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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The rabbis of the Talmud have taught us that all new beginnings are fraught with difficulties. This weeks parsha in its details of the beginning of human existence on this planet certainly confirms that observation. Seemingly, everything goes wrong from the start. Adam and Chava sin and are expelled from Paradise, Cain slays his brother Abel, and in a short span of generations and time the world sinks into a state of idolatry and moral depravity. The Torah even allows for a note of regret, so to speak, emanating from G-d Himself regarding the fall of humankind. It is hard to find a note of optimism until the last verse of the parsha. There it states that Noach found favor in G-ds eyes. The rabbis in the Mishna stated that there were ten generations that passed between Adam till Noach. The message here is clear. G-d somehow found it worthwhile to outwait the ten generations until humankind would produce an individual who would be worthy enough to start the world anew from him and his progeny. The Torah here teaches us important lessons: The worth of a single individual; the patience and fortitude of G-d with humankind; and that in G-ds scheme of things it is worthwhile to wait generations and persevere for the sake of finally achieving a truly good role model for human behavior. These lessons are the primary messages of the parsha and provide for us the guidance in viewing the rest of the Torah narrative as well as for viewpoints in our own personal and national lives.

The Talmud teaches us that Adam was created singly and alone so that no one of the human race could claim to be of greater pedigree than others. A second reason advanced by Jewish scholars is that this fact alone proves the power and inherent worth of an individual. In a world that has barely survived a century where hundreds of millions of individuals were deemed to be worthless except to serve an almighty state or ideology, the Torah comes to reaffirm the worth of an individual life. Every individual is a potential Noach, someone who can find favor in G-ds eyes so to speak and give the world a new and fresh start. But to create such individuals requires exquisite patience on our part. We are not allowed to be dismayed by the daily disappointments and failures that plague society and its leaders. Even if generations seemingly fail to achieve the desired improvement of the human character, we are still bidden to strive to achieve that goal. For that we also have the words of the rabbis of the Mishna: It is not necessarily incumbent upon you to complete the work [of making a better world] but neither are you freed of the task of attempting to do so. This is the lesson of the first ten generations of humankind as recorded in this weeks parsha. It remains the lesson for all later generations, including our own.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated by
Jack & Abe Newman & families
l'zecher nishmas Avinu Moreinu
R' Dovid Yissacher Dov ben Avraham Eliezer A"h

RABBI AARON GLATT

National Council of Young Israel

With great zeal and enthusiasm we start a new year of parsha study. We thank HaShem, shehechayanu, for allowing us to "get in touch with" Parshas Beraishis again. Torah learning is a circle, comprised of continuous beginnings and (temporary) endings, reviewing, learning new ideas, reviewing some more, and re-starting over again. In this fashion, we constantly revitalize and reaffirm our commitment to Yiddishkeit. Coming off the yomim noraim, fresh and eager, filled with tremendous hopes and aspirations, we are convinced that this year will mark our breakthrough in Torah, avodah, and gemillus chasadim.

This year we will daven with greater fervor; this year we will treat our spouse better; this year we will review each sedra (Torah portion) two times, plus read the Targum and / or Rashi. Yet, some (many?) of us will stumble and fail to accomplish the wonderful resolutions that were made. And far worse, the yetzer harah (evil inclination) whispers to us "so what - the same thing happened last year, and life went on. Don't worry about breaking promises - it doesn't really matter". What must our response to this twisted logic be? Beraishis relates the infamous account of how Adam and Chava were given a single solitary command, a simple precept to

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fulfill - do not eat from the Eitz Hada'as (the Tree of Knowledge). Tragically, the snake, the vile yetzer hara, prevailed, and Adam and Chava succumbed to temptation. To this day, we suffer the sequelae of their offense; women are burdened with the extremely painful travails of pregnancy, labor and delivery, while men are faced with the severe demands and stress of earning a livelihood. Why? What exactly was this Eitz Hada'as? What does it represent?

The gemara (Berachos 40a; Sanhedrin 70a) and Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 15:7), relate four possibilities as to the genus of this novel tree. The Razu (Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn in his Medrash commentary) explains that all four opinions are correct. The Eitz Hada'as was not a lone tree but an orchard, containing many different species. The differing viewpoints of the rabbis just reflect their contemplation regarding the particular tree Adam and Chava partook from. (Incidentally, however, no one advocates that it was an apple tree, as popular mythology suggests!).

