

ADDRESSING THE JEWS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Bereishis

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 344, Marriage and the Birchas Airusin.
Good Shabbos!*

Rabbi Yitzchak is Addressing the Jews, Not Other Nations

Rashi [Bereishis 1:1] notes -- in the name of 'Rabbi Yitzchak' -- that it would have been logical for the Torah, which is basically a book of laws, to begin with the first Commandment "This month for you is the beginning of months" [Shemos 12:2]. Why then does the Torah begin with the story of Creation?

The Torah began with the story of Creation because it wished to convey the message of the pasuk [verse] "The power of His acts He told to His people, in order to give them the estate of nations" [Tehillim 111:6]. If the nations of the world will say to Israel 'You are bandits for you conquered the lands of the seven nations who inhabited Canaan', Israel will respond that the whole world belongs to G-d. He created it and He gave it to whoever was proper in his eyes. By His wish He gave it to them and by His wish He took it from them and gave it to us.

Reb Elya Meir Bloch asked the question: what would be accomplished by making this point? It is obvious that the nations of the world would not be swayed by this argument. Neither quoting to them from Rashi, nor quoting to them from 'Rabbi Yitzchak' would help convince them in the slightest that the Jews have a right to Eretz Yisrael [The Land of Israel]. Rather, says Reb Elya Meir Bloch, this Rashi is actually for our benefit, not for the benefit of the nations.

If we know and we are really convinced that the Land belongs to us, then that gives us the strength of conviction and the power to stand up to the nations of the world and say emphatically "This is our

land". The issue is not which argument we need to use when we defend our rights to the land. Nor is the issue whether they accept our arguments at all. The issue is that we need to understand our rights to the Land of Israel. When a person KNOWS that he is right, he then has the audacity to stand up and say "I am sorry, but it is mine -- it is not yours!" This is the lesson of the first Rashi in Chumash.

Jews must remember that our claim to Eretz Yisrael is based on Rabbi Yitzchak's argument. The argument that "We made the desert bloom" or that it is ours by virtue of force is not the correct argument. The more that we are convinced of the reality that "The power of His acts He told to His people, in order to give them the estate of nations", the more effective we will be in retaining that which is rightfully ours.

The Paradigm of "If At First You Don't Succeed, Try Try Again"

The pasuk says, "And G-d saw all that He created and behold (hinei) it was very good" [Bereishis 1:31]. The Medrash explains that G-d created worlds and then destroyed them until he created this world. This is the implication of the world 'Hinei' [behold], which implies that all of a sudden, G-d created a world that was good (so he did not destroy it).

The simple reading of this Medrash is that G-d engaged in a number of 'trial runs' until He finally "got it right" and created a world with which He was happy. It is described as if there was an architect at a drawing table with a large pad. He drew out some plans that he did not like. So he ripped off the paper, crumpled it up, threw it in the garbage, and started over again. "Back to the drawing board!"

This obviously would be heresy and is clearly not what the Medrash is saying. I saw an interesting insight into this Medrash in the name of Rav Soloveitchik, zt"l. Rav Soloveitchik stated that every parsha in the Torah is coming to teach us a lesson. However, the description of Creation (ma'aseh Bereishis) is so obscure and so incomprehensible that one must wonder what its inclusion in the Torah could possibly teach.

Even after reading the account of creation, we still do not understand what happened. It is clearly not a historical account. The account of creation seems very imprecise to us. So what are we supposed to learn from it?

Rav Soloveitchik taught that there is a mitzvah in the Torah called "Mah hu, af attah" (Imitatio Dei -- Just as is with Him; so too it shall be with you). A person must try to emulate G-d. We make a mistake by thinking that the command of "You shall walk in His ways" [Devarim 28:9] is limited to the attributes of compassion and mercy [Shabbat 133b] or to certain very specific acts of kindness (e.g. - burying the dead; clothing the naked, etc.) [Sotah 14a]. Rav Soloveitchik said that "Mah hu, af attah" is a much broader concept than that.

