

My artwork is inspired by the opening verses of Bereishit, when God's first breath calls forth light (יהי אור) out of the darkness (Gen. 1:3). This holy light (shown in blue) is timeless—the first manifestation of God's will. The Aleph is depicted as emerging out of the darkness surrounding it while the holy light is concealed within it. The essence of this light radiates outwards (towards the lower worlds, which are expressed by the three colors that surround the Aleph's form). The light transcends all levels of Creation.

The image of the Aleph connects the forces that are above to those that are below. The Aleph's form is comprised of two *yuds* and a *vav*. The two *yuds* (above and below), depicted with lines moving in differing directions around them, represent the duality of forces. The *vav* that stretches between the two *yuds* unites these forces into a state of holy union.

I hope that this artwork will provoke reflection on the essence of the Aleph inside all of us—the breath of the One and how we can reconnect it to its Source.

This work was created as part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program and was on display at JTS as part of the Corridors exhibition.

To see the artwork in color and high-definition, visit:

www.jtsa.edu/aleph



Bereishit 5781

בראשית תשפ"א



Beginning, Rebuilding

**Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of
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Like millions of American children in the 1970s, I tuned in weekly to ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. The opening sequence showed skiers gracefully racing down a mountain, and then spectacularly wiping out while the narrator promised viewers "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Something tragic and true was contained in this message. The possibility of calamity makes moments of triumph precious and worth pursuing.

The same narrative device is employed by the Torah. Dazzling victories are paired with ignominious defeats. Consider, for example, three victorious moments in the Torah: The dedication of the Tabernacle; the declaration by Israel at Sinai that they will "heed and hear" God's teaching; and God's proclamation at the end of Creation that all of it was "very good."

Each moment completes an arduous process, signaling blessing and joy. Yet the Torah barely allows one to celebrate before delivering a devastating narrative twist. What does this say about the nature of victory, and what can it teach us about resilience in a pandemic?

The end of Exodus and the beginning of Leviticus describe the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings, and then details of the sacred service. Finally, when all is ready, Moses instructs his brother and nephews to begin an eight-day vigil, after which God's glory will appear. Aaron and sons offer their sacrifices, Moses and Aaron enter the Tabernacle and then emerge to bless the people, summoning the divine glory (Lev. 9:23).

The Talmud states that the dedication of the Tabernacle was the greatest joy for God since the creation of the world (BT Megillah 10b). It was a labor of love, generosity, skill, and devotion. The Tabernacle project engaged the people of Israel as creators and allowed the divine presence to dwell in the

center of their camp. And yet barely have the altar embers extinguished than calamity strikes. Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu offer "strange fire" and are struck dead by a fire from God (Lev. 10:1–2). The transition from joy to sorrow is lightning fast.

Now scroll back to Exodus 24, following the theophany at Sinai. Moses dedicates a different altar and reads the "book of covenant" to the people, after which they proclaim, "all that has been spoken by the Lord we shall heed and hear" (Exod. 24:7). In other words, they pledge obedience to God, but also something more—to study the teachings that they have committed to keep.

This double promise is central to Jewish spirituality. When the people make this statement, they signal trust in God and in their teacher Moses. They also indicate their intention to live in partnership with the Divine, not as unquestioning servants, but as students and teachers with their own insights to add to the ever-flowing well of Torah. What a spiritual triumph for Israel and for God!

The Talmud says that when the people made this double promise, ministering angels came from heaven and adorned each Israelite with two crowns. And yet, this victory was short-lived. Moses returned to the summit of Sinai, and the insecure people turned to worship the golden calf. This time twice as many attacking angels descended and ripped the crowns from their heads (BT Shabbat 88a).

Examples of this spiritual contrast between victory and defeat abound, but none is as prominent as the very first. In Genesis 1:31, God is pleased with the creation, declaring it to be "very good." But by the end of the first Torah portion—after the sin of Adam and Eve, Cain's murder of Abel, and the mysterious incident with the Nephilim—God bitterly regrets creating humanity, which is "evil all day" (Gen. 6:5–6). The Creator's joy turns suddenly to sorrow.

A puzzling midrash plays on the first proclamation that the creation was "very good" (*tov me'od*). Rabbi Meir had a Torah scroll which added a shocking alternative: "Death is good" (*tov mavet*). The Sages add that God initially intended for humans to be immortal, but, anticipating that they would then see themselves as divine, decided that mortality was for the best (Genesis Rabbah 9:5).

Victory without the likelihood of failure feels inevitable and thus cheap. Life without death would lack limits and humility. The fleeting nature of triumph makes it more precious. It also intimates that the converse is true—that moments of sorrow and defeat may give way to new accomplishments and celebrations.

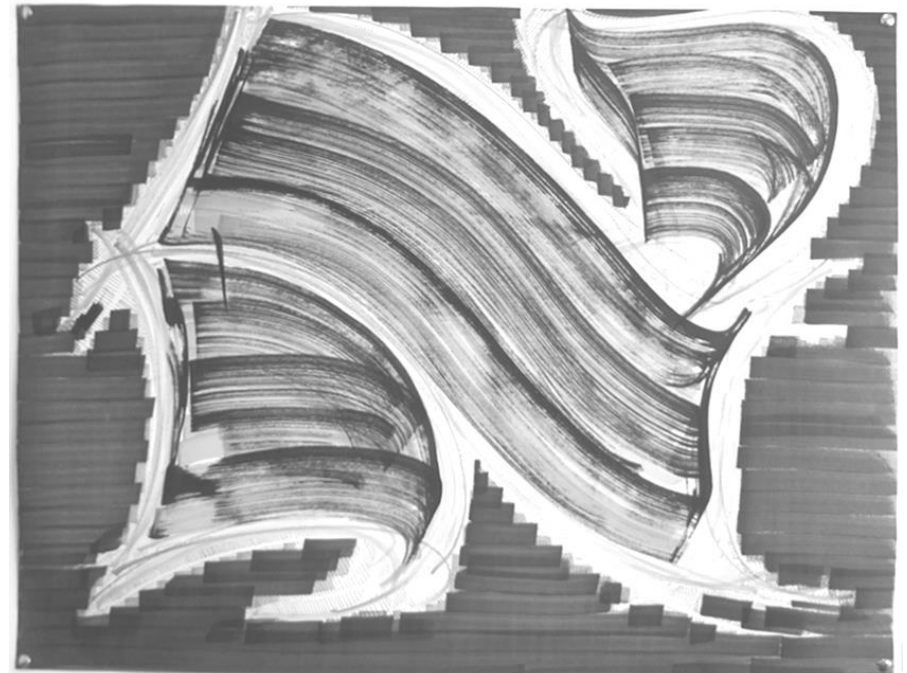
The past year has been rife with sorrow, with more than one million people killed by the novel coronavirus and nearly every aspect of life disrupted. Even in our sorrow, however, we are gaining new skills and purpose. As we return to the beginning of Torah, we also return to rebuilding our Jewish community to flourish once more, crowned by our dual commitment of service and study in partnership with God.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Aleph: The First Breath

Joshua Hooper, JTS Alumnus (DS '17)



Joshua Hooper
The First Breath: The Creation of Aleph
Poster board and marker