Images at Work Versus Words at Play: Michelangelo’s Art and the Artistry of the Hebrew Bible

RICHARD S. ELLIS

Dedicated to the Memory of My Father, Murray Ellis (1923–2001)

GOD’S POSTERIOR IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL? I SUSPECT that it can be traced back to the Latin translation by Jerome of an enigmatic word in the Hebrew Bible, just like those horns on Michelangelo’s statue of Moses in Rome’s Church of San Pietro in Vincoli. But it is unmistakably there, on the most famous ceiling in the world that displays to the hordes of gawking tourists Michelangelo’s frescoes, the crowning glory of the Renaissance.

In fresco two, Michelangelo painted a scene in which God appears twice. On the right side, face to the viewer, God is creating the heavenly bodies. On the left side, back to the viewer, God is exposing the dual moons of his own posterior, which nicely balance the newly created celestial moon on the far right. One conjectures why those angels caught in God’s cape in the representation of the forward-facing deity are smiling. Perhaps they imagine, beneath the freely flowing cape, God’s about-to-be-revealed tush.¹

Although God’s posterior is integral to Michelangelo’s conception of the Divine, the frescoes use it as just one element in their interpretation of the narratives of Genesis. Commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508 and completed after four years of physically and emotionally exhausting labor,² Michelangelo’s artful representations, recently restored and effulgent, consummately articulate the spirit of the Renaissance as they make a profound theological statement: about creation, about the entry of sin into the world through the fall of Adam, about the cleansing of humanity by the waters of Noah’s flood, about the persistence of sin after the flood when Noah became drunk and in his drunken nakedness was ridiculed by his son Ham. As theology, the frescoes interpret the narratives of Genesis as pointing to one

Richard S. Ellis is a Professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst (http://www.math.umass.edu/~rsellis). He recently completed a novel set in Jerusalem entitled Blessing from the Dead.
ineluctable conclusion: humanity cannot be saved by its own works, but needs Christ in order to be saved.

Christ, the theological focus of the frescoes, bursts out of a ball of light on the front wall of the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo painted The Last Judgment some 30 years later. Christ is the Divine Judge, a still point in the vortex of the living and the dead, the elect levitating to eternal life, the damned descending into the dark abyss. He is Adam reborn, both in spirit and in flesh, his athletic torso vivifying that of his disgraced predecessor shown in fresco six. With bulging biceps and pectorals and golden, flowing tresses, the Christ of The Last Judgment resembles more a classical Greek statue than the bearded religious figure of traditional Christian art, although in un-Greeklike fashion his genitals are covered, in contrast to Adam. Only the scar on Christ’s right chest mars the perfect body.

Resplendent art. But what is a Jew to make of it?

Michelangelo’s Mute God with a Flowing Gray Beard
As one stands in the Sistine Chapel in the intersecting force fields of the frescoes on the ceiling and The Last Judgment on the front wall, reaction to Michelangelo’s art depends on one’s spiritual tradition. From a Christian perspective, Michelangelo has arrayed in splendid radiance the sweeping panorama of the human-Divine encounter: creation, fall, expulsion from the Garden of Eden, persistence of sin after the flood, redemption through Christ at the end of days. From a Jewish perspective, Michelangelo has arrayed in splendid radiance what are limited interpretations of narratives in the Book of Genesis, narratives that have been the focus of Rabbinic commentary for centuries.

Viewing Michelangelo’s art, a Jew gapes into the spiritual chasm separating Christianity from Judaism. Michelangelo’s portrayal of God in human form transgresses the Second Commandment and the soul of Jewish wisdom: God is unknowable, unimaginable, visually unportrayable. As Maimonides taught, the only true statement that one can make about God’s essence is that no true statement about God’s essence is possible. To portray God in human form in a two-dimensional fresco is to limit God’s infinitude that is infinitely beyond the powers of the human mind to perceive.

