

Hashem Cares About Our Pain

Erev Shabbos Drush for Parshas Bereishis

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Based on a teaching of Rabbi Goel Elkarif.

Why the Torah begins with Bereishis

“Bereishis bara Elokim es hashamayim ve’es ha’aretz.” In the beginning, Hashem created the heavens and the earth.

Rashi begins his commentary with a surprising question. Rabbi Yitzchak says that the Torah should have begun with “Hachodesh hazeh lachem,” the first mitzvah commanded to the Jewish people. Why does it begin with Creation?

Rashi answers with the words of Tehillim: “Koach ma’asav higid le’amo, lases lahem nachalas goyim.” Hashem told His people about the power of His works in order to give them the inheritance of the nations.

One day, the nations will say to the Jewish people: You are thieves. You conquered the lands of the seven nations. You have no right to be there.

The Jewish people can answer: The entire world belongs to Hashem. He created it. He gives it to whom He chooses. By His will He gave it to them, and by His will He took it from them and gave it to us.

These words are painfully familiar. We hear accusations concerning Eretz Yisrael, concerning the Palestinians, concerning our right to live in our own land. Jews hear themselves described as intruders and thieves. Those accusations can follow us into our conversations, our thoughts, and our homes.

And there, at the very beginning of the Torah, Hashem has already given His children an answer.

The Ramban raises a fundamental question. Surely the Torah should begin with Creation! Belief that Hashem created the world is the foundation of everything. There is a Creator, there is a Master of the world, and there is One Whose will we are obligated to fulfil. Why would Rabbi Yitzchak ask that the Torah begin elsewhere?

The Ramban explains that the deep matters contained in the account of Creation are difficult to understand. Certainly we need faith in the Creator. The question concerns the Torah's detailed account of Creation and the events that follow it. Why record all of this at the beginning? Rashi's answer is that it gives Klal Yisrael a response to the accusation against our possession of the land.

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus asks a further question. Why should that accusation determine how the Torah begins? Hashem knows the truth. He created the world. He gave us the land. What difference does it make that someone calls His children thieves?

His explanation is very moving. Hashem does not want His children to suffer.

He knows that those accusations will hurt. He knows that a Jew can carry the pain of being despised, misrepresented, and condemned. And He gives us words with which to answer.

Hashem is concerned even about the pain caused by an insult. Even about the distress of being called a name. He sees the wound that a sentence can leave behind.

That is an extraordinary lesson to find at the opening of the Torah. Hashem tells us that He created the world, and through the way He tells us, He teaches us to care about another person's pain.

We may sometimes say: It is only words. Why are you so upset? Ignore it.

But Hashem takes the hurt seriously. The accusation has not changed the truth, yet His child is hurting. That matters to Him.

Many of us feel scared and nervous when we hear these accusations. We feel the hostility. We hear our people condemned, and we carry that hurt.

This week, Hashem is giving us comfort. Eretz Yisrael is the land He gave us. We are not gazlanim. We are not thieves. Our right to the land comes from the Creator and Master of the world.

Take comfort. Do not let these accusations make you doubt that we belong. Hear the confidence Hashem is giving His children at the beginning of the Torah. He knows what hurts us, and He gives us an answer that can steady our hearts.

What a tremendous chesed! Hashem anticipates our pain and gives us reassurance. We should feel that kindness this week.

And then we should emulate Him. If Hashem takes our hurt so seriously, we must take someone else's hurt seriously. We can give another person some of the comfort and reassurance that He gives us.

Kayin and Hevel wanted to give

Let us turn to Kayin and Hevel.

The Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah asks what they were discussing when they were together in the field. One explanation is that they agreed to divide the world. One took the land, and the other took the movable possessions.

The Sifsei Tzaddik asks: Why make that division? Why should one brother have the land and the other have the animals and movable property? They could have remained partners. Each could have had a share in everything.

He gives a remarkable explanation. Their original intention was good. They understood “Olam chesed yibaneh”—the world is built through kindness. They could see how every part of Creation contributes to another part.

The ground produces plants. A person cultivates the ground, waters it, and removes the thorns. Bees draw nourishment from flowers, and as they move between them, they also help the plants reproduce. Flowers attract those little visitors; the visitors receive nourishment and perform a service in return.

Creation is full of relationships through which one living thing sustains another.

Kayin and Hevel wanted to take part in that giving. If they owned everything jointly, each would simply be using what was already his. By dividing the possessions, they could give to one another.

