

TORAH MUST BEGIN WITH THE LESSON OF YASHRUS ('STRAIGHTNESS')

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bereishis

Torah Must Begin With The Lesson of Yashrus ('Straightness')

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 696, The Bracha on the Havdala Candle. Good Shabbos!

Rashi quotes the words of the Medrash: "Rav Yitzchak said the Torah had no need to start any place except 'This month for you is the beginning of months' [Shmos 12:2] (which is the first commandment given to the nation of Israel). Why then does the Torah begin with the story of Creation?

The Torah began with 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]. For if the nations tell us we are robbers for conquering the territory of the Seven Nations of Canaan we can tell them that the whole world belongs to G-d. He created it and He gave it to the nation that was fit in His opinion to give it to. He originally gave it to the Canaanites and then He took it from them and gave it to us."

The Ramba"n strengthens Rav Yitzchak's question. It is not just a matter of choosing what the Torah should have started with; the choice to begin with the story of creation is particularly vexing. Truth be told, we really do not understand the meaning of the term "Tohu v'vohu". We do not understand the meaning of the term "rakiah". The whole narration of the Creation story is so puzzling to us - and even to great scholars. Rightfully, this should - if anything - be a part of the "Oral Law". The Written Law should be for those portions of Revelation that we can open up, read what is written black on white, and understand what is being said. This is an aspect of what Rav Yitzchak is asking. If we are not going to understand it anyway, then why write it?

Again, the answer is that if the Nations of the World come and tell us that we have no right to "occupy the Land of Israel," we can tell them "In the beginning G-d created..." (Bereshis bara Elokim).

However, it is painfully clear to us that whether we would try to make Rav Yitzchak's argument at the

United Nations or on college campuses or on talk radio, the argument would ring quite hollow to our adversaries. In reality, then, Rav Yitzchak has a very good question (why did the Torah start with Parshas Bereshis), but we do not understand his answer!

Rav Simcha Zissel Brody gives the following insight. In the book of Shmuel [Samuel II 1:18] there is a reference to something called "Sefer HaYashar" [the Book of the Upright]. The Talmud [Avodah Zarah 25a] has a dispute as to the nature of this volume. One Amora identifies it with "the book of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov (namely - the Book of Bereshis), because Bilaam called Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov upright (yesharim), when he said 'Let my soul die the death of the righteous' (Tamus nafshi mos yesharim) [Bamidbar 23:10]."

It is worth noting that the Patriarchs are not called Tzadikim [righteous] or Chasidim [pious] or Talmidei Chachomim [scholars] - all of which they were. The Patriarchs are called Yesharim - "straight" individuals, of upright character. The Patriarchs did not live in "religious neighborhoods", they lived among the Gentiles. They interacted not with fellow Jews but with non-Jews. The way they interacted with their Gentile neighbors - in a straight, honest, and upright fashion - earned them the title of Yesharim [straight ones]. That is why the Book of Bereshis is called Sefer Yesharim.

Before we can attempt to learn the books of Shmos, Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devorim, with all their laws and legal details, we must be introduced to the "Book of the Straight". We need to know how to be 'straight' because manners and etiquette precede the Law (derech erez kadmah l'Torah).

In Parshas Lech Lecha, G-d promises the land of Canaan to Avraham Avinu. The promise will take effect many centuries later. At that time, Avraham's descendants will return to conquer the land. We may think to ourselves "Hey, this is not so 'yashar'. This is not straight. This is not right. This is not legitimate. These people have lived here for centuries!"

Were it not for Parshas Bereshis, I could learn all of Chumash and there would be a little voice in the back of my head saying, "But it is not so 'yashar' after all." Therefore, the Torah - whose primary mission is to teach us that we should be yashar - needs to put that thought to rest, to remove any slight doubt from our minds that something is not straight. The Almighty is in effect saying, "That which I am telling you to do - to take Eretz Yisrael - is 100% yashar because I created the world in the beginning of history. It is My world and I gave it to those who were fit in My eyes." The reason the Torah begins with the story of Creation is not to impress the Gentiles with the argument that we have a right to the Land of Israel, but to convince the Jewish people that they have a right to it and that their claim is one based on the principle of being upright.

Rav Simcha Zissel says that the story of creation is full of the principle of 'straightness'. We all know the Medrash that when G-d created the sun and the moon of equal size, the moon complained that it is not right that "two kings share a single crown." G-d consequently minimized the moon to be smaller. According to the Medrash, G-d then created the stars in order to appease the moon (so that it now "ruled" over a trillion stars).

The world really did not need stars; they were not part of the original plan. They are apparently unnecessary. Why were they created? According to the Medrash, they were created in order to mollify the moon. This again is an example of Yashrus. It is the right thing to do.

How many times have we heard the question "Where does it say it in Shulchan Aruch"? It does not need to say it in Shulchan Aruch. The Torah teaches us that we should do that which is right and good. The Rambam writes on this pasuk that the Torah cannot spell out every single case that will come down in the history of the world of how a person should act. So, He gives us a single rule of thumb: Do the right thing (V'asisa v'ha'Yashar v'ha'Tov [Devorim 6:18]), do the fair thing - even though it is not spelled out in the Code of Jewish Law. In this way, we emulate the Patriarchs and we emulate the Almighty Himself. That is lesson of the story of Bereshis [Creation] and the Book of Bereshis. We must absorb this lesson before we can study the rest of Torah.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Bereishis are provided below:

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