

כח מעשי הגיד לעמו

# Introductory Shiur to Sefer B'resheet

by Yitzchak Etshalom

## I

### RASHI'S OPENING QUESTION

In the first note of his commentary on the Torah, Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzhaki, France 11th c.), challenges the very existence of the entire book of B'resheet:

R. Yitzhak said: The Torah should have begun with *This month is unto you the first of the months* (Sh'mot 12:2) which is the first Mitzvah by which Yisra'el were commanded [this is the Mitzvah of sanctifying the New Moon and of creating a calendar with the month of Aviv (Nissan) at its head]. What is the reason that it begins with the creation? On account of *He hath declared to His people the power of His works, in order to give them the inheritance of nations* (T'hilim 111:6) - that if the nations of the world say to Yisra'el "You are thieves, stealing the lands of the seven [K'na'ani] nations', they will respond: "The whole world belongs to haKadosh Barukh Hu; He gave it to whom He pleased, and according to His will, He took it from them and gave it to us.'

R. Yitzhak's question (the source of which is somewhat elusive; there are those who posited that the Rabbi Yitzhak in question was Rashi's father and that he was acting out of a sense of paternal honor, crediting his father with this idea; recently discovered manuscripts of the Midrash Tanhuma have, however, revealed the source of this Midrash.) seems odd and makes many a student profoundly uncomfortable. How could there be a Torah without the creation narrative, the patriarchal histories, the grandeur of the Akedah, the shame of Yoseph's brothers and the many other impactful lessons of Sefer B'resheet? In order to formalize (and, perhaps, ease) our instinctive discomfort with this comment, we should clarify the assumptions which lie at the heart of R. Yitzhak's question:

A) The Torah is purely a book of commands, proscriptions and obligations; (besides the many ethical admonitions and exhortations, theological tenets and principles which suffuse the non-legalistic parts of the Torah, the historic and meta-historic information, glorious poetry and praise-songs and prophecies are so central to our understanding of G-d's will and our people's destiny that it is impossible to imagine a Torah bereft of these many texts).

B) The Torah's ultimate message, *weltanschauung*, teleology - as well as its direct series of commands, proscriptions and obligations are only addressed to the B'nei Yisra'el; (Besides the seven Noahide Mitzvot, many of the universalistically-oriented eschatological visions which are found throughout the N'vi'im are founded upon - and explications of - some of the universalistic elements in the Torah; in addition, the Torah teaches us that which is *good and right in the eyes of G-d* [D'varim 6:18]).

As we can see, the premises which drive this opening comment of Rashi are difficult and somewhat counter-intuitive.

His answer, given in R. Yitzhak's name, is no more satisfying than the question, as follows:

First of all, to consider that the first 61 chapters of the Torah are presented purely to establish our claim to Eretz Yisra'el again minimizes the impact and import of those weighty chapters.

R. Yitzhak's answer leaves us with a further question - if the sole purpose of B'resheet is to establish G-d's proprietorship over the earth, wouldn't the first verse of the Torah have sufficed? His answer does not account for the patriarchal narratives, the story of slavery and Exodus - it doesn't even explain the Eden, flood or tower narratives.

One further point to ponder in R. Yitzhak's response: If the nations who will one day challenge our claim to Eretz Yisra'el will be so easily persuaded by the doctrine of Creation as presented in Sefer B'resheet - why wouldn't they also be convinced by verses found throughout Vayyikra (e.g. 18:25-30; 25:38), Bamidbar (e.g. 13:2, 15:18, 33:50-54) and D'varim (e.g. 11:10-12, 11:31), all of which point to the clear and decisive divine gift of Eretz Yisra'el to the B'nei Yisra'el?

In sum, we have two sets of questions generated by this cryptic comment of Rashi:

- A) How could we “do without” B’resheet (Sefer and Parashah)?
- B) How does R. Yitzhak’s answer solve his quandary?

Before moving on, it is prudent to note that Ramban raised the most basic of these questions in his first comments on the Torah. His explanation of R. Yitzhak’s suggestion is not that we would be left uninformed about the creation; rather that it would be understood from later Toraic references to creation - and that the details (including meta-historic narratives) would be transmitted through oral tradition.

Ramban also explicates R. Yitzhak’s answer, such that we understand that much more than the first verse is necessary for the anticipated polemic against the nations:

The Torah began with the chapter of In the beginning G-d created... and recounted the whole subject of creation until the making of man, how He granted him dominion over the works of His hands, and that He put all things under his feet; and how the Garden of Eden, which is the choicest of places created in this world, was made the place of his abode until his sin caused his expulsion therefrom; and how the people of the generation of the flood were completely expelled from the world on account of their sin, and the only righteous one among them - he [Noah] and his children - were saved; and how the sin of their descendants caused them to be scattered to various places and dispersed to different countries, and how subsequently they seized unto themselves places after their families, in their nations as chance permitted. If so, it is proper that when a people continues to sin it should lose its place and another people should come to inherit its land, for such has been the rule of G-d in the world from the beginning. This is true all the more regarding that which is related in Scripture, namely that K’na’an was cursed and sold as a servant forever. It would therefore not be proper that he inherit the choicest of places of the civilized world. Rather, the servants of G-d - the seed of His beloved one, Avraham - should inherit it..

