

PARSHAS BEREISHIS

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Bereishis, 5631 (1871)

Let us begin from the beginning, the first ma'amar of the Sfas Emes on Parshas Bereishis.

The Sfas Emes starts by quoting Rashi's comment on the posuk (Bereishis, 2,2) "Vayechal Elokim ... " Says Rashi: "Ma haya ha'olam chaseir? Menucha! Bah Shabbos, bah menucha. Kalsa nenigmera melacha." That is: "What was missing from the Cosmos that HaShem had created? Repose. When Shabbos came, repose came as well. Creation was now complete."

Continues the Sfas Emes: HaShem created the world in order to let His goodness flow out to this world, the world of teva (nature) . Further, this is why the word in Hebrew for the world is "olam" (hidden). Because HaShem's Presence is hidden in this world. This perspective -- that HaShem is really there, but His Presence is hidden -- is a recurring theme in the Sfas Emes. In support of this key insight, the Sfas Emes cites his illustrious grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim.

Note what is occurring in this piece: The Sfas Emes makes a statement -- that HaShem created the world specifically in order to suffuse it with goodness. That is standard and accepted Torah hashkofo (doctrine). But this precept stands in glaring contrast with the world as we see it -- - full of misery and suffering. Many authorities ignore this blatant contradiction between received doctrine and perceived reality. By contrast, the Sfas Emes draws our attention immediately to this tension, confronts it head-on, and incorporates it as an integral part of the story. That is, we are enjoined to glorify HaShem specifically and especially in this state of His being hidden. In fact, this is one of the things that the Torah intends by saying: "HaShem saw all that He had made ("KOL asher assa"), and, behold, it was very good!"

In the same vein, the Sfas Emes cites a posuk (Mishlei, 16, 4) "KOL pa'al HaShem lema'aneyhu." (That is: "All of creation glorifies HaShem.") For, although individual features of the world oppose kedusha (sanctity), the generality (the "KLAL") of creation joins together to glorify HaShem. As we ourselves know and proclaim: "HAKOL bara lichvodo"!

The Sfas Emes continues: This is why without Shabbos, the world lacked menucha. For Shabbos brings together ("KOLel") and unites all the days of the week. By so doing, Shabbos elevates all Creation to a higher level of spirituality, all united by one theme: to become an instrument (a KELI) for serving HaShem's will.

The Sfas Emes has told us that on Shabbos, all Creation surges forward to come closer to HaShem. This movement toward HaShem occurs not only in intellectual terms. Shabbos also comes ---and brings with it-- a powerful emotional charge. Thus, the word "vayechulu" -- a word that we say in Kiddush -- implies a yearning to come closer to HaShem. So, too, the posuk in Tehilim (84, 3): "... Kal'sa nafshi ..." ("My soul yearns to come closer ... to HaShem").

Finally, the Sfas Emes tells us how a person can attain the goal of this yearning. How? By hisbatlus -- subordinating our will to the will of HaShem, something that is feasible only because each of us is connected with HaShem. This hisbatlus is what Chazal meant when they said that when Shabbos comes, menucha comes into our lives. This is what Rashi had in mind, concludes the Sfas Emes, when he declared that with Shabbos: "KALsa venigmera hamelacha". (That is: Creation was now complete). For this dedication and selflessness to HaShem is the purpose of Creation.

The Sfas Emes is not light reading. It will become more clear when you read it again.

Note two take-home lessons:

1. "Menucha" does not mean sleeping the Shabbos away.
2. When we say -- in Kiddush -- the word "vayechulu" our minds, too, can be sparked to the picture of all Creation yearning to come closer to HaShem, coming together to become an instrument of His will. The picture of all nature joining together to glorifying HaShem may appear too "mystical" for some people. But we find similar images in mainstream Yiddishkeit -- e.g., in passages of Tehilim which are incorporated in Kabalas Shabbos (the Friday night prayer service).

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff and **Torah.org**.