Kayin would have the land and provide its produce to Hevel. Hevel would have the animals and provide Kayin with meat to eat and wool with which to clothe himself. Each would possess something that his brother needed. Each would have an opportunity to give.

Think about the generosity of that original thought. A person can look at what he owns and ask how to protect it. They initially looked at what they owned and asked how it could become a means of chesed.

But the arrangement did not remain an arrangement of kindness. Possessiveness entered. They began to feel: This is mine. That is yours. The same division that was meant to create generosity became an occasion for conflict.

Their quarrel deteriorated until it ended in bloodshed.

The intention to do chesed was there. The middos needed to sustain it were missing.

That is a sobering lesson. We can arrange something beautiful, undertake something generous, and still damage it through the way we behave. A gift can carry a demand for gratitude. Help can be accompanied by resentment. A favour can become something we repeatedly hold over another person.

The world needs our giving, and it needs us to become people who can give well. People who remain sensitive to the recipient. People who remember why they began.

The tree that shares its fruit

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin develops another illustration in his sefer Oznayim LaTorah.

Rav Sorotzkin observes that a barren tree can have a thick trunk, while a fruit tree may have a thinner one. He explains this through the picture of a tree directing its nourishment: the fruit tree gives of its strength to produce fruit, while the barren tree retains that strength for its own growth.

A fruit tree draws nourishment from the ground and turns that nourishment into fruit that others can eat. People benefit from it. They value it and protect it. Even in wartime, the Torah places a prohibition on destroying fruit trees in the circumstances it describes.

A barren tree also draws nourishment from the ground, but it does not provide fruit for people to enjoy. Eventually, people may cut it down and use its wood for heating, cooking, or other needs.

In Rav Sorotzkin's illustration, the fruit tree shares what it receives. The barren tree retains the nourishment for its own growth. The tree that gives has people looking after it. The tree that keeps everything for itself may eventually be taken down so that others can benefit from its wood.

He draws a lesson for human life. A person who thinks about others and shares what he has becomes a source of blessing. People want that person to remain with them. They value what he brings into their lives.

A person who thinks only of himself may appear secure. He has kept everything. But what has he built around himself? Who has received nourishment from his presence?

There is so much that a human being can give: knowledge, encouragement, practical help, companionship. We can help another person feel that life is bearable, that he has somewhere to turn, that someone is pleased to see him.

A word can hurt. A word can also sustain.

The kidney donor from Petach Tikva

There is an account of a man in Petach Tikva who donated a kidney.

For years, this man had been sensitive to dairy products. After he donated the kidney, something unexpected happened: his sensitivity to dairy products disappeared.

The doctors did not know how to explain the change. They did not understand the connection between donating a kidney and the disappearance of that sensitivity.

The donor offered his own explanation. Do not look for the connection only in the world of medicine, he said. A Jew gave life to another person. In return, Hashem gave him renewed life.

The account is presented as an expression of the spiritual meaning of his experience. He had given something of his own body so that someone else could live. And he understood the change in his own life as a gift from Hashem.

What is striking is the way he thought about what he had done. He had given from himself. He had helped another person live. And when an unexpected benefit came to him, he saw Hashem's kindness in it.

"Chesed va'hatavah lazulas"—kindness and doing good for another person—is a foundation of the world's continued existence.

That brings us back to Bereishis. The world Hashem created is sustained by giving. And the One Who created it is concerned about the suffering of His children.

Where should we begin to live that way?

What to daven for under the chuppah

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman was asked what a chassan and kallah should daven for under the chuppah.

He answered that the chassan should daven to be a good husband to his wife, and the kallah should daven to be a good wife to her husband.

The chuppah is a moment of extraordinary opportunity. A new home is beginning. It is a time of Divine favour, a time to ask for blessing and forgiveness.

And Rav Shteinman directs each one's attention toward the person standing beside them. Daven that you will be good to that person.

There are so many things we hope to receive in marriage: understanding, patience, support, appreciation. Rav Shteinman gives the chassan and kallah something to take responsibility for themselves. What kind of husband will I be? What kind of wife will I be?

That question remains with us long after the chuppah. After years together, there is still someone beside us whose life is affected by our words, our habits, our moods, and our kindness.

We can become very familiar with what that person should improve. We also need to consider what it is like for that person to live with us.

Hashem notices His children's pain. We need to notice the feelings of the people who share our home.

A sefer and a concern for shalom bayis

The next story makes that sensitivity very concrete.

There is a halachic subject called gilui: food or drink left uncovered, with the concern that a snake might have introduced venom into it.