In other words, R. Yitzhak anticipates that the international censure of the B’nei Yisra’el will be grounded in the claim of the essential injustice of our conquest of the Land - to which we will be able to point to the pattern of divine justice, involving expulsion, exile and loss of national sovereignty as a result of sin - and the special relationship enjoyed by the children of Avraham within the matrix of the divine scheme.

We are still faced with several problems:

- A) Many of the B’resheet stories - including some of the prominent ones in our Parashah - seem superfluous within R. Yitzhak’s explanation;
- B) Again - if the nations are not convinced by our “legal” claims as spelled out in the legalistic portions of the Torah, why would the narratives in B’resheet be any more convincing?

## II

### R. YITZHAK’S ANSWER REVISITED

As noted above, the version of the Midrash cited by Rashi is related - with several significant variations - to B. Rabbah 1:2. One of the most significant differences is the verb used to describe the response of the B’nei Yisra’el to the nations. Whereas the passage in B. Rabbah has “אומר...משיבין” - (lit. “respond...saying...”), the version found in Rashi has “אומר” without the first verb “משיבין”. In the version of B. Rabbah, the expectation is that the B’nei Yisra’el will actually respond (verbally) to the nations - i.e. the argument from divine ownership will be the gist of our defense. It is possible to read Rashi’s version differently - that this argument is not a defense, rather it is our claim, presented in a “take it or leave it” manner. In other words, the B’nei Yisra’el will have internalized the truth regarding proper proprietorship of the Land (and the earth) and will make this declaration to the nations.

That being the case, we can re-orient our questions above:

What information is there in these sections of the Torah which is “more convincing” to us regarding our claim to the Land - and how do we account for the many (seemingly unrelated) stories throughout B’resheet?

### III WHEN WAS SEFER B'RESHEET "GIVEN"?

Before responding to our questions, I'd like to pursue another line of inquiry which will lead us back to Rashi's first comment.

The Torah itself tells us that Mosheh wrote at least one Sefer Torah just before his death (D'varim 31:9,24) - and the assumption among the Rabbis is that these it was a complete (or nearly complete - note R. Yehudah's opinion in BT Bava Batra 15a) Sefer Torah, including all of Sefer B'resheet. We may be safe in assuming that this was not the first time that the B'nei Yisra'el heard the information contained in Sefer B'resheet (besides the familiarity that they had with some of the stories in the form of family traditions - see Rashi, Sh'mot 3:18). When did they first "get to know" Sefer B'resheet?

While this may seem an arcane question of dubious worth, this is not necessarily the case.

As I have pointed out several times in previous shiurim, many Rishonim have stressed the importance of understanding the Torah through the prism of the ears of the original target audience. In other words, the way for us to most effectively and accurately understand the impact of the Torah's message is to try to "hear" it as did the first audience to whom any particular passage was addressed. The many images, word-associations, double-entendres etc., which the Torah uses to enrich and deepen the impact of its message are only understood from the perspective of the people to whom these words were originally addressed. Only by "translating" these messages into contemporary terms (one of the most frequent modes of Torah commentary, dating back to the Midrashim) are we fully addressed by the Torah.

Therefore, it makes a very big difference when Sefer B'resheet was first presented to the people - we can understand the importance and implicit messages of the various narratives by placing them against the backdrop of the particular generation which first received them. Once we ascertain the nature and status of the "first audience" of B'resheet, we may be able to decipher why these narratives were necessary for them to internalize, as per our understanding of R. Yitzhak.

There are, basically, three alternatives as to when Sefer B'resheet was first "presented" to the B'nei Yisra'el:

#### **1. At Har Sinai.**

In Sh'mot 24:1-7, we are told:

*And he said to Mosheh, Come up to Hashem, you, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Yisra'el; and worship from far away. And Mosheh alone shall come near Hashem; but they shall not come near; nor shall the people go up with him. And Mosheh came and told the people all the words of Hashem, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which Hashem has said will we do. And Mosheh wrote all the words of Hashem, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Yisra'el. And he sent young men of the people of Yisra'el, who offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to Hashem. And Mosheh took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the ספר הברית, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, All that Hashem has said will we do, and obey.*

Regarding the contents of ספר הברית, Rashi avers that it included all of Sefer B'resheet and all of Sh'mot until that point (including the Exodus, the Decalogue and the laws of chs. 21-23). It seems fairly straightforward that Rashi would maintain that this is the moment of "B'resheet Revelation".