In the first opinion, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak speculates that the Eitz Hada'as was a grape tree (vine), as many of our troubles can be traced to overindulgence with wine. On the other hand, Rabbi Nechemiah maintains it was a fig tree. Since HaShem ultimately gave them coverings (clothes) made from fig leaves, it must be because that was the medium through which they sinned. All of the other trees "refused" to be sullied by association! The third opinion, that of Rabbi Abba from Acco, expounds the Eitz Hada'as was an esrog tree, based upon Chava's assertion that the tree itself was good. Chazal relate that only an esrog tree produces fruit and bark with similar taste.

Parenthetically, the Mateh Ephraim (Eleph Hamagen 660:6) explains a beautiful Hoshana Rabbah custom pertaining to pregnant women. After the mitzvah of the four species is completed on Hoshanna Rabba, the esrog is no longer necessary. Pregnant women would bite off the esrog's pitem, thereby demonstrating that this time they are "eating" from the esrog tree only after the esrog is permissible. By indicating their disapproval of Chava's original transgression, in this merit, the women are asking HaShem to grant them an easy delivery!

However, the fascinating fourth opinion regarding the identity of the Eitz Hada'as is the view I would like to focus upon. Rabbi Yehuda comments that the Eitz Hada'as was a wheat tree, because Chazal inform us a baby only truly acquires knowledge after partaking of wheat products. Indeed, Berachos 40a gives further credence to his viewpoint by asking the following question: Does one fulfill the obligation to make a bracha on a vegetable, if instead, by accident, one recited the fruit blessing? The gemara responds with certainty - no - it is absolutely unacceptable, even after the fact (be'dieved). Wheat does not grow on a tree, so why should you even think such an incorrect blessing would be good?? However, since Rabbi Yehuda is of the opinion that wheat does grow on a tree, you might have presumed that one could fulfill their obligation, therefore the gemara informs us that is incorrect.

All very nice and true. Yet, even though most readers of this august publication are city dwellers unfamiliar with the fine particulars of agronomy and agriculture, I dare say that even the most urbanized amongst us are aware that wheat does not grow on a tree! What is Rabbi Yehuda saying?? And even more to the point, what significance is there in the tree's type - why such an extensive discussion?

As a good Jew, let me answer this question with a question. What bracha does one make on bread? HaMotzi lechem min Ha'aretz. Yet, this is strange, even according to Rabbi Yehuda. Why do we say thank you to HaShem for providing us with bread from the land, when in truth, it is wheat that is cultivated? Only afterwards, through our hard work, strain and effort, does the wheat become bread? The bracha should more correctly be HaMotzi chitah (wheat) min Ha'aretz!

The Toras Chaim (Sanhedrin 70a) provides an invaluable insight for our daily lives, especially appropriate for beginnings like Parshas Beraishis. Originally, HaShem never intended man to have to work hard for his bread - it grew directly on a tree. All Adam had to do was go and pick right off the tree a fresh pumpernickel, rye, bagel or challah, whatever his heart desired. Life was simple, no sweat, no hard labor - just basking in Gan Eden in the glow of the Shechina. But then we sinned, and that's when our troubles began. From then on, we would have to work the land "be'zeyas apecha", with the sweat of our brow. No longer would things come easily, no more would we be provided ready to eat delicious fresh bread on a silver platter. No, we would now have to strive and toil, with no guarantee of success: knowing full well that many crops would fail despite our best intentions and back breaking effort.

Berachos 38b discusses the language of the bracha, the word HaMotzi itself. Does HaMotzi imply past tense (one who brought forth) or future tense (one who will bring forth? The Toras Chaim suggests that both are correct! One day soon, iy"H, trees will once again produce fully baked bread instead of wheat stalks. The word HaMotzi alludes to this past and future concept. True, we must remember our past, understand

and recognize our mistakes and prior errors, and rectify them as possible. Yet we must always be optimistic and positive, striving eagerly forward, getting back up after a failure and trying again, anticipating a future when things will be better.

HaShem has given us the amazing power and ability to transform wheat into bread. We must accomplish this through nature, as a "punishment", through hard physical, backbreaking manual labor on the fertile land G-d has bestowed upon us. But, we must simultaneously do this spiritually. We must continuously improve ourselves, moving forward religiously, and not allow our yetzer hara to so easily defeat us. We must combat the natural tendency to slip back into our old routines and bad habits. Just because we did not fully succeed last year, does not mean we are doomed to fail again.

