahir* also analyzes the graphic shapes and interactions of the *beit* and *alef*. It plays on and radically revises the midrash's interpretation of the *beit* as forbidding us to inquire about the primordial secrets of creation. It takes us right into those hidden realms where the *alef* and *beit* graphically interact like comics panels and create the world. It shows us how this seemingly "simplistic 'comics question'" about which letter should begin the Torah is really a deeper hermeneutic dilemma. For here, *beit* is a "beginning that is second." How is it that *alef*—the first letter, with the value of one—is *not* the beginning? What does it mean that *beit*, the second letter, represents beginning? What, indeed, is "beginning"?

Here is one of the key passages from the *Sefer ha-Bahir*:

R. Rehumai said and expounded:

Why is the letter *alef* at the head [*ba-rosh*]? For it preceded everything, even Torah.

And why is *beit* next to it? Because it was first [*tehillah*].

And why does it [the *beit*] have a tail? To point to the place from which it came, and there are some who say, that from there the world is sustained. [§17–18]

It sounds like a Zen koan; this text is fragmentary and, like many other Kabbalistic writings, intended to be cryptic, so only the worthy few could understand and pass on the deepest "secrets" of Torah. These texts also deal with religious intuitions beyond syllogistic reason and leave much "gutter"—"white space"—for the reader to decipher. About the gutter in comics, Scott McCloud further writes, "The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible" (92). That's also a fine way to describe how these Kabbalistic texts are constructed. So prepare as well for some intense effort to understand as we go along.

Elliot Wolfson interprets this passage to mean that *alef* is first, as the "head" [*rosh*] or "foundation," but that it is not the "beginning" [*tehillah*] (135). (There is also a play on the word "*b'reishit*," which has within it letters for the Hebrew word for "head," *rosh* [ראש]: *reish*, *alef*, *shin*.) *Ba-rosh* means "at the head." The passage is telling us that *to know alef we have to start with beit, which points to what came before*. That is what R. Rehumai alludes to

in the enigmatic passage, “And why does it [the *beit*] have a tail? To point to the place from which it came. And there are those who say, that from there the world is sustained.” We need another *etnachta* here! To help grasp this Kabbalistic distinction of a “beginning” point from the “head” (in the sense of “absolute origin and fount of everything”), think for a moment of how you would determine the “beginning” or “origin” of anything. We often never know the exact beginning point of any journey—be it intellectual or existential—until we are well on our way and look back. And even then, it’s not so easy to tell. When did I “begin” to write this essay? When I actually sat down the first day to compose it at the blank screen? When I typed the first word or when I finally got the idea, after trying many other beginnings, to start it with the quotation from Elie Wiesel? Or was it months earlier, when I started the research? Maybe it was when I saw the proposal for this volume of essays. Or even before that, when I started to become interested in graphic narratives, or a few decades ago when I started to study rabbinic texts and learn Hebrew? Or even earlier, when. . . ? At what temporal moment did I “begin” it? And beyond that, what was its ultimate creative foundation or “origin”?

The question of beginnings is an infinite regress, pointing endlessly back to some ultimately hidden, ungraspable “origin” (“head”), including the “beginnings” of our birth and the birth of our cosmos. As recent science has taught us, even what we can see and measure of the vast universe and its billions of galaxies is only a fraction. The bulk is composed of dark matter that’s invisible. I’d like to think of the *alef* in the *Sefer ha-Bahir* as representing a kind of “dark matter,” another metaphor for the ungraspable divine origin of the universe. It may be unknowable, but what we *can* see of the universe points back to it. Thus, the *beit*’s tail is pointing back, as it were, from “beginnings” to “origins” in the divine infinite abyss.

The *Sefer ha-Bahir* further interprets the boundaries of what can be seen and understood about the world in the graphic interplay of *alef* and *beit*:

Why is the letter *beit* closed on all sides and open in the front?

This teaches us that it is the house (*bayit*) of the world. Thus the Holy One Blessed be He is the place of the world and the world is not His place.