In other words, at this point, the first third (or so) of the Torah was presented to the B'nei Yisra'el - and it was the first time that any of this had been presented (at least in written form) to them (or anyone else).

Ibn Ezra (followed by Ramban) takes a different approach and maintains that the ספר הברית only included those commands given to Mosheh at Sinai, beginning with the Decalogue. That being the case, when was B'resheet (and the pre-Sinai narrative portions of Sh'mot) presented to the people?

We are left with two options -

## **2. At Arvot Mo'av.**

As mentioned above, Mosheh finally completed a Sefer Torah (the first one presented to anyone else - in this case, the Levi'im) at the end of his life, in the plains of Mo'av (on the East Bank opposite Yericho). It is certainly plausible that this was the first time that the specific details of B'resheet were revealed to the people - whether they were given to Mosheh at that point or he had received them at Sinai and only now revealed them to the B'nei Yisra'el.

## **3. In Egypt (pre-Sinai).**

The Avot were prophets (see BT Megillah 14a and Rashi ad loc. s.v. N'vuah) and many of their prophecies were intended to be realized in later generations. In addition, many of the symbols and messages given to them were specifically aimed at major historic events. Therefore, it is not implausible to maintain that as the events transpired and the prophecies given, they were committed to writing. That would place a completed version of Sefer B'resheet (albeit not in the same form as we have today - see Hullin 101b and Rashi ad loc. s.v. Ela) in the hands of the slaves in Egypt. Buttressing this somewhat unconventional perspective is the claim of the Midrash (Sh'mot Rabbah 5:22) which places a complete Sefer B'resheet in Mosheh's hands at the beginning of his mission, well before the arrival at Sinai.

In sum, we have three viable alternatives as to when and to whom Sefer B'resheet was first revealed. It thus seems reasonable that the major impact of the narratives of B'resheet must be viewed against these three "target audiences" - and, since it is unclear which one was the true "original recipient", we would do well to suggest implications for each.

In other words, by discerning the implications and import of any particular narrative in B'resheet for the particular target group, we can respond confidently to R. Yitzhak's question - "This is why B'resheet had to be written - to get this particular message across to these particular people."

This is not to suggest that any of the narratives in B'resheet are less than one-hundred percent accurate - but the fact of their inclusion (as opposed to others which are excluded - e.g. the early parts of Avraham's life) and how they are described (the particular uses of G-d's Names, word-associations etc.) carry implications that are, again, best understood by taking the original target audience into account.

## **IV SURVEYING PARASHAT B'RESHEET**

In order to hone in on the issue here, we will confine the rest of the analysis to the central themes of our Parashah.

There are ten basic themes in Parashat B'resheet:

- A. First Creation Story (1:1-2:3)
- B. Second Creation Story (2:4-8)
- C. Description of Garden (2:9-25)
- D. Sin, Curse & Exile #1 (3:1-24)
- E. Fratricide (4:1-8)
- F. Sin, Curse & Exile #2 (4:9-16)
- G. Generations ("Begats") (4:17-5:32)
- H. Divine Disappointment (6:1-4)
- I. Divine Consideration to Reverse Creation (6:5-7)
- J. "Saving" Presence of the Righteous Man (Noach - 6:8)

## **THE IMPACT OF PARASHAT B'RESHEET ON THE EARLIEST TARGET AUDIENCE**

I would like to analyze the major themes in our Parashah against the background of the Midrashic claim that Sefer B'resheet was in the possession of the B'nei Yisra'el during their slavery.

By taking their situation into account, we can revisit R. Yitzhak's question and note how the messages of B'resheet, implicitly or explicitly presented through the various narratives in our Parashah, would have fortified their resolve and helped shape their understanding of their own future and destiny.

By doing so, we can more fully understand Rashi's comment, as explicated by Ramban, that these lessons would serve the people well in readying them for their return to the Land and for a proper interaction with the neighboring nations.

The B'nei Yisra'el in Egypt, before and during the period of their slavery had a proud past but (without the information in Sefer B'resheet) an uncertain future and an oppressive present. While many in the nation attempted to assimilate into Egyptian culture and pagan religion (as our Rabbis faithfully report), many others maintained a strong fidelity to national language, faith, customs and aspirations. As such, the impact of the messages in our Parashah would have reasonably resonated with some of the most cherished and necessary beliefs and values which helped them survive and ensure the return of their children and grandchildren to Eretz Yisra'el.

Here is a review of the ten major themes in our Parashah and suggestions as to how the slave-nation would have reasonably responded to these narrative passages:

### **A. First Creation Story (1:1-2:3)**

(for a fuller treatment of the two creation stories, see *V'shinantam* 1/1)

Response: The order which is the "signature" of this presentation of Creation (note how each day has its own orderly schema, each species reproducing according to its kind etc.) is a powerful antidote to the harshness of exile and slavery. If G-d's universe is orderly and just, then the basic injustice of slavery will ultimately be rectified - especially following the implications of the end of our Parashah (#J below).