May we all, be'ezras HaShem, be very successful this year in making bread - not only financially, but more importantly, spiritually.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Rabbi Yitzchok said, 'there was no need for the Torah to begin anywhere but from 'this month is to you' (Shemos 12:2), which is the first mitzvah that Israel was commanded. And for what reason did it open with 'in the beginning?' Because 'the strength of His actions He told to His people to give then the inheritance of nations' (Tehillim 111:6). So that if the nations of the world say to Israel 'you are robbers for you have taken over lands belonging to the 7 nations [of Canaan],' they can say to them, 'the whole world belongs to G-d; He created it and gave it to whom He deemed appropriate-it was His will to give it to them, and it was His will that it be taken from them and given to us."

Questions on this (first) Rashi abound, as the sheer volume of commentary on it (and the midrashic sources it is based on) attest to. For starters, exactly who is going to change their opinion based on the story of creation being included in the Torah? If the target audience believes in the Torah's validity and authority, there would be no question that the Chosen Land was destined for the Chosen People anyway. After all, the Torah is replete with commandments regarding the Land of Israel, including shortly after that first mitzvah (Shemos 12:25). And if the inclusion of the creation story is meant to convince non-believers that G-d wanted the Land of Israel to belong to the Nation of Israel, since they don't believe what the Torah says anyway, how will saying so in that same Torah make any difference?

One possibility could have been that *we* are really the intended audience, so that *we* understand fully that Israel belongs to us. Although this might be a valid reason, Rashi (on the verse in Tehillim) makes it quite clear that it is not limited to us: "He wrote for Israel the story of creation to inform them that the land belongs to Him and He can put whomever He wants there, remove them, and put others there, so that the nations cannot say to Israel 'you are thieves, for you have conquered the land of seven nations." The purpose is clearly so that others cannot complain to us. Not so that we will have what to respond to them, but so that "they will be unable to say it to us." How will including it in our holy book prevent them making the claim?

Besides, the logic of G-d having created the land, and therefore able to move the pieces on His chess board from place to place at will, applies to all places and all peoples. Native Americans should not be able to claim that America owes them anything, as obviously G-d wants the land "from sea to shining sea" to be in the hands of the American Government! G-d must have wanted the Czars to rule Russia for a while, and must have wanted the Land of Israel to be ruled by so many others besides the Jews for so much of history. This argument doesn't prevent future attempts to take land, it only justifies having taken it, as G-d must have approved! How can this argument be presented as if it only explains/justifies our conquering the Land of Canaan 40 years after the exodus from Egypt, and not to every war waged over the history of mankind?

Additionally, this would only explain the inclusion of the creation story. What about the rest of Sefer Beraishis? If the issue is having anything but the actual laws in the Torah, the story of the flood would be just as extraneous. As would everything that happened to Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, and their children-including all the trials and tribulations that occurred in the desert, i.e. Sefer Bamidbar. Why were all of these things (and more) included in the Torah?

Even if it were necessary to include creation in the Torah, it's already there! When we are commanded to keep the Sabbath we are told that we should work for 6 days and rest on the seventh "for in six days G-d made the heavens and the earth, the seas and everything that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day" (Shemos 20:11). Why "add" it earlier if we will know that G-d created the world (and can therefore do with it as He sees fit) as part of the commandments anyway? G-d's involvement in the world is also made clear through the very fact that there is reward (i.e. rain) if we follow the commandments and punishment (i.e. lack of rain) if we don't. If the Torah is supposed to be only the laws, why include ideas that will be included later?

Finally, even if including it would prevent the nations from claiming that we shouldn't have Israel, why does it have to be part of the Torah itself? The argument would be just as effective if it were made elsewhere, such as in a separate book of the Bible. Just as Moshe wrote Iyov, yet it is not considered part of the Torah (but one of the Writings), he could have written the parts of the Torah that are not the actual laws as a

separate volume, and they would be just as effective! If the need to explain the inclusion of the creation story is based on the Torah being a law book rather than a story book, giving us the purpose of the story doesn't explain why it is included *here*, just why it needs to be included *somewhere*! So why didn't the Torah just start with the first mitzvah?