The story of Creation teaches us that G-d is a creator of worlds. But the Medrash is teaching us that one can create worlds and they can be failures, but one should not become discouraged. One should start over and do it again until he succeeds. G-d specifically created worlds and destroyed

them -- not because He could not get it right the first time. Rather, He wanted to show us mortals how difficult it sometimes is to create something. Sometimes one can exert effort for a good part of one's life and then realize that the product of his efforts has been a flop. The tendency is to throw up one's hands in despair and proclaim, "I've had it!" The Master of the World, therefore, did something "totally out of character" for Him -- He goofed! Not, Heaven Forbid, out of incompetence; but rather because He wanted to give us the paradigm of not getting it right the first time. Failure should not inhibit our creativity and should not inhibit our ambition. We each must become 'creators of worlds' in our own limited capacities. If our creations fail, so be it. We can follow G-d's example and try it again.

Who was the first 'person' to say, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again"? It was, as it were, G-d Himself. That is the lesson of the Medrash that G-d created worlds and destroyed them.

This Message Was Meant For My Brother - Not For Me!

Kayin and Hevel each brought sacrifices to G-d. G-d accepted Hevel's offering, but not Kayin's offering. Kayin was very upset at this rejection. G-d inquired of Kayin why he was so upset. "If you will do good (from now on and not be cheap in bringing future offerings -- which is why I rejected your offering) then you will be forgiven. But if you will not improve, then the evil inclination will be with you forever. Its desire is toward you, yet you can conquer it" [Bereishis 4:7]. This is the first recorded 'mussar shmooze' [pointed lecture in ethical improvement] in the history of the world.

The very next pasuk says, "And Kayin said to Hevel his brother. And it happened when they were in the field that Kayin rose up against his brother Hevel and killed him" [4:8]. The commentaries are bothered by an obvious question. We are told that Kayin said something to his brother, but we are not told what he said. What was the nature of this conversation? What did Kayin say to Hevel before he killed him?

The Ibn Ezra offers a very simple interpretation that fits in very well with the flow of the pasukim. The Ibn Ezra explains that Kayin repeated to Hevel the contents of G-d's ethical lecture. He told Hevel what he heard from G-d, and then proceeded to kill him.

Rabbi Zev Leff explains that Kayin's reaction to the 'mussar shmooze' from G-d was that "I liked the lecture, but it has nothing to do with me! It does not apply to me. Maybe I'll try it out on my brother Hevel. He is the one who needs to hear this chastisement."

However, Hevel did not accept the mussar from Kayin. "You have the wrong man, Kayin." Then Kayin killed Hevel. This was the first 'mussar shmooze' in history and this is the classic response to every 'mussar shmooze': "He is not talking to me!"

Sometimes when I speak in certain places, I have great trepidation about what I am about to say. I am afraid people will become offended. They might take my comments in the wrong way and think that I am insulting them. But, invariably people tell me "It was a great speech. It is a shame the

people who should be hearing it were not here."

This is the classic response to every corrective ethical lecture. The source is Kayin. "G-d did not mean this lecture for ME". (Keep in mind that there were only a very few people in the world at that point.)

The Talmud says that if a Hebrew slave does not want to go free after six years, we pierce his ear and say, "the ear that heard on Sinai 'they shall be My servants (and not servants to other servants)' and ignored this exhortation, shall be pierced". But the question can be asked, why should we pierce the ear lobe? That is not the part of the ear that hears! If we wanted to make this an effective lesson, we should have pierced the eardrum! What does the ear lobe have to do with hearing?

The answer is that the purpose of the ear lobe is to funnel the sound. The eardrum certainly heard the message at Sinai, but it was not directed correctly. The direction of the message was deflected to someone else. "This does not affect me. The message is meant for someone else." That is not the fault of the eardrum; it is the fault of the ear lobe whose function is to properly direct the message.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

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