Do not read *beit*, but *bayit*, as it is written, [Proverbs 24:3] “With wisdom [*hokhmah*] the house [*bayit*] is built, with understanding it is established. . . . [§14]

The *beit's* shape, as in the midrash, is “closed on three sides and open in front.” In its origins in seventeenth-century BCE ancient pre-Canaanite script, the *beit* indeed is an abstracted pictograph of a house, drawn with open door and surrounding walls; and *bayit* means *house* in the cognate Semitic languages. In our midrash and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the name *beit*, *bayit*, house, alludes to God’s creating the *house* of the world. This is where time and space “begin,” and so there is an open space in front for new possibilities, for historical development—but God is also the surrounding, and protecting the “house” of the *beit*. Here the very “blessing” of God, [*brakha*], fills the world, connecting it to the *Ein Sof* of God (lit. “without end,” the Kabbalistic term for the abyss of “divine infinity”). In the graphic language of our “Kabbalistic comics panels,” *alef*, the primordial ungraspable origin “beyond,” makes a connection to the *beit*, the beginning of space and time. The *beit* then builds, makes a place, a home for creation in space and time. God creates time and space, surrounds, fills, and sustains the world but is still always beyond. God is “the place of the world, but the world is not His place”: *Alef, Beit*.

The *Sefer ha-Bahir* then takes us deeper into an analysis of how relations between open white spaces and black letters represent and enact the Divine creative flows emanating from God’s infinity, and how they connect to and sustain finite creation. It shifts our perception and animates the letters further by making parallels between their forms and the shape of the human body:

What does the *beit* resemble? [ב] It is like a man, formed by God with wisdom [*hokhmah*]. It is closed on all sides but open in front.

The *alef*, however, is open from behind. [א]

This teaches us that the tail of the *beit* is open from behind. If not for this, man could not exist.

Likewise, if not for the *beit* on the tail of the *alef* the world could not exist.

Aryeh Kaplan, commenting on this enigmatic passage in his own translation of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, interprets the front “opening” of the *beit* (the white open space on its left side between the two edges of the thick horizontal black) as the openings of the “two main organs of human expression and generation, the mouth and the sexual organ,” which are also “open” in front (Kaplan 99). And indeed, if these human orifices were sealed, a person could not exist. So, too, if the divine generative flow should cease, the world could not exist. This is just a glimpse of a topic for which we have no space here: the way Kabbalistic texts speak simultaneously on many levels, especially of

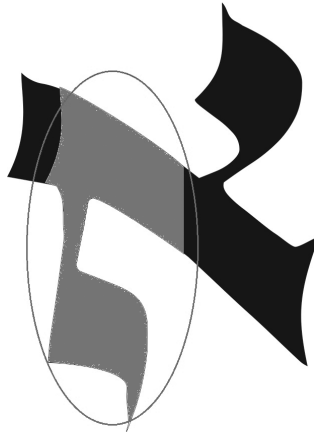


Figure 2.3. The Hebrew letter *beit* highlighted in gray and circled inside the letter *alef* in a font rendered digitally based on hand-drawings of the traditional Hebrew scribal script (Hebrew: Ktav Stam סת"ם). *Beit*, by Izzy Pludwinski. Copyright © 2017 Izzy Pludwinski

correspondences and mutual influences among different parts of the cosmos. The main point is that what's described about the human being is another allusion to and reflection of intra-divine processes and the divine supernal creative attributes, emanations known as *sefirot*. These are different “faces” and “dynamic configurations” of the Divine, to which the letters are also related. But what does the *Sefer ha-Bahir* mean with that cryptic phrase about a *beit* “on the tail of the *alef*”? The text mentions *two* tails: the tail of the *beit*, and the *beit* “on the tail of the *alef*.” We’ve seen the first, but where is the second?

We have to move to a more complex visual level now. We’ve been looking at *alef* and *beit* as two separate letters but are now directed to see how one letter can contain *within itself* other letters and can also become multidimensional. Look back again at the *alef*. Meditate on it playfully; dissolve the letter itself into different shapes, forms, lines, curves, components. Try to see it sculpturally in three dimensions and not just flat on the page. Here is a further hint: another great thirteenth-century Provençal Kabbalist, R. Asher Ben David, writes of the *alef*: “If you flip her in all directions, you shall be able to build each and every letter from her” (qtd. in Fishbane 496). Did you see the *beit* on the “tail” of the *alef* graphically illustrated in figure 2.3 above? The *beit* is upside down, drawn in gray, and circled to make it easier for you to identify.

