

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTHS OF SIVAN - TAMMUZ 5761

MAY 23 - JULY 20, 2001 • No. 5 Vol. 14

*If we know anything
it is to know
that we know
something.*

THE FIRST DOMINO

Knowing is the clearest indication that we exist. As Descartes put it “*Cogito ergo sum.*” But from where does that “something” originate? Where is the beginning of knowledge? Where does cognition start?

We understand almost all things by relating them to what we already know. Every new piece of knowledge is like a domino we attach to a pre-existing chain of cognitive “dominoes.” We can only understand something if we can find it a home, if we can connect it to what we already understand.

For example, the fact that the circumference of a circle is $2\pi r$ is no more than an inscrutable puzzle to someone who has no idea what a “circumference” or a “circle” is. Similarly, knowing that Brazil won the World Cup in 1970 is not a piece of information that can be grasped by someone who has no idea what a “Brazil” might be, or a “world,” or a “cup,” let alone the hieroglyphic “1970.”

Cognition works by association. We know things because we can attach them to other things that we know. But how does the process start? Where does that first knowledge come from? If knowledge can only work by attaching itself to that which is already there, necessarily there must be some point, however minuscule, of

prior cognition to which that knowledge attaches. But where does that first point come from?

SELF-STARTER?

It’s axiomatic then, that we cannot grasp that first point by ourselves — because that first point of cognition would have nothing to attach itself to. It’s like starting a car. Once the car is running, the engine itself can generate enough power to sustain the cycle as long as the fuel lasts. To start the car, however, you need an

outside force — an electric starter, or if all else fails, a crank handle.

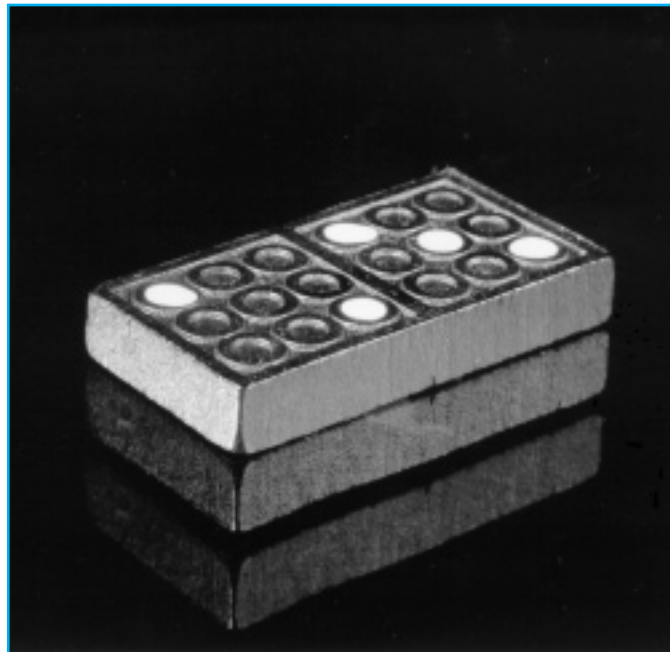
Where is the crank handle, of cognition? Who gave us the first domino?

THE BEGINNING IS ALWAYS BEYOND

All beginning starts from beyond. Our understanding commences only from after that beginning point and onwards. That first point, however, the beginning of knowledge itself, is beyond — beyond our understanding, beyond our grasp. That first point is the basis of all

understanding, without it we have nothing on which to build knowledge, but it itself cannot be understood. It is hidden. It is something beyond. It is something that G-d gives.

The Torah starts with the letter *bet* — “*Bereishet...*” *Bet* is the second letter of the *aleph bet*. Why doesn’t the Torah start with the *aleph*?



Continued over

In this world, the *aleph* is always beyond. (Similarly the convention is to print the Tractates of the Talmud starting from page *bet* -2.)

"In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and the earth..." The *Targum Yerushalmi*, an Aramaic translation of the Torah, translates the expression *"In the beginning"* as *"with wisdom."* Beginning is synonymous with wisdom. That original point of wisdom, that beginning of knowledge which only G-d can give us is always beyond. It is the basis of all understanding, but it itself cannot be understood.

ONE WORD

Every year, at the festival of Shavuot, we celebrate G-d communicating with mankind at Mount Sinai. The Torah describes the moment thus:

"G-d spoke all these words, saying: 'I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery...'"

Rashi explains that the phrase *"G-d spoke all these words, saying..."* means that G-d spoke all Ten Commandments in one utterance — an impossibility for Man since such an utterance neither can the mouth speak, nor the ear hear. G-d then repeated and explained each of the Ten Commandments separately: *"I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You should not recognize the gods of others...etc."*

What was the point of this unified utterance that was impossible

to grasp? What was given over to us in that utterance that fused everything together, an utterance that could neither be spoken nor understood?

A NEW BEGINNING

When G-d created the world, He created it with Ten Pronouncements. The first of these Pronouncements was *"In the beginning..."* The second was *"And G-d said 'Let there be light.'"* The third: *"And G-d said 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.'"* Each one of the Ten Statements at Sinai are a direct parallel, one for one, to the Ten Pronouncements with which the world was created. *"In the beginning"* parallels *"I am Hashem, your G-d who has taken you out of the slavery of Egypt."* *"Let there be light"* parallels *"You should not recognize the gods of others..."* Just as G-d created the world *"In the beginning,"* so He "re-created" the world at Sinai.

A new world, however, requires a new beginning.

Now we can understand the significance of that utterance that no human mouth can speak nor ear can hear. With that utterance G-d created a new beginning to cognition. A point of departure for all that was to follow, but it itself was beyond understanding. You can't speak it. You can't hear it. But without it, nothing else is understood correctly.

It is the first domino of a new world.

FEELING THE KNOWING

There!

All the war-torn clichés,
Clutches loosed,
Are born again unspeaking —
All the unstill words
still tingling from the spine —
electric.

There!

A New Moon over Jerusalem.

There!

Feeling the knowing
that this beautiful silver sliver
is the shining under the door
of a great palace of Light.

There!

The publication of Seasons Of The Moon is made possible by the generosity of Jill Sinclair and Trevor Horn