Yet humans interact with God. One record of those interactions is the Hebrew Bible, which portrays the human-Divine encounter with a verbal artistry that mirrors the mystery of that encounter by being open-ended, playful, and generative of multiple interpretations. Biblical language is a multilayered language of astonishment, expressing the insight that God is
present in all phenomena. It is language at the edge of its capabilities. To explore this artistry and to contrast it with Michelangelo’s in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel are the purposes of this essay.

In the first five frescoes the Italian master transgresses the Second Commandment prohibition against portraying God by picturing God as a vigorous but elderly gentleman with a flowing gray beard. Fresco four, The Creation of Adam, is the most famous of all. According to the standard interpretation, the fresco shows God extending God’s finger to impart to Adam the spark of life. But can we not interpret this scene reciprocally? In addition to depicting the creation of humans in the image of God, it can also be interpreted as depicting the creation of God in the image of humans. This interpretation is consistent with mystical strains of Renaissance thought and explains the shape of God’s cape, which is that of a cross-section of the human brain, a shape known to Michelangelo by performing dissections of the human body. According to this interpretation, Adam’s extending his finger to impart to God the spark of life represents the leap of his imagination above the merely earthbound to conceive of a deity who, because of Adam’s immature spirituality, is cast in human form.

One moves back to the first three frescoes, which do not depict creation as described in the first chapter of Genesis. There, the God of the Torah creates the universe by means of actions augmented by potent speech-acts that enact the creative power of language. While Michelangelo’s first three frescoes show God as being very busy—God molds the light, separating it from the darkness, then flings out the sun into the expanse of the heavens—his God is un-Jewishly mute.

From the perspective of Christian theology, fresco six is the most important of all. In Paul’s creative and revolutionary exegesis, the fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve brought death and sin into the world, which the waters of Noah’s flood did not erase. Only through Christ could death be defeated and humanity be saved. Christianity sees the fall and the expulsion as evidence of humanity’s innate sinfulness, an interpretation captured consummately by Michelangelo in the right half of fresco six. The avenging angel thrusts the point of the sword into Adam’s jugular as the banished pair cringe in fear. Expressions of sheer dread contort their faces. The point of that sword also banishes the busy, bearded, mute God of the first five frescoes, who does not appear again.

The Horned Lawgiver Stripped of His Law
Adorning the margin that surrounds the Sistine Chapel frescoes are a series of paintings by Michelangelo of Hebrew Prophets, chosen for their Christological
significance. The Prophet Moses, the most towering figure in the Torah, the legislator of the commandments and the intermediary between his people and God who spoke with God face to face, is absent.

Michelangelo’s sculptural interpretation of the Lawgiver can be found a few kilometers away, inside the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli. His Moses sits in a dark corner of the church, which one illuminates by dropping a coin into a slot. Bursting out of a cramped space framed by two columns, Michelangelo’s Moses materializes, massive, muscular, and gruff. This bearded giant in a toga, from whose forehead horns protrude, is not the Prophet of the Torah, but rather a Christianized cousin of Michelangelo’s other giants in the Sistine Chapel: Adam and God on the ceiling and the athletic Jesus on the front wall. Moses is clutching under his right arm what must be the twin tablets of stone upon which he inscribed the Ten Commandments. But they cannot be the twin tablets because they are much too thin.

In its theological impact, Michelangelo’s most blatant distortion far exceeds the placing of horns on Moses’s forehead, which at least have a scriptural basis. In Michelangelo’s sculpture, the twin tablets of stone upon which the Biblical Moses inscribed the Ten Commandments have blank faces, an artistic representation consistent with the Christian belief that the mitzvot have no relevance to the moral life. As Paul taught, Moses’s Law is an allegorical foreskin that has to be circumcised so that the Spirit could emerge. Michelangelo’s statue of Moses makes it clear that he was one of Paul’s mohelim.

