

WHY TELL STORIES?

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**Parashat Bereishit - Why Tell Stories?
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**Today's Learning:
Ohalot 9:3-4
O.C. 108:11-109:1
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Menachot 19
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Moed Kattan 1**

Rabbeinu Yonah z"l (Spain; died 8 Marcheshvan 5024 / 1263) writes: The Torah is made up primarily of three types of material. One type consists of the mitzvot aseh / affirmative commandments and the mitzvot lo ta'aseh / negative commandments. The second type of material includes the Torah's promises of reward and punishment. Finally, the third type of material in the Torah is historical. [The

Book of Bereishit is made up almost entirely of this third type.]

To what may the historical portion of the Torah be likened? R' Yonah continues: When a doctor advises a patient how to treat a particular illness, he often will tell the patient to eat (or not eat) certain foods and to take certain medications. However, what will be even more useful is for the doctor to add, "Don't do what your friend so-and-so did, for he caused his own death." The Torah, too, commands us to keep the 613 mitzvot, and it adds stories about people who behaved properly and people who did not behave properly so that we may learn from their successes and failures.

The historical portion of the Torah also teaches us to acquire good character traits and to avoid bad traits. And, R' Yonah writes, they teach us the value of work. For example, the Torah tells us that Yaakov and Moshe were shepherds. In this week's parashah the Torah tells us about the first shepherd (4:20) and about the inventor of bronze and iron farm implements (4:22). Most importantly, this week's parashah tells us no fewer than three times that Hashem himself "worked" (2:2-3). The Book of Bereishit also teaches about the importance of marriage. (Derashot U'Peirushei Rabbeinu Yonah pp. 16-17)

"Bereishit . . ." (1:1)

R' Eliezer Landau z"l, a descendant of the Vilna Gaon, related that his distinguished ancestor passed through Berlin in his travels. With him he carried many notebooks and papers on which he had recorded his novel Torah insights.

While staying in another Jew's house, the Vilna Gaon dropped a piece of paper on which he had written: "The entire Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi and all midrashim are alluded to in the written Torah, the entire written Torah is alluded to in Parashat Bereishit, and all of Parashat Bereishit is alluded to in the word 'Bereishit'." The sage's host was incredulous. "Is that really so?" he asked. "I have just had my first born son and will soon have to redeem him. Where is that mitzvah alluded to in the word Bereishit?"

Without a moment's hesitation, the Vilna Gaon responded: "Breishit" ("bet-reish-aleph-shin-yud-tav") is an acronym for the phrase, "Bincha Rishon Achar Sheloshim Yom Tifdeh" / "Your first born son you shall redeem after thirty days."

(Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"G-d made the two great luminaries, the great luminary to dominate the day and the lesser luminary to dominate the night; and the stars." (1:16)

Rashi quotes the Gemara which notes the seeming inconsistency in this verse. On the one hand, the sun and the moon are both called "great luminaries." On the other hand, the sun is called the "great"

luminary and the moon is called the "lesser" luminary. In answer, the Gemara explains that the sun and moon were created equal, but after the moon complained that two kings cannot share a crown, G-d diminished the moon's size.

R' Aryeh Zvi Frumer z"l (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin and founder of the Mishnah Yomit program; killed in the Holocaust) asked in his Shabbat Hagadol Derashah in 1930: How can this Gemara, which implies that the moon gives off light like the sun, be reconciled with our knowledge about the heavenly bodies? After all, the moon is not only smaller than the sun, it gives off no light of its own.

He answered: The Mishnah (Bava Metzia 12a) teaches that an object found by a "kattan" belongs to his or her father (if it does not otherwise have to be returned to its owner), while an object found by a "gadol" belongs to the finder (again, if it does not have to be returned). Ordinarily, the term "kattan" refers to a pre-bar or bat mitzvah age child and "gadol" refers to a boy over the age of 13 and a girl over the age of 12. Not here, says the Gemara. Here, "gadol" means a child who is financially self-sufficient and "kattan" means one who is still supported by his or her parents, regardless of age.

This is also the meaning of Chazal's teaching about the moon. It does not mean that the moon was once as big as the sun. Rather, it means that the moon once was a star that gave off its own light. This would explain the moon's referring to itself as a "king," for kings also are self sufficient. After the moon complained, however, Hashem made the moon "smaller" - i.e., not self sufficient.

(Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"The days of Adam after fathering Seth were eight hundred years, and he fathered sons and daughters. All the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died." (5:4-5)

Why did the early generations live as long as they did? Did every member of those generations live that long, or only the people mentioned by name in the Torah? Below are some of the answers given by early commentaries:

Rambam ("Maimonides"; Egypt; 1135-1204) writes: "Only the people mentioned by name in the Torah lived such long lives. Other people lived normal, natural lives. Those who lived exceptionally long lives did so either through exceptional attention to their diets and their health or through miracles. It cannot be any other way." (*Moreh Nevochim II 47*)

R' David Kimchi z"l ("Radak"; Provence; 1160-1215) explains: It may be that all people lived that long, or it may be that only the named people did, while their contemporaries chased worldly pleasures which shorten a person's life. It also may be that G-d wanted these people to live exceptionally long lives so that they would have time to discover the various branches of human knowledge and record them for posterity. After all, there is no way that a person can learn enough in a normal life time if he does not have existing works on which to build. (*Radak: Commentary on the Torah*)

Ramban (Spain and Eretz Yisrael; 1194-1270) disagrees vehemently. He writes in part: Why should the people mentioned in our parashah have experienced such miracles? There is no evidence that most of them were prophets or even particularly righteous! And if you will attribute their longevity to their diets, how can even the best diet cause a person to live more than ten times the normal life span? Furthermore, if those generations knew the secret of such longevity, would they not have shared it with their contemporaries so that they too would have lived such long lives? And, how was the secret lost after the Flood, when life expectancy declined markedly?

Rather, Ramban explains, Adam lived as long as he did because he was made by the Hand of G-d. Even after he sinned and death was decreed on him, his nature (as the product of G-d's direct handiwork) allowed him and his earliest descendants to live superlatively long lives. All people before the Flood had similar life spans.

Following the Flood, however, the world experienced atmospheric changes which caused man's life expectancy to decline. Shem, the son of Noach, was the last to live nearly as long as the early generations (i.e., 600 years) because he was born before the Flood, although he lived most of his life after the Flood. After the generation of the Tower of Babel, the atmosphere changed for the worse again [apparently as a punishment for their sins] and life expectancy became shorter still. In the time of the Patriarchs, Ramban writes, the ordinary life span was similar to our own. That is why Pharaoh was so amazed (47:8) when he met Yaakov, who was then 130 years old. (*Ramban: Commentary on the Torah*)

Rabbeinu Yonah writes: The reason that the earliest generations lived as long as they did was simply to give them a chance to populate the world with numerous sons and daughters, for otherwise the world would have remained desolate.

(*Derashot U'Peirushei Rabbeinu Yonah p. 17*)

R' Yaakov Yosef Katz z"l (late 1800s; known as the "Toldos"), one of the leading disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov, was visited a certain town when he was approached by an inhabitant of a neighboring village and asked to attend the circumcision of the man's son on that day. "I will even honor you to be the sandak / godfather," the villager said.

The Toldos agreed, but only on the condition that he could sit in another room and study Torah until all of the preparations had been completed and he would not have to wait idly for the ceremony to begin. The villager agreed.

When everything had been prepared and the baby had arrived, the villager went to call R' Yaakov Yosef. However, when they returned to the place where the brit milah was to be held, the villager was chagrined to discover that one guest had left and there was no longer a minyan. He quickly ran outside and pleaded with the first Jew he saw: "Please come to my son's brit milah."

The man responded, "Zohl zein azoi" / "So be it!" "Can I offer you an honor?" the villager inquired. "So be it!" the tenth man responded. To every question he was asked, he answered: "So be it!"

After the circumcision, the Toldos asked that this man be brought to him, but the man had vanished. So the Toldos asked in heaven who the man was, and he was told that it was Eliyahu Hanavi, who had been sent to teach the assembled the importance of accepting G-d's judgment in all circumstances. "So be it!" should be a Jew's response to everything that he experiences in life.

As the Toldos was preparing to leave town, a stranger approached him and asked if he could share the sage's carriage. "Who are you?" the Toldos asked. "So be it!" the stranger responded (apparently rebuking the sage for not agreeing immediately to share his ride).

When the tzaddik R' Yitzchak Mattityahu Luria z"l heard this story, he commented: On each day of Creation, the Torah says, "And it was so!" But why does the Torah say, "And it was so!" at the very end of creation when nothing new had been created? That, answered R' Luria was Adam's statement, accepting that G-d in His Wisdom had created the world exactly as He saw fit. "So be it!"

(Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

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