

PARSHAS BEREISHIS

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Yeshaya 42:5 - 43:10

We introduce the year's Haftora reading with a penetrating message defining our awesome role in this world. Rashi quotes the Sages' Aggadic interpretation of the Torah's opening word, "Breishis" to mean, "For the sake of the choice". Based on references from the books of Yirmiyahu and Mishle, the Sages explain the Torah's first verse in the following manner, "Hashem created the world for the sake of His sacred people and His sacred Torah." (comment of Rashi to Breishis 1:1) Hashem revealed at the outset that His master plan called for standards of elevation. Although the world would develop into seventy nations Hashem created His world with one nation in mind, the Jewish people. Similarly, although the world's moral fiber would consist of seven human principles Hashem created His world with a greater moral standard in mind - the adherence to six hundred and thirteen principles.

Concurring with the Torah's opening thought the prophet Yeshaya develops this and translates it into our levels of responsibility. In order to appreciate this we refer to Rashi's opening comment to the entire Torah. The Sages question the Torah's need to begin with the historical account of over two thousand years of world existence. They reason since the Torah is essentially a book of Mitzvos it should most appropriately begin with Hashem's first Mitzva to His people. They answer that Hashem wished to substantiate our claim to Eretz Yisroel. He therefore began the Torah with the unequivocal fact that He created the world and apportioned His land to whomever He deemed worthy of residing therein.

These words are cryptic and perplexing but their underlying message is that the Torah's lessons go far beyond the scope of Mitzvos. Hashem declared through His opening words that His all encompassing purpose for creation is to be recognized as the source of existence. Nachmanides crystalizes with these classic words, "For Hashem has no interest in all below other than for mankind to know and acknowledge Him as their creator." (comment of Nachmanides to Sh'mos 12:16) This explains why Hashem began the Torah with an elaborate history lesson. The opening chapter describes in detail every step of creation. This first statement declares for all time the direction of the world and its primary purpose- to recognize and acknowledge Hashem as the source of all. The world's foremost obligation is to preserve this truth thereby fulfilling Hashem's sole interest in all of mankind.

Nachmanides develops this and shows how the book of Breishis is one long display of Hashem's sovereignty over His world. Although the world seems to run on its own Hashem truly controls it and responds to all human conduct. Breishis teaches us that Hashem rewards those who follow His program and acknowledge His existence and punishes those who ignore and deny His existence. Hashem is extremely harsh on those who rebel against Him attempting to eradicate His name from this world. Conversely, Hashem is also extremely kind and compassionate to those who dedicate themselves to His program and publicize His existence. Adam's short lived privilege in Gan Eden and his subsequent rejection begin the lesson. The devastating flood and disastrous tower of Bavel continue the lesson. Canaan's corrupt behavior and Shem's commendable concern complete this segment of things. (Nachmanides to Breishis 1:1)

Following this pattern of creation Hashem designated a specific area of His world wherein His Divine presence could be recognized and intensified. The said purpose for this elevated land was to increase His recognition amongst those who sought to further their relationship with Him. The seven Canaanite nations residing therein had no such goal in mind and were immersed in the most repulsive pagan culture ever to exist. They were, by definition, the antithesis of Eretz Yisroel and defied the entire world's purpose for existence. The Jewish nation, on the other hand, served as the focal point of existence and undoubtedly deserved to further their relationship with their Creator in His chosen land.

Maimonides explains that the world at large was on a decline since the early generation of Enosh who created the platform for idolatry. By the time Avrohom Avinu discovered Hashem the world's population totally forgot Hashem's truth of creation. Avrohom Avinu painstakingly nurtured his family into the only people that recognized and preserved the truth. These experiences clearly display the need for a chosen people without whom the entire purpose of creation would have been forgotten.

The beginning of the book of Sh'mos provides our second lesson, the need for the elevated standard of Torah. Maimonides explains that the Jewish people's exposure to and association with Egyptian culture threatened to destroy Hashem's truth from the world's sole remnant of pure thinkers. Even Avrohom Avinu's devoted family became influenced by its surroundings and began adopting disgraceful foreign ideologies. One sacred branch of the Jewish nation, the tribe of Levi, remained loyal to Hashem's truth and preserved the family tradition. Maimonides explains that Levi's family was privileged to immerse itself in Torah study throughout the trying period of exile and remained steadfast to Torah principle. (Maimonides Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:3) This experience proves the need for an elevated moral standard without which the basic truths of creation would be lost forever.