Many commentators have pointed out that Michelangelo’s conception of the two-horned Moses was based on a mistranslation of Exodus 34:29 in Jerome’s Vulgate, the authorized text used by the Church. Fox translates this verse and the next one as follows: “29. Now it was when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of Testimony in Moshe’s hand, when he came down from the mountain—(now) Moshe did not know that the skin of his face was radiating because of his having spoken with him.— 30. Aharon and all the Children of Israel saw Moshe: and here, the skin of his face was radiating! So they were afraid to approach him.”

While the phrase “the skin of his face was radiating” appears twice, each time it is from a different perspective. Verse 29 seems to be told from the perspective of God. Because Moses had spoken with God, the skin of Moses’s face was radiating as Moses descended alone from Mount Sinai. By contrast, verse 30 is told from the perspective of the Israelites, who feared Moses because the skin of his face was radiating. Interestingly, both senses are contained in the
virtual space of the Hebrew original. In fact, a silent letter can be interchanged and a word can be revocalized to yield multiple meanings corresponding to the dual perspectives of verses 29 and 30.

In the traditional, Masoretic vocalization, the Hebrew for the phrase “the skin of his face was radiating” is karān or panāv; karān means “was radiating,” or means “skin” or “skin of,” and panāv means “his face.” The reverse apostrophe ‘that precedes the letters or represents the Hebrew letter ayin. We now revocalize and interchange letters in order to obtain other meanings. By altering vowels, karān becomes keren, meaning “horn” or “beam,” and by interchanging the first letter of ‘or (ayin) with the Hebrew letter aleph, one obtains the word ‘or, meaning “light” (the apostrophe that precedes or represents an aleph). Thus the Masoretic Hebrew karān ‘or panāv can also be read as keren ‘or panāv, meaning “the light from his face [was] a horn,” or as keren ‘or panāv, meaning “the skin of his face [was] a horn” or less literally as “the skin of his face [sent forth] beams of light.”

Verse 29, which is told from the perspective of God, relates that the skin of Moses’s face was radiating because of his having spoken with God. Karān or panāv. Verse 30, which is told from the perspective of the Israelites, articulates the fear that this metamorphosis of Moses’s face evoked in them. Keren ‘or panāv. The Israelites saw the radiating light as threatening, as hornlike, keren-like, a perception that objectifies the fear that they experienced in Moses’s presence. This dual perspective, which expresses the multifaced/multifaceted nature of Moses, is also artfully conveyed by the Hebrew word panim, which is an ambiguous singularplural form meaning either “face” or “faces.”

The evocative and multilayered ambiguity of the Torah, based in part on its ability to generate multiple meanings, is inevitably lost in translation, whether into the English of Fox or into the Latin of Jerome. However, the latter translation differs markedly from the former in its emphasis upon a different aspect of Moses’s face. Jerome translates karān ‘or panāv in Exodus 34:29 as cornuta esset facies sua, meaning literally “horned was his face.” In verse 30 the Hebrew phrase is translated into the analogous, grammatically appropriate Latin phrase.

Thus, according to Jerome, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, the skin of his face did not send forth beams of light, but horned was his face. Cornuta esset facies sua. Like karān or the revocalized keren in the Hebrew original, cornuta appears first in the Latin. But because Jerome does not translate the Hebrew word ‘or, meaning “skin,” the placement of cornuta first in the sentence emphasizes Moses’s weirdness.
The Septuagint, Luther’s Bible, and the King James Bible all avoid Jerome’s distortion. “The skin of his face shone” reads the King James; Luther’s reads similarly as does the Septuagint. However, none of these translations captures the dual perspective of the Hebrew karan or panav / kerem or panav. A parallel situation occurs in Michelangelo’s pictorial interpretations of the Biblical narrative of creation. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” So reads the majestic opening verse of the King James Bible, reproducing word for word the translation in Jerome’s Vulgate as well as in the Septuagint. But just as Michelangelo’s frescoes are limited interpretations, so is the King James translation limited. It does not hint at the astonishing fecundity of the first verse in the Torah, the multiple senses of which are far richer and far more mysterious.

