

Life is a Bet

Sefer Bereshit starts out with the Hebrew letter “bet”. The first Midrash Rabba (and echoed in Yerushalmi Chagiga 2:2) notes that the reason this is not an “alef” is because “bet” is bounded on the top, the back, and the bottom. There is only one way to move and that is forward (assuming it is Hebrew and we are going right to left!) So “bet” is an appropriate beginning to the Torah, teaching us that creation moves in only one direction - forward.

Other reasons brought down include the idea that Bet is Bayit, the Jewish value of home and also stands for the number two, which Rav Soloveitchik taught is the minimum for both family and community (see his Family Redeemed for more on this notion). It also stands for Bracha (see Bereshit Tanchuma 5).

After the flood, Noach could have despaired over seeing his world destroyed. Instead, he exits the Ark with his family and the animals, and he begins to plant anew. Much is made over the fact that he got drunk afterward, but little is noted about the fact that this survivor of world destruction went ahead with life, moved forward. He knew that nothing can stay the same, and continued to live, plant and build. Noach also lives with the letter Bet.

We are introduced to Avram and Sara with the words “Lekh Lekha” – go forward to the place which God will reveal. Avram and his family move forward; there is no turning back. God is with them all throughout the journey. They also move with the letter Bet. In the merit of the move, God promises them blessing.

I think it is no accident that the first chunk of Bereshit has this common theme of moving forward. It is not only the story of the Jewish people’s beginning. It is also the story of humanity. Life is a Bet. Nothing stays the same. We only move in one direction.

I spent this past Simchat Torah weekend in St. Louis. It will be my last visit with an Ozarowski house at which to stay. My mother is moving to Chicago in mid-November. She is putting the house in which our family lived for 55 years up for sale. I grew up in this house, imbibed my parents’ values and stories there. I brought my girlfriend (now wife), kids and grandkids there. We always came back for vacations, Yamim Tovim and all sorts of visits through the decades. My parents built a home and family there, one filled with many blessings. My father did much of the decorating with his own Holocaust-stained hands. My mother cared for him for years as we watched him decline and die there. I went through all the nooks and crannies there this past Sunday. I will probably never see it again, certainly not as an ancestral homestead.

The weekend was very bittersweet filled with flashbacks and moments of great emotion (such as while driving on the way to St. Louis when I happened to play a beautiful soulful CD with Hamalakh Hagoel on it, and I realized I had played this same CD in pretty much the same spot on I-55 the night my Dad died. I broke down and had to stop driving for a while.)

Life is a Bet. Nothing stays the same. We can only move forward. But the movement can have meaning if grounded in the other meanings of “bet’ – Torah, family and community. We take those with us no matter where the Ribono Shel Olam leads us, no matter what happens around us. If we do, it can only be for blessing.