We now understand that the basic truth of creation, "Breishis Bara", called for an elevated people and standard of conduct, "For the sake of Yisroel and Torah". Although Hashem allowed for the existence of other nations with basic moral conduct this could not preserve the purpose of creation. The books of Breishis and Shemos historically display the absolute need for an elevated nation with

elevated ethical standards. History itself teaches us that without the Jewish people and the Torah the world could never fulfill Hashem's basic interest in creation and would forfeit its right to exist.

These thoughts provide the backdrop for our Haftora which outlines the privileges and responsibilities as the Chosen nation. The prophet Yeshaya begins by saying, "So says Hashem the creator of the heavens and their expanse, He who spreads the land and its sprouts, gives breath of life to the people residing upon it and Heavenly spirit to those who walk there." The Sages interpret this passage to refer specifically to those who reside in Eretz Yisroel and traverse its soil. They deduce that a maid servant from gentile decent who resides in Eretz Yisroel will merit everlasting life. In addition, they deduce that even one who traverses Eretz Yisroel's soil will merit an elevated spirit in Olam Habba. (Mesichta K'subos 111a) As stated, Hashem's sole interest in creating His world is to be recognized by His creatures and establish an ongoing relationship with them. Whoever resides in Eretz Yisroel is privileged to an intense relationship with Hashem that mature into an everlasting one. Even traversing Eretz Yisroel's produces intense feelings of closeness to Hashem that translate into eternity. Yeshaya therefore says all who merit to enter Eretz Yisroel epitomize Hashem's sole interest in creation, to be acknowledged as the creator of the world thereby yielding an ongoing relationship with Him.

Yeshaya continues, "I established you a covenant of people to enlighten the nations." Radak explains that the Jewish people's merit gives reason for the existence of the entire world. All nations owe their existence to the Jewish people who single-handedly continue and further the world's purpose. As we have learned the world was created for the sake of those who acknowledge their creator and continues to exist solely for that purpose. Yeshaya, however, adds a significant dimension to this and reminds us that we were chosen to enlighten the nations. Radak explains that Hashem demands from His people to serve as a shining example to the rest of the world. Hashem's purpose for creation was for all nations to recognize Him and acknowledge Him through their ethical conduct maintaining basic human behavior. We, the Chosen nation, must conduct ourselves with such perfection that the entire world will appreciate the truth of creation. We must effectively impress them with this truth that everything belongs to Hashem, the creator and master of the universe. (comment of Radak ad loc)

Yeshaya continues and prophesies that the time will come when the nations of the world will question Hashem's favoritism to his chosen people. Hashem will respond, "Let the earlier ones inform us by giving their testimony and proving our righteousness." (Yeshaya 43:9) The Sages explain that at the end of time Hashem will call upon Nimrod, Lavan, Potiphar's wife, Nebbuchadnetzar and Daryovish to attest to the Jewish people's moral conduct. (Mesichta Avoda Zara 3a) The perfect devotion of Avrohom Avinu, Yaakov Avinu, Yosef Hatzadik and the like will unequivocally prove the truth of "Breishis"- that the world was created solely for the sake of His devoted people.

Yeshaya adds another dimension to our lesson and states in Hashem's name, "All that is called by My name was created for My glory." (Yeshaya 43:7) The Sages question, 'Who dares call himself by

Hashem's name?" They answer that the pasuk refers to our obligation to emulate His ways. We must be identified through our attributes of kindness, compassion and piety in the same way that Hashem is known. (Yalkut Shimoni 452) This completes our lesson of Breishis - for the sake of His people. We, the Jewish nation, are elevated expressions of Hashem's creation. In addition to acknowledging our Creator our responsibility goes beyond. Because we are His Chosen people we carry His stamp of creation, being created in His sacred image. This image demands of us awesome levels of perfection in order that our essence reflects Him as our creator. Our elevated standard of conduct must unequivocally project a resounding message that we are His creatures privileged to be created solely to serve Him.

May we merit in our difficult traumatic era to serve our Creator wholeheartedly thereby bringing Him the true glory He deserves to receive from all.

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