In order to understand how the accusation of illegally grabbing the Land of Israel is being prevented, we should try to understand what the accusation actually is. When land is conquered by one nation from another, it is usually resources that are being fought for. One nation feels that its border really extends farther than they have control over, or that it needs the natural resources the other country can provide. But it is fought between two already existing countries, with the outcome determining who controls the resources of the area in question. (Obviously there is much human tragedy involved as well, not just in the loss of life, but in the disruption of life and the mistreatment of others. But the war is fought not in order to cause suffering, but to gain additional control.) Who will live where is not really what's being fought over, but who will govern the disputed area. During the First Temple, Assyria was innovative in that they moved entire populations from place to place, but that was to minimize the difficulty of ruling others in their country. In essence, though, they also were an existing country expanding its reach by conquering its neighbors.

This is not what happened in the Land of Canaan. Avraham came from either Ur (Iraq) or Aram (Syria). Those countries were not trying to conquer Canaan. Avraham himself didn't try to conquer it. He clearly considered himself a "stranger," who had to part ways with his nephew (Lot) because he insisted he didn't even have grazing rights, and insisted on purchasing a burial place for his wife. His grandson, Yaakov, upon returning from living with family in Aram, purchased land in Shechem. Then the family moved down to Egypt, returning 250 years later, after becoming a nation, to conquer Canaan. And because they were a new nation, they had no previously established homeland, where a war would have meant merely extending its borders to expand its resources. They had to take land away from the residents that had resided there since the beginning of the "homeland" concept. And even if those residents were given the op portunity to flee for their lives or live under Israelite rule, the Torah demands that those who do not be annihilated.

Imagine of the impression it would leave had the Torah consisted purely of the laws. Many of those laws refer to conquering land from Canaan, and destroying every remnant of the idolatrous society that had lived there. Our own sacred text would testify that we came from nowhere (actually, since many mitzvos are connected to the exodus from Egypt, it would be obvious where we came from, but were still escaped slaves with no home) who took over someone else's land by wiping them out. A very different scenario than your typical war, and one that could certainly lead other nations to accuse us of being "armed robbers" taking things that were not ours. This is what Rabbi Yitzchok says is being prevented.

But that is only true if the Torah started from the first mitzvah, and only included the mitzvos. Instead, we are told not only that G-d created the world, but precisely *how* He created it. He didn't just cause a big bang and then leave things to develop on their own, but was the One who directly caused every aspect of creation, including the formation of the continents (see Beraishis Rabbah 1:2). Man is clearly the focal point of creation, and when he sins, he is thrown out of the Garden of Eden. When mankind becomes corrupt, G-d wipes them out (except for Noach and his family). Because of Cham's misdeed, his fourth son, Canaan, is cursed, and his descendants must become the slaves of the descendants of his uncles (specifically Shem-see Beraishis 9:27). When the unified society tries to wage war against G-d (by building the Tower of Bavel), He spreads them out, thus assigning different countries to the different peoples. Yes, Canaan is also assigned a homeland, but they have already been designated as the slaves of Shem's descendants, so they are merely caretakers of the land until G-d's Chosen People are ready to inherit it. (For a more complete discussion of Canaan's role as temporary caretakers of the land, as well as a possible reconciliation of the seemingly contradictory sources regarding whether the land was originally assigned to Shem or to Canaan, please see www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/lechLecha.pdf.)

After this setup is provided, we are introduced to our forefathers, whose dedication to G-d formed the basis of this emerging nation. We learn which of Avraham's sons, and which of Yitzchok's twin sons, will carry forth G-d's mission, and the circumstances that led to the slavery in Egypt. The miraculous exodus story follows, followed by the nation's acceptance of its holy mission. Their missteps in the desert are included too, lest we think that they would lose their special status (and thus their right to the land of Canaan) if they were less than perfect. It isn't just creation that must be told, but everything from "in the beginning" on, as it provides the context within which the Chosen People were given the Promised Land by the Creator, and how they did not "steal" it from others, but were destined for it from the beginning (see Bamidbar Rabbah 23:11-12).

Since the source for the other nations' claim would have been the Torah itself, this context must be provided within that same source. Including it in a separate volume risks having it considered secondary (as the rest of Nach is considered), and merely apologetics. And, as the Maysiyach Ilmim points out, there is no guarantee that any other Book (besides the Torah) will never be lost. There are lessons upon

lessons learned from these divinely-dictated "stories," and internal consistency demands that the same Torah that insists we cannot steal supplies the context that explains how G-d is not insisting that we steal the land from Canaan.

