

ONEG!

A collection of fascinating material on the weekly parsha!

Rabbi Elchanan Shoff

PARSHAS BERESHIS

In the beginning... (Gen. 1:1). It says in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Chagigah* 10a) that R. Yonah said in the name of R. Levi that G-d created the world with the letter *bet* (ב), because that letter represents the idea of “blessing” (ברכה, which starts with the letter *beis*); and He did not create the world with the letter *alef* (א), because that letter represents the concept of “cursing” (ארורה, which starts with the letter *alef*). God said that if He would create the world with the letter *alef* which represents cursing, it would have no chance to last. So He created the world with the letter *bet* so that maybe it will last. See Maharal’s *Tiferet Yisrael* (ch. 34) for a deep explanation into this rabbinic tradition concerning the correlation between blessing and multiplicity. **R. Eliyahu Guttmacher**¹ (1796–1874), a student of R. Akiva Eiger (1761–1837) who cites this Yerushalmi when discussing the custom of naming a child after one of their ancestors. Sometimes, people want to name a newborn child who is a girl after a male relative, or vice versa. In such cases, they do not give the child a name of the opposite gender, but rather find a similar name which has one or two letters the same, and given that name to the child. R. Guttmacher writes that this idea is justified in light of the Yerushalmi cited above, which says that the word *bereshis* is associated with *bracha* just because the first letter of *bereshis* is a *beis* like *bracha*. This shows that a name or word can be associated with another name or word simply by sharing one or two letters with that name or word. Nonetheless, R. Guttmacher notes that in order for this case to be truly analogous to the Yerushalmi, one should optimally strive to have the *first* letter of the child’s name match the *first* letter of the relative’s name, just as the *first* letter of *bereshis* matches that of *bracha*.

In the beginning... (Gen. 1:1). The *Baal ha-Turim* (Gen. 1:1) writes that the word *bereshis* can be descrambled to spell out the words *bais rosh* (literally, “the house at the head”), which alludes to the First Temple. The *Peirush ha-Rokeach* already suggests this idea, and even finds a more detailed allusion to the First Temple: The word *bereshis* is spelled בראשית. If we treat the letter *beis* as a word on its own, it becomes *bayis* (“house”), then next three letters form the word *rosh* (literally, “head”, but in this context, “the first” like *Rosh Hashanah*, or *Rosh Chodesh*), and the last two letters, *tav* and *yod* have a numeric value of 410. The First Temple stood for 410 years, and thus the first word of the Torah reads “The First Temple will stand 410 years. This idea can be further explained by the midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:6 s.v. vayehi) which tells us that from the moment that the world was created until the building of

¹ *Drashos Vichiddushei Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher, Margolios Tovah*, pg. 3 s.v. *yesh lilmod*

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the *mishkan* (precursor to the Temple) the *shechina* (Divine Presence) did not rest in this world. It was only when the *mishkan* was built that finally God's presence found a place in this world. Thus, the very building of this world, which we are taught (Tanchuma to Nasso 16) was created for the very purpose of "providing God a dwelling place down below" is hinted to in the first word of creation, since it is creation's purpose, and that process was fulfilled most fully and magnificently in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the beginning... (Gen. 1:1). R. Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfas (1523–1598) in *Sifsei Kohen Al ha-Torah* explains the ideas behind two more ways of descrambling the word *bereshis* which conjure the creation of Man: *rav ashis* ("I will place a master") and *shir taav* ("He desires a song"). He explains that G-d desired, so to speak, that there will be an entity on Earth that will sing His praises in the same ways that the angels in the Heavens sing His praises. To that effect, He created Man and charged man with the responsibility of singing G-d's praises on Earth. By creating Man, G-d also placed a master over all the creatures of the physical world.