The Language of the Hebrew Bible and the Mystery of Existence
A mystery pervades existence. However, we are excluded from comprehending that mystery because it includes ourselves.

What insights into the mystery of existence are conveyed by Michelangelo’s frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? The first five recall the creation of the cosmos and of Adam and Eve, while the sixth portrays the disobedience of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, acts that brought sin into the world. The last three, which depict events in the life of Noah, are a sober reminder that the flood did not cleanse humankind of sin. All nine frescoes point to the birth, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. As depicted in the overpowering fresco of The Last Judgment on the front wall of the Sistine Chapel, Christ, at the end of days, will resurrect the righteous from the dead and condemn the wicked to eternal punishment. Christ explains history as well as the meaning of existence. In Christ, the mystery of existence is resolved.

“Our entrance here being an Exclusion from comprehension,” \(^{11}\) the open-endedness and unfathomability of the mystery of existence are infinitely beyond the capacity of the human mind to imagine and the human hand to portray. Michelangelo’s frescoes have a different agenda, which it shares with much of Christian art, although his iconography is not that of normative Christianity. Appropriate to their placement as didactic images in a chapel, the frescoes are a form of doctrinal enforcement that is meant to impart, in simplified format, a complete and diagrammatic reading of a complex history.\(^ {12}\)

Images at work versus words at play, artistic representations of God and man providing incontrovertible explanations of existence, versus the open-ended play of interpretation on the text of the Torah: these dichotomies
illuminate the spiritual chasm separating Christianity from Judaism. The chasm is explored by Susan Handelman in her book *The Slayers of Moses*, where she writes the following concerning the attitude of the Rabbinic commentators toward the Torah, the Talmud, and other Jewish texts: “We have characterized Rabbinic reading of texts as metonymical—... preferring multivocal as opposed to univocal meanings, the play of as if over the assertions of is, juxtapositions over equivalencies, concrete images over abstractions. ... The text, for the Rabbis, is a continuous generator of meaning, which arises from the innate logic of the divine language, the letter itself, and is not sought in a nonlinguistic realm external to the text. ... For the Jew, God’s presence is inscribed or traced within a text, not a body. Divinity is located in language, not person.”13

Locating divinity in language is one facet of the Jewish reverence for the creative power of language. This reverence is expressed in an observation by Ramban (Nachmanides), which in turn is based on Talmudic teachings. In his classic, thirteenth-century commentary on the Torah, he discusses the fifty gates, or degrees, of understanding of the secrets of creation. These gates were all transmitted by God to Moses with one exception. “Everything that was transmitted to Moses our teacher through the forty-nine gates of understanding was written in the Torah explicitly or by implication in words, in the numerical value of the letters or in the form of the letters, that is, whether written normally or with some change in form such as bent or crooked letters or other deviations, or in the tips of the letters and their crownlets...”14

The spiritual obligation that is incumbent on the reader is to try to open the gates of understanding by interpreting the words and letters in which the secrets of creation are encoded.15 However, complete knowledge of the secrets of creation is not possible, even for Moses. For the fiftieth gate of understanding was not transmitted by God, and its content is unknown. “It is possible,” Ramban conjectures in an echo of Maimonides, “that the fiftieth gate concerns knowledge of the Creator, blessed be He, which is not transmittable to any created being.”16

In combination with the other frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo’s portrayal of creation in the first three points ineluctably to Christ. For a Jew, the open-ended and unfathomable mystery of creation is enacted, not in those frescoes, but in the richly evocative ambiguity of the opening verses of the Torah. In contrast to the translations in the Septuagint, in the Vulgate, in Luther’s Bible, and in the King James Bible, several medieval
commentators, and most moderns, agree that the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 does not mean “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” The Hebrew text can be interpreted in numerous other ways depending on how one understands the cryptic first word, bereyshit. 