Once these things were included in the Torah, they have the same divine nature as the laws themselves, including the ability to transform us into people that follow in the footsteps of our forefathers.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

At the conclusion of the Sukkot Festival, just prior to the Sabbath when we begin reading the Biblical cycle once again with the portion of Genesis, we read the Scroll of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet); and strangely enough, there is a striking connection between what appears to be the pessimistic and even nihilistic message of Ecclesiastes and the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel.

Commentaries throughout the generations have wrestled with the connection between a Scroll that iterates and reiterates the utter futility of life when assessed from the perspective of certain death-the one fate that is destined for all-and Sukkot, our festival of greatest joy. King Solomon, the wisest and wealthiest of Kings who is traditionally reputed to have authored Kohelet, impresses upon us with elegant cadences but nevertheless with the subtlety of a sledge-hammer how neither wisdom nor wealth nor material pleasures nor toil can bring ultimate satisfaction when "there is an evil about all things that go on under the sun: that the same fate awaits us all;... a live dog is better than a dead lion" (Ecclesiastes 9:3,4).

Indeed, the word "hevel" (literally a breath or the whitish vapor which exudes from one's mouth on a cold day, but usually translated as vanity because of the fleeting and non-substantive nature of this vapor) appears in this Scroll no less than thirty-eight times, and in the very opening verse seven times: Vapor of vapors (a double noun which counts for two), says Kohelet, vapor of vapors, everything is vapor" (Eccles 1:2). And no wonder! After all, according to the literal meaning of this scroll, "The dead know nothing at all; there is no more reward for them, their memory is forgotten. Their love, their hate, their jealousy have already perished-nor will they ever again have a share in whatever is done beneath the sun" (Ibid 9:5,6).

The traditional commentaries, most notably the Targum, emphasize the vapor- vanity aspect of life when it is viewed "beneath the sun"-beneath the sun rather than beneath a loving and eternal G-d, from the perspective of this mortal, finite and often unfair world rather than from the perspective of the infinite and true world-to-come. This understanding provides a logical tie-in to the Sukkah: when one views the entire desert experience from a purely geographical-historical vantage point, the Sukkot were temporary huts which barely insulated us from the cold and heat and barely protected us from the rains and winds; but when we see the desert as the natural outgrowth of Divine miracle and loving intervention which freed us from Egyptian servitude, then the desert Sukkot become clouds and rays of Divine glory which symbolize the Sanctuary.

But even according to the simple meaning of the text, King Solomon-despite his initial pessimistic assessment of life as transient and inconsequential as the fleeting vapor of a breath-seems to make a fascinating turnaround. In the very verse following his pining over the futility of a life which must always end in the destruction of human love, hate and jealousy, he suddenly declares: "Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for G-d has already approved your deeds. Let your garments always be white and your head never lack oil. Enjoy life with the wife you love through all the days of the life of your vapor which (G-d) has given you beneath the sun all the days of the your vapor; for that is your compensation for your life and your toil which you toil beneath the sun. Whatever you are able to do with your strength, shall you do!, because there is neither deed nor accounting nor knowledge nor wisdom in the netherworld where you are going to there" (Eccles 9: 7-10).

What caused the switch in attitude, suggesting that it is precisely the inevitability of death and the briefness of life which ought spur you on to enjoy life to its fullness and accomplish as much as your strength allows? I remember my last visit to my maternal grandmother, the individual who had the most profound influence on my life, just a few days before here death. She lived in an "efficiency room" (combined kitchen and bedroom) within my aunt and uncle's larger apartment; she was then ninety years old, and very ill, although not in real pain. As I entered her room, she gave me her very special smile. "Mein Liebes Kind" (My beloved child), she said. "That is exactly how I see my life-an opening and closing of the door, a brief instant in the eternal span of time. Make sure you utilize each moment. I know I'm dying, and I'm not afraid to die. I'm going home to G-d. I only pray I used the time I was given as best as possible..."

