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## **The Power of Speech: How the Rabbis Understood What it Means to be Human**

### **A Name - Poem by Ada Limón**

When Eve walked among  
 the animals and named them—  
 nightingale, redshouldered hawk,  
 fiddler crab, fallow deer—  
 I wonder if she ever wanted  
 them to speak back, looked into  
 their wide wonderful eyes and  
 whispered, Name me, name me.

## **I. The World is Created Through Speech**

### **Genesis Chapter One**

1 *Breishit* - When God began to create heaven and earth—  
 2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—  
 3 **God said**, “Let there be light”; and there was light.  
 4 **God saw** that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.  
 5 **God called** the light Day, and the darkness **God called** Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.  
 6 **God said**, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.”  
 7 **God made** the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so.  
 8 **God called** the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.  
 9 **God said**, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.” And it was so.  
 10 **God called** the dry land Earth, and the gathering of **waters God called** Seas. And God saw that this was good.  
 11 And **God said**, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.  
 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And **God saw** that this was good.  
 13 And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.  
 14 **God said**, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years; 15 and they serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.” And it was so.

### **בראשית א**

א בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ: ב והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחושך על פני תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים: ג ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי-אור: ד וברא אלהים את-האור כייטוב ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין החושך: ה ויקרא אלהים | לאור יום ולחושך קרא לילה ויהי-ערב ויהי-בקר יום אחד: (פ)  
 ו ויאמר אלהים יהי רקיע בתוך המים ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים: ז ונעש אלהים את-הרקיע ויבדל בין המים אשר מתחת לרקיע ובין המים אשר מעל לרקיע ויהי-כן:  
 ח ויקרא אלהים לרקיע שמים ויהי-ערב ויהי-בקר יום שני: (פ) ט ויאמר אלהים יקוו המים מתחת השמים אל-מקום אחד ותראה היבשה ויהי-כן: י ויקרא אלהים | ליבשה ארץ ולמקנה המים קרא ימים וברא אלהים כייטוב: יא ויאמר אלהים תדשא הארץ דשא עשב מזריע זרע עץ פרי עשה פרי למינו אשר זרעו-בו עליהארץ ויהי-כן: יב ותוצא הארץ דשא עשב מזריע זרע למינהו ועץ עשה-פרי אשר זרעו-בו למינהו וברא אלהים כייטוב: יג ויהי-ערב ויהי-בקר יום שלישי: (פ) יד ויאמר אלהים יהי מארת ברקיע השמים להבדיל בין היום ובין הלילה והיו לאות ולמועדים ולמים ושנים: טו והיו למארת ברקיע השמים להאיר על-הארץ ויהי-כן: טז ונעש אלהים את-שני המארת הגדלים את-המאור הגדל למשולל היום ואת-המאור הקטן למשולל הלילה ואת הכוכבים: יז וניתן אתם אלהים ברקיע

16 **God made** the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.

17 And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, 18 to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And **God saw** that this was good.

19 And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

20 **God said**, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.”

21 God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good.

22 God blessed them, saying, “Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”

23 And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

24 **God said**, “Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.” And it was so. 25 **God made** wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.

26 **And God said**, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” 27 **And God created man in God’s image, in the image of God God created him; male and female God created them.**

28 **God blessed them** and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

29 **God said**, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. 30 And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.” And it was so.

31 **And God saw** all that God had made and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאֵר עַל־הָאָרֶץ: יָחַד וְלַמָּשָׁל בַּיּוֹם  
 וּבַלַּיְלָה וְלַהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא  
 אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: יֵט וַיְהִי־עָרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם  
 רְבִיעִי: (פ)

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם שָׂרָץ גֹּפֶשׁ  
 חַיָּה וְעוֹף יַעֲרֹף עַל־הָאָרֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי רָקִיעַ  
 הַשָּׁמַיִם: כֹּא וַיֵּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַתַּנִּינִים  
 הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֵת כָּל־גֹּפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה הַמְּשִׁשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר  
 יִשְׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵהֶם וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף כְּנָף  
 לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: כב וַיִּבְרָד  
 אֲתָם אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־  
 הַמַּיִם בַּיַּמִּים וְהָעוֹף יִרָב בָּאָרֶץ:

כג וַיְהִי־עָרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם חֲמִישִׁי: (פ)  
 כד וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ גֹּפֶשׁ חַיָּה  
 לְמִינֵהָ בְּהֶמָּה וּבְרֶמֶשׂ וּבְחַיֵּי־הָאָרֶץ לְמִינֵהָ וַיְהִי־  
 כן: כה וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־חַיֵּי הָאָרֶץ לְמִינֵהָ  
 וְאֶת־הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינֵהָ וְאֵת כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה  
 לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: כו וַיֹּאמֶר  
 אֱלֹהִים בְּעֵשָׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ בְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיִּרְדּוּ  
 בְּדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־  
 הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:  
 כז וַיֵּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם  
 אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:  
 כח וַיִּבְרָד אֲתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים  
 פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבְרַשְׁתֶּהּ וּרְדּוּ  
 בְּדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּת הָרֶמֶשׂ  
 עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־  
 עֵשֶׂב וְזֶרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ  
 וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ פְּרִי־עֵץ זָרַע זָרַע  
 לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָהּ: ל וְלִכְלִי־חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ  
 וְלִכְלִי־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלִכְלִי וְרֹמֵשׁ עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
 אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ גֹּפֶשׁ חַיָּה אֶת־כָּל־יֶרֶק עֵשֶׂב לְאֹכְלָהּ  
 וַיְהִי־כֵן: לא וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר  
 עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה־טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי־עָרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם  
 הַשִּׁשִּׁי: (פ)

*Questions for consideration –*

- Please notice all of the ways that speech is utilized in this chapter. Are there different verbs used? Who speaks? What is the result of speech?
- Why do you think that speech is the most utilized action in creation? What does that tell you about the power of Speech?

## 2) Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanna 32a

Rabbi Yohanan said: They correspond to the ten utterances through which the world was created. The Gemara asks: Which are these ten utterances? The Gemara explains: This is referring to the ten times that the phrase “*And God said*” appears in the story of Creation in the first two chapters of Genesis.

The Gemara asks: Does it refer to the repetition of the phrase: “*And God said*” in Genesis? There are only nine such phrases, not ten.

The Gemara answers that the phrase “*Breishit*” (In the beginning) is also considered an utterance, as it is written: “*By the word of the Lord were the heavens made*” (Psalms 33:6), which indicates that all of creation came into existence through a single utterance, after which all matter was formed into separate and distinct entities by means of the other nine utterances.

## תלמוד בבלי מסכת

### ראש השנה דף לב.

רבי יוחנן אמר: כנגד עשרה מאמרות שבהן נברא העולם. הי גינהו - ויאמר - (ויאמר) דבראשית תשעה הו! - בראשית נמי מאמר הוא, דכתיב +תהלים לג+ בדבר ה' שמים נעשו.

*Questions for consideration –*

- What do we learn here about the word *Breishit*? Why do you think that the Talmud wants to claim that this is “speaking”?

## II. Humans Share the Power of Speech

### 3) Genesis 2:19 – 20

And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and **whatever the man called** each living creature, that would be its name.

20 **And the man gave names** to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found.

### בראשית ב:יט-כ

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לִרְאוֹת מִה־יִּקְרָאֵם לּוֹ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵם לּוֹ הָאֲדָם גִּפְשׁוֹ תִּהְיֶה הוּא שְׁמוֹ:  
 וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל־הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל־חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה וְלָאָדָם לֹא־מָצָא עֲזָרָה כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

### 4) Midrash Genesis Rabbah 17:2

Said R' Acha: In the hour that the Holy One came to create the human, God ruled together with the ministering angels.

God said to them: “Let us make a human [in our image]”.

They said to the human: This one, what good are they?

God said: The human’s wisdom is greater than yours.

God brought before them beast and animal and bird.

God said to them: This one, what is his name? They did not know.

God made them pass before Adam.

God said to Adam: This one, what is his name?

Adam said: This is ox/shor, and this is donkey/chamor and this is horse/sus and this is camel/gamal.

And you, what is your name?