As Rashi points out, the grammatical form of the first word bereyshit causes one to reject the reading “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” He claims that the plain sense of the verse is the following: “In the beginning of God’s creation of the heaven and the earth . . .” or “When God created the heaven and the earth . . .” Rashi understands the first two verses of Genesis as setting the stage for the creation of light in verse three.

Rashi argues for this alternate reading not just on the basis of syntax. The translation, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” implies that the Torah is presenting the chronological order of the acts of creation. But this implication is contradicted by Genesis 1:2, which tells of the waters over which the “rushing-spirit of God hovered.” According to Rashi, this verse proves that the waters must have preceded the creation of the heaven and the earth in Genesis 1:1. However, the Torah does not indicate when the creation of the waters occurred.

A tension between the first two words of Genesis 1:1 animates Rashi’s commentary. His reading of this verse as “In the beginning of God’s creation of the heaven and the earth” is not consistent with the Masoretic form of the second word, here translated as “creation.” This word must be revocalized for Rashi’s reading to make sense. In order to resolve the tension, Rashi prefers a metaphorical, Midrashic interpretation that depends on another sense of the first word bereyshit.

The word bereyshit consists of the ambiguous and common preposition b', which has the various senses of “in” or “with” or “for” or “for the sake of,” and the noun reyshit, meaning “the beginning of.” In order to interpret the opening verse of Genesis, he cites Proverbs 8:22 and Jeremiah 2:3, which single out two entities of great significance that are called reyshit: the Torah and Israel. This leads to another reading of Genesis 1:1: “For the sake of (b’) [the Torah and Israel which bear the name of] reyshit, God created the heaven and the earth.”

“For the sake of the Torah, God created the heaven and the earth.” This interpretation of the first verse of the Torah confers on the Torah a cosmic significance. From here it is a small step to the Talmudic reading that in fact the Torah preceded creation as the blueprint of creation. Only after the Torah was consulted could God’s creation commence. In the words of a Midrash, “The Holy One, blessed be He, . . . looked into the Torah and created the world.”
The idea that the Torah is the blueprint of creation has enormous textual implications. Handelman explicates the idea by connecting it with the act of interpretation: "[W]ith the proper methods of interpretation, one can unlock the mysteries of all being. Every crownlet of every letter is filled with significance, and even the forms of letters are hints to profound meaning. To understand creation, one looks not to nature but to the Torah; the world can be read out of the Torah, and the Torah read from the world." 25

Because the text lacks vowels and punctuation, because of ambiguities at the levels of letters, words, verses, and chapters, meaning in the Torah is not an absolute quality inhering in the text alone. Rather, meaning is the fruit of reader-text co-involvement. As a result, the personality of God and the human relationship with God as portrayed in the text cannot remain fixed. The reader’s perceptions of that personality and of that relationship change as the experiences that the reader undergoes change.

Besides those of Rashi, other readings of the first verse of Genesis are possible. A number of these focus on the root of bereishit, which is rosh, meaning "head." The root meaning is brought out if one shifts the last two letters of bereishit onto the next word and revocalizes, obtaining a Hebrew word meaning "will create himself." This shifting of letters is not unreasonable since in ancient Torah scrolls not only were vowels and punctuation missing, but also the spaces between individual words. 26 With these changes, the opening verse of Genesis can also be read as follows: "In his head God will create himself [along] with the heaven and the earth." 27 This is consistent with mystical insights, both Jewish and Christian, that the cosmos is a thought in God’s mind. 28

As I read the opening verse of the Torah, my interaction with the text releases a cornucopia of interpretations: "In the beginning of God’s creation . . .," "For the sake of the Torah God created . . .," "In his head God will create . . .," "The head inside the house" with which the cosmos began (see note 28). All these readings and more blossom out of the astonishingly fecund opening verse. And all these interpretations become infinitely enriched by their interactions with the thousands of verses that follow it, an infinite orchard of interpretation whose seed is the polysemous first word bereishit. 29