This, I believe, is the true meaning of King Solomon's Scroll. Eitan Dorshav, in a most thoughtful article in Azure, Autumn 2004, provides the interpretation. It is the very beauty of life which ought serve to spur us on to actualize our potential and make the most of every moment we have in this world-before it's too late. Were we to face a lifetime of infinity, there would be no necessity to do, to love, to relate; after all, why do today what you can always do tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, unless there may not be a tomorrow.... And since we are such finite mortals, we

must grasp onto every moment of joy and satisfaction, we must live each moment as fully as possible.

The opening portion of the Book of Genesis tells of Cain and Abel, Hevel, the shepherd whose very short life-a vapor, a breath-was cruelly snuffed out. However, the Bible tells us, "And Hevel also brought (a sacrifice to G-d) consisting of his first-born, fatted sheep; And the Lord looked with favor (gave salvation, Hebrew Yesha) to Hevel... " (Genesis 4:4). In the sum total of things, whether we live to be a 100 or 20, our lives are always too short and seem to pass as mere vapor. The most we can hope for is that the period of time we do live is devoted to G-d, to the eternal ideal of compassion, freely-given love and truth, and that we fulfill the human mission of being shepherds for those who require our care. The question can never be how long you lived, but rather what you made of whatever time was placed at your disposal. If you were a shepherd, and if your life was dedicated to G-d, then you will have achieved salvation.

On my desk in my Ohr Torah Stone office in Efrat is a clock which is modeled after the sun-clock put up in Jerusalem by Rav Shmuel Salant more than 100 years ago, instead of ciphers it has letters, twelve letters spelling out the verse, "our days are as a passing shadow." (Ymnu Kztl Over). I have added beneath the clock a mediating verse, "In the shadow of Your Wings do I find sheltering comfort." I do not find such a clock depressing; much the opposite, it inspires me to make each moment as momentous as possible.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

While some maintain that the human being is only physical form, the Torah, in one of its most important sentences, insists that every person is also created in the image of G-d—tzelem Elokim (Genesis 1:26,27). On the surface we see each others' outward appearance, but if we look deeply, we ought be able to perceive a little bit of G-d in our fellow human being. In fact, it is the tzelem Elokim which makes the human being unique. In the words of Pirke Avot, "beloved is the human being who is created in the image of G-d." (Avot 3:18) Several fundamental ideas emerge from the tzelem Elokim principle.

Bearing in mind that each and every human being is created with tzelem Elokim, it follows that all people—regardless of race, religion, nationality, age, mental faculties, handicap etc—are of equal value.

Human beings can relate to G-d "vertically" and "horizontally." In the sense that we have the capacity to reach upwards to the all powerful G-d through prayer and ritual, we relate vertically. Additionally, when we relate to our fellow person, we connect to that part of G-d in them. If one hurts another human being, G-d is hurt. Similarly, if one brings joy to another, G-d is more joyous. Hence a horizontal relationship exists as well.

No matter how far one strays, one has the potential to return to the inner G-dliness we all possess—which is, of course, good.

Even if a person holds him/herself in low esteem, he/she ought have self confidence. After all, G-d is in each of us. G-d, as the ultimate creator has given us the capacity to be endlessly creative—lending an important ingredient to our self esteem.

As G-d is omnipresent, so too do people created in the image of G-d have the inner desire to reach beyond themselves. We accomplish this by developing lasting relationships with another. In tha sense one's presence is expanded.

Similarly, as G-d is eternal, we, created in the image of G-d have the instinctual need to transcend ourselves. This need is met by raising children. Unlike animals, human beings are uniquely aware of historic continuity.

The image of G-d points to life after death. As G-d lives forever, so too does the part of G-d in us, our soul, live beyond our physical years.

Of course it must be remembered that tzelem Elokim does not mean that every human being is automatically good. Image of G-d is potential. If properly nurtured, it takes us to sublime heights. If abused, it can sink us to the lowest depths. Hence the words ki tov, found after every stage of creation, are not recorded after the human being is formed. Whether we are tov depends on the way we live our lives; it is not endowed at birth.

And, the mystics add, that when we live our lives properly, the image of G-d in each of us merges with the omnipresent G-d to become One—Ehad.

The tzelem Elokim is an eternal spark. Whether it is lit is up to us.