The “tail” of a letter is sometimes also called the “leg”; here the *beit* is the lower “left leg” of the *alef*. The key point, once again, is how the letters are interpreted as graphically conveying and enacting the Divine flows and emanations that create and continuously sustain the world. Meir Sender interprets our passage as follows: “Given the right-to-left flow of Hebrew writing, letters that have curves that cup spaces above and to the right are receiving from levels ‘above’ themselves. Letters that have curves that cup spaces below and to the left are emanating to levels ‘below’ themselves.” With that in mind, the letter *beit* on its own, as we saw before, is closed on three sides and open to the left. This means that it emanates to levels of existence “below,” to our “home” world of space and time and finitude. Yet for the world and the whole cosmos on its many other physical and metaphysical levels to exist and endure, the world also has to receive Divine flow from a higher level than that, from “Above.” That is the function of the *alef*—and *not just* when it precedes the *beit* in linear sequence. The *alef* also contains *within* it, as Sender puts it, “an incipient *beit*, a *prefigured beit*, in its backwards upside-down tail.” In this way, he continues, the *alef* “has a curve cupping a space to the right, symbolizing and enacting the receiving of emanation from Above.” That sustains the entire cosmos and system of Divine creative flow as Kabbalah constructs it.

In sum, “If not for the *beit* on the tail of the *alef* the world could not exist.” Aryeh Kaplan further interprets the “*beit* on the tail of the *alef*” to mean: “[E]ven the most brilliant light, is utter darkness when compared to the infinity of God” (99–100). That visible/invisible *beit* within the form of the *alef*, in other words, is part of the metaphysical paradox of the infinite and finite, the ungraspable origin, the Divine abyss giving birth to the finite, to shape, form, space, and time.

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We have now looked at the meaning of the “negative space” *inside* and *between* the letters. The *beit* and *alef*, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* has observed, “open from behind,” but in different ways. We also saw before in the midrash how the *beit*’s tail opens from “behind” with its little thorns pointing back to the hidden origin, *alef*. The *alef* opens too, but in another multidimensional way. Look at the two independent letters again: the *alef* has many more “openings” than does the *beit*. In fact, the *alef* is unique among all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in being “open on all sides.” Moreover, when the *alef* is pronounced *verbally*, it sounds like “ahhhhhh”—a simple opening of the mouth and vibrating expiration from the throat, like the sound of the letter “a” in English. *Beit*, in contrast, is pronounced with closed lips, making a

short, clipped “b” sound. “Likewise,” says the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, “if not for the *beit* on the tail of the *alef* the world could not exist.” In another sense, the *beit*’s boundaries make *our* world possible. We couldn’t live in a world that was wholly *alef*, so utterly open and permeated by the Infinite. We would be nullified out of existence or go mad. That would not be a “blessing” but a “curse.” Those who speak in the name of “Absolute Truths,” which they claim to solely possess, bring curse and cruelty to the world, not blessing. They have no room for the other, for plurality, for “*beit*.” Therefore, *our* world and *our* Torah (as opposed to other levels of Torah and other metaphysical worlds) begin with the *beit* of *b’reishit*. We live and flourish in the world of duality, of time, space and division, not absolutes. Yet somehow, and this *is the critical point* and the great mystery of the universe, there is a level in which the *alef* connects and contracts and flows to the *beit* in order for there to be a world at all; a way in which *alef* contains all the letters, as the Kabbalists affirm, and is the kernel of everything, the origin. Without the continuing, oscillating relation of *alef* and *beit*, the world could not exist. This relation is enacted in the black and white spaces *between* the letters and words, and *inside* the letters, in multiple dimensions.

The *Sefer ha-Bahir* still leaves us many “gutters.” But even if you can’t quite grasp all the explanations above, it also teaches that these deeper meanings are enacted in the potency of the letters’ “graphic narratives”—just by our looking, even without our being consciously aware of or understanding them. The letters and white spaces are “living” Divine agents; the metaphysical-cosmological creative process is enacted and embodied, as it were, every time we gaze at or write the spaces and letters. Doing so is a channel for us to absorb and unite with God’s light, even if we have no cognitive grasp of their textual meaning. At the same time, these midrashic and Kabbalistic texts also teach us to *look and read anew*, to play with the letters, to “become scribes” of the Torah as well, as it were.

...

Time for a final *etnachts*. Isn’t all this, one could object, a kind of giant Rorschach game, where the rabbis are just reading into lines and blotches what they want to see? Well, yes, in a way, because as the rabbis themselves say, the way that you look at and draw the letters, vocalize and chant them brings them to life, creates them, activates their potential divine forces. Writing them, reading them, meditating upon them, composing and recomposing them, makes you participate in their creative energies, connects you to God. The letters come alive; *they create you as you create them*. As the Batizer Rebbe taught the young Elie Wiesel: “Take care of them and they will take

care of you. They will go with you everywhere. They will make you laugh and cry. Or rather, they will cry when you cry and laugh when you laugh. . . .” The most fundamental religious, philosophical, and existential questions are in the *alef* and *beit*, though they look like a simple two-panel comic. It’s as complicated, and as simple, as the first thing a child learns: “*Alef, Beith*.” But everything is there.