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." So reads the majestic opening verse of the King James Bible, reproducing word for word the translation in Jerome’s Vulgate. In the King James, this opening verse is the prelude to a lucid narrative of the orderly, logical creation of the cosmos. However, when one reads the Hebrew text through the lenses of the commentaries by Rashi and others, an aura of the open-ended and unfathomable
mystery of creation becomes apparent. "There is a tension," Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes, "between the benevolent clarity and power of the narrative and the acknowledgment of mystery that inheres in the very first word and that develops as the implications of the beginning are realized."\textsuperscript{30}

In contrast to the linguistically creative and created God of the Torah, a pictorialized or sculptured divinity is a limited divinity, whether God the Father on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or God the Son on the chapel’s front wall. Only words can sculpt an invisible God. By evading the limitations of visual representation, the Second Commandment creates virtual spaces of great expressive and interpretive freedom that open the imagination up to face infinity, such as the words of the creation narrative or the poetry of a Shabbat morning prayer, which contains the largest number in the Jewish liturgy: "Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as its multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, and our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon, and our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as hinds—we still could not thank You sufficiently, HASHEM our God and God of our forefathers, and to bless Your Name for even one of the thousand thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of favors that you performed for our ancestors and for us."\textsuperscript{31}

In contrast to Michelangelo’s wondrous, but limiting portrayals of creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the open-ended interpretability of the creation narrative in the Torah enacts creation’s infinitely inaccessible mysteries. Does God create the cosmos? Does the Torah create God?

In Genesis 1:2, we read about the faces of the ocean covered by darkness at the beginning of creation and the faces of the waters over which the rushing-spirit of God hovers protectively.\textsuperscript{32} And while hovering, God, Narcissus-like, sees God’s own panim, God’s own faces. The astonishment of it. Rashi points out that the word tohu in tohu vavohu “signifies astonishment and amazement, for a person would have been astonished and amazed at its emptiness.”\textsuperscript{33} The infinite energy of it. Perhaps God queries the reflections of God’s faces in the faces of the waters using the words of Emily Dickinson: "Infinitude—Had’st Thou no Face that I might look on Thee?"\textsuperscript{34} In order to dilute the energy of those faces, God creates the cosmos. Or the Torah creates God.

The faces of God reflected in the faces of the waters have infinitely many facets, which are distributed throughout the Torah, the blueprint of creation. Certain facets were seen by Jacob face to face at Peniel after wrestling with the unknown adversary (Genesis 32:31). Other facets were
shown by God to Moses when they spoke face to face as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). And yet other facets were reflected in the radiant skin of Moses, whose face was the moon to God’s sun when he descended from Mount Sinai carrying the two tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:29). And the Lord makes yet other facets shine upon you in the Blessing of the Face (Numbers 6:24–26).

May YHWH bless you and keep you!
May YHWH shine his face upon you and favor you!
May YHWH lift up his face toward you and grant you shalom.

In Hebrew “face” is panim, which is plural, and in the panim of God infinitely many facets shine. In Exodus 33:20 God tells Moses and you and me and all of us: “You cannot see my panim, for no human can see me and live!” But you and I and all of us can be enlightened by the infinite facets of those faces whose energy is distributed throughout the Torah. They wait for us to release them, to play with them, to wrestle with them. They wait for us to become God’s partner in the act of creation, which, with open-ended and unfathomable mystery, ongoingly enfolds and unfolds the cosmos.

NOTES

Acknowledgments: I am greatly indebted to Catherine Madsen for a careful reading of an early version of this essay and for a number of useful suggestions, one of which led to the title. I also thank Markos Katsoulakis for translations from the Septuagint Greek.