In the beginning... (Gen. 1:1). Another permutation of the letters of *bereshit* spells out the words *bris* (covenant) and *aish* (fire). *Peirush ha-Rokeach* explains that this alludes to the fact the covenant of circumcision (*bris milah*) has the power to save one from the fires of *Gehinnom*, as the Talmud (*Eruvin* 19a) says that Abraham stands at entrance to *Gehinnom* in order to save anybody who has a circumcision.² This can be explained in accordance with the Maharal (*Nesiv ha-Avodah*). The Talmud (*Brachos* 15b) says that if one reads *Kriyas Shema*, and is particular with the pronunciation of each letter, then they will cool off *Gehinnom* for him. Maharal explains that this is because *Gehinnom* was created on the Second Day of Creation—the day which epitomizes the concept of separation (because on that day, G-d separated the waters above from the waters below, and because the number two itself conveys the idea of a split), while *Kriyas Shema* is the ultimate declaration of the Oneness of G-d. This is why reading *Kriyas Shema* counteracts the effects of *Gehinnom*. In the same way, the act of circumcision is also something which unites, rather than divides. This is because through his

² See also my *Va'ani Bashem Atzapeh* to Tehillim 84. When Mishlei 31:21 speaks of the Woman of Valor, it says that nobody in her household fears snow, because everybody is wearing special color-garments (*shanim*) which will keep them insulated. Rashi and *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Reay* 13, and *Tanchuma Buber Bereshis* 33) explain that the *shanim* here actually refer to the two (*shnayim*) stages of circumcision—cutting the foreskin (*milah*) and peeling the remaining skin (*priyah*)—which insulates an individual against the "snow" of *Gehinnom*.

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circumcision Abraham became the “father of many nations” (Bereshis 17:5) in that he assumed the responsibility for the worldwide dissemination of monotheism. In the same way that Maharal explains why *Kriyas Shema* counteracts the effects of *Gehinnom*, circumcision has the power to do the same. With this in mind, we can understand the Gemara (*Nedarim* 22a) which says: Anyone who gets angry—all sorts of *Gehinnom* dominate him. The *Peirush ha-Rosh* explains that this means that his time in This World will be like *Gehinnom* for him. This is because one who regularly becomes angry separates himself from the rest of society, and whenever there is separation and multiplicity (which contrasts with the Oneness of G-d, and the universal message of Abraham), the horrors of *Gehinnom* reign free. This may be alluded to in the Gemara’s wording which refers to “sorts” of *Gehinnom*, implying that *Gehinnom* itself is not monolithic, but is comprised of multiple elements.

God created... (Gen. 1:1). The Ostrovtzer Gaon (1851–1928)³ explains that the word *bara* (“He created”) alludes to the three areas in which a special blessing is required to be successful: Children, Life, and Sustenance alludes to Children because the *Bara*. בני חיי ומזוני. Hebrew word *ben* (“son”) is translated by the Targumim into Aramaic as *bara*. Life is alluded in *bara* because life depends on being healthy, the Hebrew word for which is *briyus*. Finally, Sustenance is hinted to in the word *bara* because when the Torah describes Joseph’s ten brothers travelling to Egypt to find food (Gen. 42:3), the word for “food” is *bar*. Moreover, the Ostrovtzer Gaon points out that the *gematria* of the word *bara* (ברא = 203) equals the same as the phrase “Children, Life, and Sustenance” (בני חיי ומזוני = 203).

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth (Gen. 1:1). R. Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfas writes in *Sisei Kohen Al ha-Torah* that the Torah describes G-d as creating the world with His name *Elokim* because that name appears as though it is in the plural form. He explains that this because all elements of creation include male and female aspects. For example, the sun is called a *shemesh* (male) and a *chamah* (female), and the moon is similarly called a *yareiach* (male) and a *levanah* (female).⁵ Adam was also created with two faces, a male and female face (see *Brachos* 61a). Even trees and plants have male and female

³ Kovetz Asifas Chachamim (Malnitz, 5688), cited by *Olas Shabbos be-Shabbato* (Bobov), p. 1. See also *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* (vol. 1, pg. 12 in the new print) who cites this explanation in the name of R. S. Y. of Bialevezeig in the name of his grandfather R. Yerachmiel.

⁴ Moed Kattan 28a

⁵This idea is already found in the *Tikkunei Zohar* 13b.