### **B. Second Creation Story (2:4-8)**

Response: In the second story, the entire universe revolves around Man and, as we see further, it is Man's happiness which drives the divine plan. As such, the basic unhappiness of slavery - as well as the "unnatural" subjugation of one man over another - is contrary to the divine will and plan of creation.

### **C. Description of Garden (2:9-25)**

Response: As beautiful as Egypt may be (see B'resheet 13:10), it cannot compare with the "choicest of all places" (to use Ramban's phrase). The Land which our ancestors knew, were given, and had to leave is the closest thing on earth to this beautiful garden - thus giving hope for the future. In addition, the knowledge that both the trees of life and of knowledge reside there create a longing for return to this paradise on earth, further inspiring these slaves to accept the burden of liberation and return home.

### **D. Sin, Curse & Exile (3:1-24)**

Response: Note that this first sin, curse and exile sequence begins in the "choicest of places". The message is quite clear - as paradisaical as this garden may be, that is the level of scrupulousness and piety which must be maintained there. Our "present" behavior in Egypt will not be acceptable there (see the beginning of Vayyikra 18 - the parallels are self-evident).

### **E. Fratricide (4:1-8)**

Response: The threat of dissension is great, especially for a people who is trying to regenerate its own national existence (cf. Sh'mot 2:11-15 and Rashi ad loc. v. 14). Even (perhaps especially) in the realms of piety and divine worship, the dangers of "one-upsmanship" are prevalent.

### **F. Sin, Curse & Exile (4:9-16)**

Response: Unlike the earlier sequence, this one takes place outside of the Garden. There are some crimes which are so heinous, no land can bear the felon - and murder (especially fratricide) is atop that list. Note that here, unlike the earlier exile from the Garden to the East, Kayyin the murderer finds no place to rest. Even though the Land to which they are coming will not bear their iniquities, even here they are not exempt from the onus of their own moral waywardness.

### **G. Generations ("Begats") (4:17-5:32)**

Response: Although this is often seen as "filler" text which bridges the ten generations from Adam to Noah, there is a profound and sociologically impactful message here. Over the course of ten generations and hundreds of years, humanity sunk from the Man who carried the breath of G-d to a generation so vile that they deserved destruction. Note that these changes do not occur overnight - they are the product of many years of down-spiraling immorality, idolatry and wanton behavior. Perhaps the clue to the shift is given when we are told that during the days of Enosh, *people began to call out the name of G-d* (see Rashi at B'resheet 4:26; MT Avodah Zarah 1: 1)

### **H. Divine Disappointment (6:1-4)**

Response: Man is engaged in a contract with G-d and G-d is profoundly invested in Man's behavior. While this may be comforting regarding the Egyptian taskmasters, it is also the source of a great sense of responsibility towards our own present and future behavior, as well as our job to help perfect all of humanity (a job which cannot even be started as slaves in a foreign land).

### **I. Divine Consideration to Reverse Creation (6:5-7)**

Response: This brief passage, the theology of which seems so obvious to us, is highly significant. If G-d can "reconsider" creation, then He is not merely the "Prime Mover", He is also the "Constant Mover" Whose will maintains creation at all times. In other words, this is a fundamental rejection of deism; G-d not only created, He continues as master of the universe who can, at any point, revert His creation to the primordial chaos.

### **J. "Saving" Presence of the Righteous Man (Noach - 6:8)**

Response: The role of the individual person/nation who is righteous must have been very impactful to our ancestors in Egypt. If one person's righteousness can spare the world, that puts immense power and responsibility on the individual - all the more so on a nation whose credo is doing righteousness and justice (B'resheet 18:19). This nation who was temporarily exiled and enslaved but knew that a brighter future was their destiny, must have been stirred and inspired by the opportunity to continue the role of Noah (and, later, Avraham, Yitzhak and Ya'akov) as the righteous one who is an everlasting foundation (Mishlei 10:25).

## **VI CODA**

R. Yitzhak's question is now clear - since the Torah is fundamentally a book of instruction for the B'nei Yisra'el, why do we need to be taught all of the lessons of Sefer B'resheet?

His answer is equally clear - in order for the B'nei Yisra'el, who were exiled and enslaved, to be able to maintain an understanding of Divine Justice, national self-identity and the special nature of the Land to where they were destined to return, along with profound sociological and anthropological lessons necessary for the success of their national enterprise, they had to be given the full Sefer of B'resheet. It is our blessing that we have had over three thousand years of opportunity to study, discuss and glean so many insights and instructions - ethical, historical, spiritual and more - from this glorious first Humash.