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

The Purpose of Creation

The wisdom of Hashem is expressed to us in two ways, via the world of nature and the world of Torah. Both, the natural world and the world of Torah speak of the greatness of Hashem. Rashi comments on the first word of the Torah, "Bereishis", that there is a relationship between creation and the Torah. The Torah is referred to as reishis, the beginning, which teaches us that the entire creation of the world was for the sake of Torah. Thus, the wonders of creation testify to the wisdom of the Creator, and through the study of Torah, we are privileged to involve ourselves with the knowledge of Hashem.

This relationship between creation and the Torah requires of us to view the natural world in a unique manner. The primary purpose of all creation is to enable us to observe the Torah. If we utilize the natural

world for its primary purpose, we are then permitted to benefit from it for our own needs. An example of this idea appears in the description of the creation of the sun, the moon, and the stars. The Torah tells us that they were created to be signs for the days, seasons, and years. Rashi comments that this refers to their role in determining the season of the yomim tovim. After the Torah establishes their primary purpose in assisting us to perform mitzvos, we are told that they were also created to give us light. We learn from here, that one can only benefit from the physical world if one first uses its gifts for their true purpose.

Chazal in maseches Pesachim (49b) tell us that one who does not study Torah, has no right to partake of meat. The commentators explain that one who does not study the Torah which is written on the skins of animals, in essence, is not using the animal world for its primary purpose. Such an individual has no right to use animals for his own materialistic needs.

Chazal have a fascinating interpretation for the pasuk which describes the seven species of produce with which Eretz Yisrael was blessed. Each of the foods mentioned in the description of Eretz Yisrael corresponds to a halachic measurement (maseches Eruvin, 4a). Eretz Yisrael is blessed with olives and the amount of food which constitutes a halachic act of eating is the size of an olive. Eretz Yisrael is blessed with dates-if one eats the measurement of a date on Yom Kippur, then one is subject to punishment.

Why is it significant to link the various halachic measurements to the fruits of Eretz Yisrael? Chazal are teaching us how to view all of creation. One who views creation through the eyes of the Torah sees, in an olive, a halachic concept. Stories are told of Torah scholars who would look at a fence and immediately ponder whether the fence was acceptable for an eruv. Similarly, when a Torah scholar looks at a lake he does not see a body of water but rather a potential mikva. Everything in the world was created to enable us to observe the Torah. We have to open our eyes to see the primary purpose of creation.

We not only view creation through the lens of Torah, we view the unfolding of history in a similar manner. The Beis Halevi comments on a difficult wording of a pasuk following yetzias Mitzraim (Shmos, 13, 8). We are commanded to relate the events of yetzias Mitzraim to our children. We are told to relate the story as we point to the korban Pesach, the matza and the marror. We tell our children that because of the korban Pesach, matza and marror we were taken out of Mitzraim. It would seem that the order of the pasuk should be reversed and instead say that we observe these mitzvos because we were taken out of Mitzraim, not the other way around. What do we mean when we say that yetzias Mitzraim took place because of these mitzvos? The Beis Halevi explains that the Torah is teaching us how to view history. Hashem wanted to give us these mitzvos and orchestrated history in a manner to make these mitzvos meaningful to us.

When we look at the natural world and at historical events we have to view them with the proper perspective. All of creation and all of history are to enable us to observe the Torah. May we merit that Hashem opens our eyes to view His creation and His hand in history, in their proper light.

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF RABBI

Covenant & Conversation

by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

It is the most famous, majestic and influential opening of any book in literature: "In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth." What is surpassingly strange is the way Rashi-most beloved of all Jewish commentators-begins his commentary: Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have begun with the verse (Ex. 12: 1): "This month shall be to you the first of the months", which was the first commandment given to Israel.

Can we really take this at face value? Did Rabbi Isaac, or for that matter Rashi, seriously suggest that the Book of books might have begun in the middle-a third of the way into Exodus? That it might have passed by in silence the creation of the universe-which is, after all, one of the fundamentals of Jewish faith?

Could we understand the history of Israel without its prehistory, the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their children? Could we have understood those narratives without knowing what preceded them: G-d's repeated disappointment with Adam and Eve, Cain, the generation of the Flood and the builders of the Tower of Babel?