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components (i.e., the pollen and stamen), and even work instruments are usually made up of two parts (like the two blades of scissors, or like a mortar and pestle). Because of this, the Torah uses the name *Elokim* describe G-d because that name is all-encompassing and includes each partner in these pairs, as both were created by G-d.

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth (Gen. 1:1). The Chida, R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai in *Pnei David* (37) cites *Midrash Mei ha-Shiloach* which makes an amazing claim based on this verse: This opening verse of Genesis contains all the vowelization marks of Hebrew, except for the vowelization mark *shuruk* because the word *shuruk* (שֹׁרֶק) has the same letters as the word *sheker* (שֶׁקֶר, “falsehood”), and the world was created through only truth, not *sheker*. This Midrash further claims that anybody who only speaks the truth will never stumble in sin. This lesson may be illustrated by a story cited by *Sefer Chassidim* (647): A Rabbi once told an overly wicked man, “I can give you a *tikkun* very easily, all I ask is that you accept upon yourself one easy thing: to only say the truth.” By taking up a vow of truthfulness, the this wicked man stopped sinning because every time he was on his way to sinning, he thought to himself: “If somebody will ask me, from where I am coming or to where I am going, I will be forced to tell him the truth and I will be embarrassed.” Because of this, the wicked man resolved to stop sinning, and eventually repented his wicked ways. This is also alluded to in the end of *Makkos* where R. Simlai said that the prophet Habakuk encapsulated the entire the Torah by saying “A righteous man lives through his trustworthiness”, if one simply resolves to be “trustworthy” and only say the truth, then he will automatically become a righteous man.

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth (Gen. 1:1). R. Aharon ben Yosef HaKohen (one of the Tosafists) notes in his work *Sefer ha-Gan* that this verse contains seven words, each one of which correspond to one of the seven days of creation, and one of the seven books of the Torah.⁶ [Though there are 5 books of the Torah, the Talmud (Shabbos 115b) says that *Vayehi Binsoah (Bamidbar 10:35-36)* is in a certain respect its own book, thus breaking Bamidbar from 1 book into 3. There are therefore many Rabbinic teaching about the 7 books of the Torah, as well as those that speak of 5 books.

⁶ Even though we commonly think of the Torah as containing Five Books, the Mishnah (*Yadayim*, ch. 3) teaches that there are actually seven, because Num. 11:35–36 is considered a separate book. Therefore, what we call the Book of Numbers actually consists of three books: Num. 1:1–11:34, Num. 11:35–36, and Num. 11:37–36:13). When added to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, we get seven books in total.

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And God said, 'let there be light' (Gen. 1:3). *Paneach Raza* explains that the first appearance of the word *ohr* ("light")⁷ in the Torah proceeds eighty letters from the beginning⁸ because "light" is dependent on the mouth (*peh*, and the numerical value of the letter *peh* is 80). He explains that true enlightenment only comes from the Torah, which itself comes from G-d's Divine Mouth. He also writes that when King David authored Tehillim 119, which contains eight verses per each letter of the entire Hebrew Alphabet, he purposely did not mention the word light or any conjugations thereof until he reached the letter *peh* (Tehillim 119:130). Moreover, he points out that in the liturgical *yotzer* poem recited by some on Yom Kippur, each stanza represents a different letter of the Hebrew Alphabet and contains a word for light, except for the stanza of the letter *peh*. This is because the letter *peh* itself is the *entirely* light (because it is the source of light), so light need not be mentioned again.⁹ R. Nosson Nota Shapiro also mentions in *Megaleh Amukos* (74) that the word "light" does not appear until after eighty letters in Genesis, and in Ps. 119 until the verses of the letter *peh*. He further writes (§182) that Moses ascended to his leadership position over the Jewish People at the age of eighty (see Ex. 7:7), because the letter *peh* (=80) is the secret behind light. Nonetheless, the assertion of the *Paneach Raza* and *Megaleh Amukot* concerning Ps. 119 is questionable because in v. 105, which is obviously before v. 130, the word *ohr* already appears. This question is raised by *Beer Shlomo* (1st edition, Letter 2, 3).¹⁰

⁷ *Beer Shlomo* asks that if one counts, one will see that there are really 93 letters from the beginning of Genesis until the word *Ohr*. However, the truth is that this is not a difficulty because when *Megaleh Amukot* cites this tradition, he writes that there are 80 letters until the verse *And G-d said, 'let there be light'* (which there are), even though it is only after an additional 13 letters in that verse that the word *ohr* appears.

