

GENESIS AND LIFE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The first book of the Torah is a perplexing compilation of stories about people. No apparent master plan or blueprint of morality is readily discernable from its contents. It does not prescribe a set of rules to live by, there are no "Ten Commandments" within its pages, it is almost completely devoid of mitzvot - divine ritual commandments - and the narrative details of the lives of its heroes are incomplete and sometimes cryptic. As such, who needs the book? What does it come to teach us? What is its purpose? Rashi raises all of these questions in the opening paragraph to his immortal commentary on Torah. "Said Rabbi Yitzchak: The Torah should have begun from the first commandment regarding the mitzvah of the New Moon!" Rashi presents the answer that the Torah begins with creation in order to impress upon us God's control over the world's events and property and that He parcels out land to whomever He desires and has assigned the Land of Israel to the people of Israel. But that does not answer why all of the other narratives and stories appear in this holy book. In fact, the entire book of Bereshit is an enigma. It tells us much but not all about the founders of our people; it records historical events that shape world civilization but does not really place them in a true historical perspective; and it certainly reveals almost nothing to us about the nature of the God of creation and Israel. So, again we ask: Why the book? The first book of the Torah is a perplexing compilation of stories about people. No apparent master plan or blueprint of morality is readily discernable from its contents. It does not prescribe a set of rules to live by, there are no "Ten Commandments" within its pages, it is almost completely devoid of mitzvot - divine ritual commandments - and the narrative details of the lives of its heroes are incomplete and sometimes cryptic. As such, who needs the book? What does it come to teach us? What is its purpose? Rashi raises all of these questions in the opening paragraph to his immortal commentary on Torah.

My rabbinic teachers taught me over a half-century ago that the secret of the entire book of Bereshit lay in the simple understanding of the verse: "This is the book of the generations of mankind." The Torah does not come to define God; it leaves that to the theologians. The Torah does not explain creation; it leaves that to the astrophysicists and geneticists. The Torah comes to direct, counsel, guide and strengthen each and every individual human being in that person's journey through life and its vicissitudes. Therefore, the Torah is devoted to personal detail about people's lives. It tells of human heroism and greatness, as well as to record the petty, violent and dark side of our nature. But most importantly, it provides us with role models, real heroes who inspire and challenge us to live up to our humanity and to the service of our Creator. Each of the heroes, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov,

Sarah, Rivka, Rochel, Leah, Yosef, Yehuda, etc., illustrates the unique path in life that a Torah believer should follow. We become aware how to overcome adversity, how to accept defeat and even tragedy, how to be positive in a negative society, and how to be God-centered in an earth-bound mortal body.

It is no wonder that the rabbis of the Talmud demanded that Jews ask of themselves: "When will my actions in life reach the level of faith and performance of my original (Book of Bereshit) forbearers?" I may never be able to achieve or accomplish what Avraham and Sarah did, but I am duty bound to measure my goals and attitudes in life according to the goals and standards that they established for their descendants- the people of Israel, many millennia ago. And the establishment and explanation of those attitudes and standards, as actually lived by these heroes, is the basic message of the Book of Bereshit. In a world where standards and morality change swiftly, where there are no fixed definitions of right and wrong behavior, the example of the people of Bereshit remains vital, perhaps even more vital than in previous eras. The evil people bring destruction to civilization, no matter how enticing the momentary enjoyment of that evil appears to society. The righteous person preserves all humanity and brings eternal blessing to generations yet unborn. Therefore each of us should write our own book of Bereshit, through our behavior, our loyalty to Torah and its standards, our learning the lessons of the original book of Bereshit. Then we will appreciate the true greatness of this first book of the Torah.

Shabat Shalom.

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