He said to God: I? It would be right to be called Adam, since I was created from the Adamah.

And I what is my name?

Adam said to him: It would be right for you to be called Lord /Adonai, since you are lord/adon to all the creatures.

### מדרש בראשית רבה יז:ב

ואמר רבי אחא אהא בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את האדם, נמלך במלאכי השרת, אמר להם: (בראשית א, כו) נעשה אדם אמרו לו אדם זה מה טיבו, אמר להם חכמתו מרבה משלכם, הביא לפניהם את הבהמה ואת החיה ואת העוף, אמר להם זה מה שמו ולא היו יודעין, העבירו לפני אדם, אמר לו זה מה שמו, אמר זה שור, זה חמור, זה סוס וזה גמל, ואתה מה שמך, אמר לו אני נאה להקרא אדם שנבראתי מן האדמה, ואני מה שמי, אמר לו לך נאה להקראות אדני, שאתה אדון לכל בריותיך.

### III. Speech is Power

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| <p><b>5) Genesis 11:1-9</b><br/>         And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another: 'Come, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said: 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withholden from them, which they purpose to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the city. Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there aconfound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.</p> | <p style="text-align: right;"><b>בראשית י"א:א'-ט'</b><br/>         וַיְהִי כָל הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים. וַיְהִי בִּנְסֻעָם מִקֵּדֶם וַיִּמָּצְאוּ בְקֶעֶז בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ הִבָּה גִּלְבָּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָּה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְבָּנָה לָאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֹר לָנֹחַ לְחֵמֶר. וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבָּה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן נָפוּץ עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ. וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת הָעִיר וְהַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וּשְׂפָה אֶחָת לְכָלם וְזֶה חֲלֹמָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא יַבְצֵר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת. הִבָּה נִרְדֶּה וְנִבְלֶה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְתֵי רֵעֵהוּ. וַיִּפֹּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר. עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׂפָתַי כָּל הָאָרֶץ וַיִּמְשָׁם הַפִּיץ יְהוָה עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ.</p>                                              |
| <p><b>6) Exodus 4:10 – 17</b><br/> <sup>10</sup> But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? <sup>12</sup> Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say." <sup>13</sup> But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent." The Lord became angry with Moses, and God said, "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you." <sup>15</sup> You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth — I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do — <sup>16</sup> and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, <sup>17</sup> And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."</p>                                                                                                                                  | <p style="text-align: right;"><b>שמות פרק ד</b><br/>         י וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה, בִּי אֲדֹנָי, לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִכִּי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשׁ, גַּם מֵאֲזִי דְבָרָה אֶל-עַבְדְּךָ: כִּי כְבֹּד-פָּה וְכַבֵּד לְשׁוֹן, אֲנִכִּי. יֵא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו, מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לָאָדָם, אוֹ מִי-יָשׁוּם אֲלֵם, אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶם אוֹ עִוֹר--הֲלֹא אֲנִכִּי, יְהוָה. יִב וְעַתָּה, לֵךְ; וְאֲנִכִּי אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ, וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר. יג וַיֹּאמֶר, בִּי אֲדֹנָי; שְׁלַח-נָא, בְּיָד-תְּשַׁלַּח. יד וַיִּסַּר-אֵף יְהוָה בְּמֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְיֶה אִתְּךָ הַלְלוּ--יְדַעְתִּי, כִּי-דְבָר יְדַבֵּר הוּא; וְגַם הִנֵּה-הוּא יֵצֵא לִקְרָאתְךָ, וְרֹאֶךָ וְשָׁמַח בְּלִבּוֹ. טו וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו, וְשָׁמַתְךָ אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו; וְאֲנִכִּי, אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ וְעִם-פִּיהוּ, וְהוֹרִיתִי אֹתְכֶם, אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן. טז וְדַבֵּר-הוּא לְךָ, אֶל-הָעָם; וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי-לְךָ לִפֶּה, וְאַתָּה תִּהְיֶה-לוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים. יז וְיֹאמַת-הַמִּטָּה הַזֶּה, תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ, אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה-בּוֹ, אֶת-הָאֹתֹת.</p> |