⁸ The same explanation appears in *Peirush ha-Rokeach* (*Parshat Emor*, pg. 286) and *Sefer ha-Tagin* (pg. 51). See also Rabbeinu Efrayim (*Parshat Bereishit*, pg. 9) who writes that light was created with the letter *peh*. See also *Regel Yesharah* (s.v. 2) who discusses this (and cited the *Megaleh Amukot* cited below), *Igra de-Pirka* (at the end, §20), and *Igra de-Kallah* (*Parshat Bereishit*).

⁹ Nonetheless, the *Rokeach* (*Hilchos Yom Kippur* §216) points out that in the preceding stanza, the word light appears twice in order to make up for its absence in the next stanza. See also his *Peirush ha-Rokeach* (to *Parshas Bereishit*, pg. 55) where he also makes this point.

¹⁰ See *Beer Shlomo* (2nd edition, Letter 2, 5) for an answer to this question, as well as *Megadim Chadashim Bereshis*, pg. 12) for another answer.

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And it shall divide between waters and waters... and it divided between the waters under the firmament and the waters above the firmament (Gen. 1:67). R. Yonasan Steif (*Amaros* to Gen. 1:6) explains that the Upper Waters are called “waters” but they are not actually “water” in the same physical sense as the Lower Waters. Rather, they are some sort of spiritual entity which are called “waters” because they serve as the spiritual root of the Lower Waters. This can be understood through an approach taken by R. Isaiah Horowitz known the as *Shelah*. R. Horowitz explained (*Shelah*, introduction, *last bayis*, pg. 10b) that the language of the Bible is called *Leshon HaKodesh* because every word in that language that denotes a physical element of reality also reflect a spiritual reality. The source of this idea is the Bible’s use of the word “waters” for both something wholly physical and for something wholly spiritual.

And God said, ‘the land should grow forth a growth—grass which sow seeds...’ (Gen. 1:11). R. Meir Yakov HaLevi Horowitz, a son of the legendary R. Pinchas HaLevi Horowitz of Frankfurt,¹¹ notes that the word *growth* (גִּשְׁת) is superfluous in this verse. To account for this extra word, he points to a Mishnah (*Avos* 1:11), in which Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says that the world stands on three elements: Justice, Peace, and Truth (דִּין שְׁלוֹם אֱמֶת). The acronym which reflects these three elements is גִּשְׁת, so the Torah uses an extra word to teach that at the beginning of creation, G-d made sure that the land exude these three attributes.

And they shall be for signs and for holidays, and for days and for years (Gen. 1:14). Rashi explains that when the luminaries do not shine as usual, it is a bad sign. The work *Daf Al Daf* (to Sukkah 29a) cites the testimony of R. Aryeh Pinsky who said that when he was a child (circa. 1955) , he merited to learn Chumash/Rashi with his grandfather R. Eliyah Lopian in Yeshivat Kaminetz in Jerusalem. When they reached the verse “and they shall be signs...”, R. Lopian taught him the this comment of Rashi and added that on the day before the First World War broke out, he remembers that there was darkness outside in the middle of the day.

¹¹ R. Pinchas Horowitz, in the end of his work *Haflaah* (to Tractate *Kesuvos*) laments the untimely death of R. Meir Yaakov, his son and student to boot, who died at the tender age of 26. He praises R. Meir Yaakov as somebody “full of Torah and Fear of G-d, outstanding in his sharpness and expertise”.

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And for holidays (Gen. 1:14). *Sefer ha-Gan* (pg. 119) notes that the word “holidays” (מועדים) does not use the simple spelling, but is rather spelled out in full, the extra letter *vav* appearing in the word. He explains that this alludes to six (*vav* = 6) holidays which requires *Kiddush* in a cup of wine: Pesach, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Rosh HaShannah. He also finds two other connections between wine and the letter *vav* in the Bible: In Song of Songs, there is no verse which begins with the letter *vav* except for “And your palate is like good wine” (Song of Songs 7:17). And in Ps. 104 which discusses G-d creating the world, there is no verse which begins with the letter *vav* except for “And wine gladdens the hearts of Man” (Ps. 104:15).