1. I suspect that the scriptural basis for God’s posterior in fresco two is Jerome’s Latin translation of the phrase “you shall see my back” in Exodus 33:23: videbis posteriorem meam. In the word posteriorem Jerome has preserved the enigmatical plural form of the Hebrew word acheray, meaning “my backs,” which a number of Rabbinic commentators explicate philosophically. Jerome’s translation was based on the Septuagint Greek translation. The word in the Septuagint corresponding to the Hebrew acheray and the Latin posteriorem also has a plural form, Jerome’s posteriorem echoes the Italian posteriore, which like the English cognate can refer to a part of the human body.


8. Translations of the Hebrew Bible are taken from Everett Fox, translator and commentator, The


10. The nominative form of the adjective *cornuta* appearing in Jerome's translation is *cornu*, meaning "horn." Could the sound resonance between *cornu* and the Hebrew word for "horn," *keren*, be one of the reasons for Jerome's translation? Like the Hebrew word *panim*, the Latin word for "face," *facies*, also preserves the ambiguity between singular and plural forms, but only in the nominative case. The other four grammatical cases all distinguish between singular and plural forms.


12. This observation is due to Catherine Madsen.


15. Handelman, p. 38.


17. Fox, p. 11.


22. Ramban, p. 20, n. 19b; Zlotowitz, p. 28.

23. Handelman, p. 38.

24. Quoted in Handelman, p. 38.

25. Handelman, p. 38.


27. This interpretation was pointed out to me by Rabbi Saul Perlmutter.

28. Another mystical reading reveals an extraordinary symbiosis of form and meaning on multiple levels. The first two letters of *heresht/it/it* are *beth* and *resh*. The first letter *beth*, in its printed form י, contains itself the second letter *resh*, printed as ר. Now *beth* and *resh* are respective forms of the Hebrew words *hayit* and *reshit*, meaning "house" and "head." What occurs on the level of letters, the *resh* inside the *beth*, mirrors what occurs on the level of words. Namely, the six-letter word *heresht/it/it* consists of the word *resh* (letters 2, 3, 4) literally inside the word *hayit* (letters 1, 5, 6). And what occurs on the level of words mirrors what occurs on the level of the verse, connecting back to the main narrative and significantly deepening our understanding of it. Namely, mystical commentary on the Torah regards the *resh*, or head, inside the *hayit*, or house, in the six-letter word *heresht/it/it* as signifying the male sex organ inside the female sex organ engaged in the act of sexual intercourse that engenders the cosmos (this interpretation was pointed out to me by Reverend Jürgen Liaas). This reading, in turn, connects human sexuality with Divine sexuality, conferring cosmic significance upon the former (Seymour J. Cohen, translator and commentator, The Holy Letter [Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993]). That *heresht/it/it* works on all three levels of letters, words, and verse, each mirroring the other, reveals the fractal structure of *heresht/it/it* while
simultaneously foreshadowing the fractal structure of the Torah, of which it is the first word (Richard S. Ellis, “The Book of Leviticus and the Fractal Geometry of Torah,” *Conservative Judaism* 50.1 [1997]: 27–34). Since God gazed into the Torah before creating the universe, *b'reyshit* also encapsulates the fractal structure of the universe, the creation of which begins with *b'reyshit*.

29. Here is an example. As the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the enlarged *beth* with which the Torah begins summarizes the duality principle that is the main structural feature of the creation narratives in Genesis (Israel Koren, “Friedrich Weinreb’s Commentary on the Two Tales of Creation in Genesis,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 [1999]: 71–112; here pp. 77–95). This duality is evident in Genesis 1:1: the repetition of the first three letters of *b'reyshit* (*beth-resh-aleph*) in the second word *bara*’; the repetition of the untranslated word *et*; the plural forms of the word translated as “God,” *Elohim*, and the word translated as “heaven,” *shamayim*.


32. In Genesis 1:2 the rushing-spirit of God hovers protectively. As Rashi points out, the word used by the Torah for “hovers” describes how a dove hovers over its nest (Silbermann, p. 3).

33. Silbermann, p. 3.