The fifty chapters of Genesis together with the opening of Exodus are the source-book of biblical faith. They are as near as we get to an exposition of the philosophy of Judaism. What then did Rabbi Isaac mean? He meant something profound, which we often forget. To understand a book, we need to know to what genre it belongs. Is it history or legend, chronicle or myth? To what question is it an answer? A history book answers the question: what happened? A book of cosmology-be it science or myth- answers the question: how did it happen? What Rabbi Isaac is telling us is that if we seek to understand the Torah, we must read it as Torah, which is to say: law, instruction, teaching, guidance. Torah is an answer to the question: how shall we live? That is why he raises the question as to why it does not begin with the first command given to Israel.

Torah is not a book of history, even though it includes history. It is not a book of science, even though the first chapter of Genesis-as the 19th-century sociologist Max Weber pointed out-is the necessary prelude to science, because it represents the first time people saw the universe as the product of a single

creative will, and therefore as intelligible rather than capricious and mysterious. It is, first and last, a book about how to live. Everything it contains-not only commandments but also narratives, including the narrative of creation itself-is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction.

How this relates to creation is a topic for another time. It is, however, an introduction to this year's Covenant and Conversation. Each week I will be looking at an ethical issue addressed by the parsha of the week. Sometimes this is a matter of halakhah, but not always. Jewish ethics is not confined to law. It includes virtues of character, general principles and role models. It is conveyed not only by commandments but also by narratives, telling us how particular individuals responded to specific situations. It moves from the minutest details to the most majestic visions of the universe and our place within it. But it never deviates from its intense focus on the questions: What shall I do? How shall I live? What kind of person should I strive to become? It begins, in Genesis 1, with the most fundamental question of all. As the Psalm (8: 4) puts it: "What is man that You are mindful of him?"

Pico della Mirandola's 15th century Oration on Man was one of the turning points of Western civilization, the "manifesto" of the Italian Renaissance. In it he attributed the following declaration to G-d, addressing the first man: "We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."

Homo sapiens, that unique synthesis of "dust of the earth" and breath of G-d, is unique among created beings in having no fixed essence: in being free to be what he or she chooses. Mirandola's Oration was a break with the two dominant traditions of the Middle Ages: the Christian doctrine that human beings are irretrievably corrupt, tainted by original sin, and the Platonic idea that humanity is bounded by fixed forms.

It is also a strikingly Jewish account-almost identical with the one given by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in Halakhic Man: "The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. It is this idea that Judaism introduced into the world." It is therefore with a frisson of recognition that we discover that Mirandola had a Jewish teacher, Rabbi Elijah ben Moses Delmedigo (1460-1497).

Born in Crete, Delmedigo was a Talmudic prodigy, appointed at a young age to be head of the yeshivah in Padua. At the same time, he studied philosophy, in particular the work of Aristotle, Maimonides and Averroes. At the age of 23 he was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Padua. It was through this that he came to know Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who became both his student and his patron. Eventually, however, Delmedigo's philosophical writings-especially his work Bechinat ha-Dat-became controversial. He was accused, by other rabbis, of heresy. He had to leave Italy and return to Crete. He was much admired by Jews and Christians alike, and when he died young, many Christians as well as Jews attended his funeral.

This emphasis on choice, freedom and responsibility is one of the most distinctive features of Jewish thought. It is proclaimed in the first chapter of Genesis in the most subtle way. We are all familiar with its statement that G-d created man "in His image, after His likeness". Seldom do we pause to reflect on the paradox. If there is one thing emphasized time and again in the Torah, it is that G-d has no image. "I will be what I will be", He says to Moses when he asks Him His name. Since G-d transcends nature-the fundamental point of Genesis 1 -- then He is free, unbounded by nature's laws. By creating human beings in His image, He gave us a similar freedom, thus creating the one being capable itself of being creative. The unprecedented account of G-d in the Torah's opening chapter leads to an equally unprecedented view of the human person and our capacity for self-transformation..

The Renaissance, one of the high points of European civilization, eventually collapsed. A series of corrupt rulers and Popes led to the Reformation, and to the quite different views of Luther and Calvin. It is fascinating to speculate what might have happened had it continued along the lines signalled by Mirandola. His late 15th century humanism was not secular but deeply religious.

As it is, the great truth of Genesis 1 remains. As the rabbis put it (Bereishith Rabbah 8: 1; Sanhedrin 38a): "Why was man created last? In order to say, if he is worthy, all creation was made for you; but if he is unworthy, he is told, even a gnat preceded you." The Torah remains G-d's supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and on the other, to responsibility and restraint-becoming G-d's partner in the work of creation.