And G-d made two great luminaries... (Gen. 1:16). Rashi explains that originally the sun and the moon were equal, but the moon complained against this arrangement and argued that two kings cannot function in tandem, so G-d made the moon smaller. This does not mean that beforehand, the sun and the moon literally radiated the same amount of light, and the moon later lost some of its luminescence. Rather, as Chasam Sofer explains (Toras Moshe to Bereshis 1:16, see also *Likkutei Basar Likkutei*), it means that originally, both the sun and the moon were independent sources of light. After the moon complained, it lost its independent ability to exude light and had to rely on the sun's light. In effect, the relationship between the sun and the moon transformed from that of two equal partners to one of a giver (sun) and receiver (moon). Based on this, R. Isaac Chaver in *Afikei Yam* (to *Kesuvos* 2a) explains why the Mishnah (*Kesuvos* 2a) rules that a virgin should get married on Wednesday. It was on Wednesday that the relationship between the sun and the moon became that of a giver/influencer and receiver, and this paradigm mimics the relationship between man and wife where biologically, the man gives to his wife, and she takes that and uses what he "gives" her to create life.¹² Similarly, the Torah obligates a husband to support his wife financially, since it sees his obligation as being the provider. R. David Zacut Modina in *Zecher David* (Maamar 1, Ch. 81, pg. 581 in the Ahavat Shalom edition) cites the unpublished manuscript of the work *Ot Brit* (Ch. 11) that there is a custom to name one's daughter as they reach the end of their first month, because women are compared to the moon. Moreover, R. Avraham Chaim Schorr in *Toras Chaim* (to *Sanhedrin* 42a) explains that G-d set aside Rosh Chodesh as a special holiday for women because women are compared

¹² See further Likkutei Chaver ben Chaim to Bereshis 1:16 s.v. *vayaas*, and R. Moshe Shapiro (1935–2017) in *Afikei Mayim* (Chanukah, Topic 4 p. 43–45). (Note also that בתולה נשאת ליום הרביעי is ר"ת לבנה R.C.K.)

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to the moon, especially because their monthly menstrual cycle resembles the month orbit of the moon.¹³

And G-d said, 'Let us make man' (Gen. 1:26). R. Nosson Nota Shapiro writes in *Megaleh Amukos* (Veeschanan, Ofen 74) that the word “let us make” (נַעֲשֶׂה) is an abbreviated notation for “He consulted with Shamai [and] Hillel” (נִמְלַךְ עִם שְׁמַאי הַלֵּל). The Ostrovitzer Gaon (1851–1928) explains the deeper meaning of this cryptic passage in *Meir Eini Chachamim* (3rd edition, pg. 5). With this in mind, R. Shapiro explains why Shamai and Hillel are called “the Fathers of the World” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 1:15, *Chagigah* 12a). He also writes that the name Moses (מֹשֶׁה) is an acronym for “Moses, Shamai, [and] Hillel” (מֹשֶׁה שְׁמַאי הַלֵּל) and “Everything they heard from Sinai” (הַכֹּל שָׁמְעוּ מִסִּינַי). I wrote about this at great length in my book *Melo Chaf Nachas*.

And G-d said, 'Let us make man' (Gen. 1:26). Rashi explains that here the Torah teaches us the proper behavior that a man should always be humble like his Creator, because G-d consulted with His Heavenly entourage before creating man. *Likkutei Chaver ben Chaim* cites in the name of R. Mordechai Bennet that for this reason the rabbis taught (*Sotah* 4b) that anybody who becomes haughty has denied the fundamental truth of G-d's existence. At first glance, this is deeply challenging to understand. He brilliantly explains that it is because the Torah speaks here in the plural, as though G-d partnered with someone/something else in creating man, in order to teach that one should always be humble. However, if somebody rejects this lesson and acts haughtily, then he has effectively demonstrated that humility is not important, and therefore he must understand that G-d literally did partner with another entity to create man when he said "Let us make man," which would deny the basic monotheistic teachings of Torah, a viewpoint tantamount to a denial of G-d.