Children themselves are a living form of “*breishit*.” They are the *beit* pointing back to the *alef*—the parents, the origin from whom they came. Like the *beit*, children also “open to the front,” moving the world forward into the future. Parents come together and give birth to the next generation, and as the generation ages, children—the next generation—begin the world anew. Or, as the contemporary Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once explained: fecundity, the ordinary power of human procreation is not just a biological fact, or blind drive of Eros. It is, in his words, an “ontological category,” a relationship between the “same” and the “other” beyond formal logic. A child is part of the parents and also entirely other, living beyond their death into the future, renewing time, and so related to the infinite time of “ever-recommencing being” (Levinas 227, 267). The birth of a child, that is, enacts the power of “infinity” in the “finite”—or, *alef* and *beit*.

But we do not need a complex philosophical analysis to know how children renew creation. They see things differently: children look at everything for the first time without preconceptions, see the animation in all things. Learning the alphabet, they do not see “through” the letters, as practiced adults do, but grasp the letters in all of their living visuality and personality. So there’s a special connection among children, comics, letters, seeing the world differently—and the kind of “sophisticated second innocence” an adult attains when looking at images, words, and things “like a child.” Comics and graphic narratives have also struggled to be taken seriously and not be seen as simplistic pleasures for barely literate children and unsophisticated adults. But comics artists have always known that behind the deceptive simplicity of their text and image panels are complex resources to express the deepest problems of life. It has taken a long time for academic theorists to catch up, but today we’re inundated with texts applying complex semiotic, narrative, and aesthetic theories to comics. In response, in this concluding section, I’d like to elaborate on a few broader connections between comics and religion.

R. Marc Kujavski formulates the larger question at stake in the Kabbalistic interpretations of the visuality of the letters as this: How does a form enclose the infinite, and how does the infinite break out from the inside?³ This question of form has been my angle here throughout in relating comics

to the Hebrew letters. There are numerous academic theorists whom I could cite on the formal aesthetics of comics and theories of the image. But it's the comics artists themselves, I think, who feel most keenly and articulate most eloquently the life of lines, and the relation of the visible and invisible in form—particularly those who write about the nature of their art such as Art Spiegelman, Scott McCloud, Ivan Brunetti, and Lynda Barry. I'll focus briefly here only on Barry, who describes herself in one of her books as follows: "b. 1956 Richland Center WI. Worked as a painter, cartoonist, writer, illustrator, playwright, editor, commentator and teacher, and found they are very much alike" (Barry, *What It Is* 138). In three of her graphic narratives, *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (2014); *What It Is: The Formless Thing Which Gives Form* (2008); and *Picture This: Learn How to Art with the Near-Sighted Monkey* (2010), she becomes a kind of secular version of Elie Wiesel's first teacher, the Batizer Rebbe. In these books she lovingly initiates us into the mysteries and interactions of lines, form, letters, and images. Much of the material is based on her traveling workshop, "Writing the Unthinkable," and courses she taught at the University of Wisconsin as an artist-in-residence. She examines, among other things, the nature of creativity and memory, and the relation of images and words. She provides exercises for hand-drawing to activate parts of the brain and access a realm we can't get to just through "thinking." These works also contain poignant personal and autobiographical stories about her difficult childhood and development as an artist, all drawn as comic pages. They are laced with mischievous humor; images of a "magic cephalopod" and a cigarette-smoking, nearsighted monkey with bandana, house coat, and slippers appear and reappear as her alter egos and avatars.

But I cite Barry here above all because she so exquisitely senses the invisible shimmering through the visible in the life of lines. "By image," she writes, "I don't mean a visual representation. I mean, something that is more like a ghost than a picture; something which feels somehow alive, has no fixed meaning and is contained and transported by something that is not alive—a book, a song, a painting—anything we call an 'art form'" (Barry, *Syllabus* 15). As the image emerges, she adds, "Liking and not liking can make us blind to *what's there*. In spite of how we feel about it, it is making its way from the unseen to the visible world, one line after the next, bringing with it a kind of aliveness I live for: right here, right now" (23). These words, I'd like to suggest, are another way of describing the emergence of *alef* and its connection to *beit*—on both the personal and cosmic levels. In *What It Is*, she further defines an image as "the formless thing which gives things form" (8) and notes the reciprocity in the creative process between form and formlessness.