¹³ Fascinatingly, it is related in the name of R. Naphtali of Ropshitz (see *Divrei Yitzchak* 71) that when one recites *Kiddush Levana* and prayers that the moon should not deviate from its normal cycle (שְׁלֹא יִשְׁנוּ אֶת תַּפְקִידָם), one should have in mind that this also refers to his wife who should have a regular period. The first two letters of the middle words of that phrase spell out the word *ishti* (אִשְׁתִּי)—“my wife”. Just as the moon waxes for two weeks, then wanes for two weeks, so should a woman optimally be ritually pure for two weeks, and then ritually impure for two weeks. See also what I wrote in *Birchasa ve-Shirasa* (to *Brachos* 56b) about the man who saw himself kissing the moon in a dream.

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And G-d saw everything that was made, and—behold!—it is very good (Gen. 1:31).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 9:7) explains: R. Nachman bar Shmuel bar Nachman¹⁴ said in the name of R. Shmuel bar Nachaman, “Behold! It is very good” refers to the *Yetzer ha-Tov* (a person's inclination to do Good) and “And behold! It is very good” refers to the *Yetzer ha-Ra* (one's evil inclination). R. Yosef Engel explains in his work *Otzaros Yosef* (*Drush* 8, 2:5) that the meaning of this Midrash is that a person should always be in the middle-of-the-road for all character traits. Given that framework, if one is “very good”, then he is again not in the middle of the road, but leaning to extremism, which is considered “bad”.¹⁵

And the Heavens, the Earth, and their legions were finished (Gen. 2:1). The Gemara (*Chullin* 60a) explains: R. Yehoshua ben Levi said that all of creation was made at their proper height, and everything was created according to their knowledge and according to their desire, as it says: “And the Heavens, the Earth, and their legions (*tzvaam*) were finished”, do not read it as *tzvaam* (“their legions”) but as *tzivyonim* (“their desire”). Rashi explains that “their knowledge” refers to their consent; meaning, G-d told everything that he will create it, and it consented. Rashi also explains that “their desire” refers to the fact that everything that was created took whatever form they chose. R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai (*Midbar Kedemos*, Yod 23) cites his great Grandfather R. Avraham Azulai (Chesed Liavraham, Maayan 4, Ein Yaakov, Nahar 11) that when God decides that a woman will conceive a child, God speaks to the soul and instructs it to enter that body, but first sends it with an Angel to choose its own physical form. Tall, short, capable, or handicapped, attractive or unattractive, poor or wealthy etc. The soul then chooses what it wants. He extrapolates that from the above cited gemara, and concludes that no person can complain and say “why is my friend more attractive than I am,” since each person chose their own circumstances. The Zohar (Vol 2 96b) however seems to contradict this idea, and says that God decrees which body each soul will enter and that though a person might not want it, they are forced into it! It seems to me that there is no contradiction at all. Certainly God, who is Infinite and all knowing always does what is best for each soul. Though he is allowing a soul to “choose”, it must be kept in mind that this is before a soul is sent to this world. At that stage, it does not have any lack of clarity. The yetzer hara does not exist in a person yet (*Sanhedrin* 91b) and

¹⁴ This is not a typo!

¹⁵ See what I wrote in *Birchasa ve-Shirata* (to *Brachos* 33a) concerning the statement that if it is forbidden to have mercy upon one who does not have intelligence.

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PARSHAS BERESHIS

thus I suggest that the meaning of "choosing one's own circumstances" is that God allows a person to go through the process of seeing how exactly the way he or she is created is just the way they need to be. In that family, that body and that life. Of course this happens against our will - it must happen. It's what is right. God knows best. But it helps us since on a deep level in our soul, which then impacts the human psyche, we have been "shown" that we are right. We have the capacity to know that on the deepest level. Perhaps that is the lesson of this teaching.

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