Writing and drawing are ways of picturing the world, “formed by our own activity, one line suggesting the next” (Barry, *Syllabus* 136). There is play and movement and soul. Or, as she writes in *Picture This*, an image is “the pull-toy that pulls you, takes you from one place to another”; it is “the soul’s immune system and transit system” (122). And like our *beit*, an image is “a place, not a picture of a place but a place in and of itself. You can move in it. . . . It seems not invented, but there for you to find” (Barry, *What It Is* 88).

Though I am quoting her verbally in writing here, my citations are missing the colors, fonts, and images in which her words are drawn and embedded on each complexly textured page. Artists like Barry take us beyond the academic, intellectual conceptions of our brains, which reflect only a part of our being. They make us feel the aliveness in the lines, and what we “live for.” It is what Ben Shahn called the “Love and Joy about Letters” in the phrase he used for the title of his autobiography. Shahn was profoundly marked by learning the Hebrew alphabet as a child, drawing the letters again and again with great passion and joy. That aesthetic experience became the foundation of his artistic career, where letters appear and reappear in many guises. Barry and Shahn immerse us in the image-text, teaching us how to create, meditate on, and participate in the love, joy, and “life” of lines.

I’d like to suggest a final connection between comics and the sacred: the artist’s, the child’s, and our love and joy in letters parallels and comes from God’s own pleasure, joy, and “primordial drawings”—from “God’s comics,” as it were, as described in the *Zohar* (“Book of Radiance”), one of the central books of Jewish mysticism. Like the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the *Zohar* is part of the literary flourishing of Kabbalah in the medieval period but was redacted from many older and ancient sources. In its opening pages, commenting on the first words of Genesis, the *Zohar* tells us: “[W]hen the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters of the Alphabet were hidden away. For two thousand years before creating the world, the blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them” (1:2b). And before that were even more primordial “drawings” by God in the very first stage of creation:

At the head of the potency of the King, He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of Infinity—a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a cord surveyed, it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*. It

split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact splitting, a single, concealed, supernal point shown. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reishit*, *Beginning*, first command of all. (1:15a)

This is a remarkable passage of poetic beauty, of words and images melding . . . and of deep mystery. It takes us far beyond our academic modes of cognition into a realm to which only the great mystics have access. But these mystics have expressed their experience in a way that somehow allows us to feel and sense a bit of that ultimate unknown. They tell us of the life and joy and desire to create as it wells up in God. And this, I think, is the ultimate source of creative pleasure in all of us, artists and academics, rabbis and readers, parents and children. For we ourselves, finally, are the letters, and the letters are us. We are “God’s comics.”

I have done a vast amount of reading and research, struggled with the white empty spaces facing me as I formed letters, words, lines, paragraphs, trying to give birth to this essay from nothingness. Nevertheless, here at the end, I feel that all I’ve given you is the *beit*, and not the *alef*—that we haven’t really even begun to understand at all. Still, I hope there is a trace of *alef* glimmering through.

NOTES

1. By “rabbinic tradition” I’m referring to thousands of years of materials. There are exoteric and esoteric traditions, legal and homiletic materials, stories, and folklore. Discussions of the forms and meanings of the Hebrew letters interweave throughout all these traditions. I cite only a few here and do not give further references due to space limitations. The Batizer Rebbe in the epigraph paraphrases a saying from an ancient Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2 [“Book of Creation”] that describes this primordial life of the letters before creation. God then plays Scrabble, as it were, combining and recombining the letters in various permutations. Those form the words of our opening verses of Genesis: “And God said. . . . And there was”—a set of performative-creative speech acts, whose letters can then also combine and recombine in endless ways to create all things. There are also many Jewish spiritual practices of meditating on the letters and their combinations in Kabbalah and Chassidic traditions to alter consciousness, create ecstatic experience, or unite with the Divine.

2. Translations of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* are mine. Citations are based on the section numbering in the Hebrew edition listed in the bibliography.

3. I am grateful to Rav Marc Kujavski for his 2009 seminar on the Hebrew letters, which surveyed many Kabbalistic sources and influenced my thinking. I also deeply thank Ora Wiskind Elper for helping me think through and research these issues and for her astute feedback on drafts of this essay.

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