Nowadays, where snakes are not commonly found, the basic halachah permits liquids that have been left uncovered. We are generally not concerned about gilui in these circumstances.

The Vilna Gaon nevertheless remained very particular about uncovered liquids. He understood that there could be additional, hidden reasons for a teaching of Chazal beyond the reason disclosed to us. One example given is a connection to avoiding foreign thoughts during tefillah.

A talmid chacham wrote a sefer on gilui, developing the subject according to the stringent opinion of the Vilna Gaon. He brought that sefer to Rav Shteinman.

Rav Shteinman examined the sefer and expressed his satisfaction with it. Naturally, the author then asked for a letter of endorsement—a *haskamah*.

But Rav Shteinman declined.

The author was puzzled. He asked why the Rav would not give an endorsement after expressing appreciation for the sefer.

Rav Shteinman explained: The sefer does indeed appear excellent, but I am somewhat concerned about the view of the Vilna Gaon.

The author asked what he meant.

Rav Shteinman asked him to imagine a man finding an uncovered drink in his home. He runs to pour it away.

His wife sees her husband pouring the drink into the sink. She does not understand what he is doing. Even if she knows about the concern over uncovered drinks, that concern is generally not applicable nowadays as a matter of the basic *halachah*.

Who knows how she will respond? She may become upset with him. She may be distressed by his action. Something as ordinary as a drink in the kitchen can become an occasion for friction between them.

Rav Shteinman's concern was that this sefer could lead to another problem in *shalom bayis*. That was why he would not give the endorsement.

Consider everything in that account. Rav Shteinman approved of the sefer's scholarship. He appreciated the author's learning and the quality of the work. But that approval did not become a practical endorsement encouraging households to adopt the stringency. He also considered what could happen when the learning entered a kitchen.

He saw a husband finding an uncovered drink. He saw a wife watching him pour it into the sink. He saw the possibility of that action causing distress and becoming a painful exchange.

That possibility mattered to him.

A person may feel strongly about a practice he observes. Rav Shteinman was teaching the author to consider the way it could affect another person and the peace of a home. The story concerns that particular practice and that particular request for an endorsement. Its message about sensitivity reaches into many parts of our lives.

We can be concerned about a religious practice and still need to think carefully about how our actions will affect another person. We can explain ourselves with kindness. We can remember that someone else may see the situation differently and feel hurt by what we do.

At the beginning of the Torah, Hashem anticipates the hurt of His children. In this story, a gadol anticipates the hurt that might occur between husband and wife. Both teach us to notice pain before we cause it.

[See our Monday Parshas Bereishis class on Ratzo v'shov. There was much ratzo here—the scholar was running toward Hashem's Torah. The shov, returning to earthly life and bringing the teaching into the home with sensitivity, was missing.]

Bringing Hashem's kindness into this Shabbos

And now we come to this Shabbos.

This Shabbos, we will hear the Torah begin again. “Bereishis bara Elokim.” And we will hear Rashi explain why Hashem began there.

Some of us have carried the pain of the accusations against our people. We have heard Jews described as thieves. We have heard our right to Eretz Yisrael denied. Those words can leave us angry, troubled, and weary.

As we read Bereishis, we can receive the comfort Hashem placed in His Torah. He created the world. He is its Master. Our connection to the land He gave us is rooted in His will. And He cared enough about our distress to give us this answer at the beginning.

We are entering Shabbos with a Father Who sees what hurts us.

Let that thought bring some menuchah into our hearts. Hashem knows the accusations. He knows the truth. He knows His children. We can welcome Shabbos and allow His Torah to steady us.

Then let us take His sensitivity into our own homes.

Before Shabbos, think of one person whose pain you could ease.

Perhaps someone has worked hard preparing for Shabbos and feels that the work is invisible. Notice it. Express appreciation. Offer help.

Perhaps a husband or wife is carrying a worry. Make room to listen. A person does not always need an immediate answer. Sometimes it helps enormously to feel that the worry is being carried together.

Perhaps someone is lonely or homebound and will not be able to join anyone for Shabbos. Give that person a call before Shabbos. Wish them a good Shabbos. A few warm words can give chizuk and help them feel remembered and cared for as Shabbos approaches.

Perhaps someone will be at our table who is lonely. Include that person in the conversation. Show interest. Help the person feel wanted.

Perhaps someone is already embarrassed or under pressure. We can choose words that preserve dignity. We can ask ourselves how our sentence will feel to the person who hears it.

We do not have to solve every problem before candle lighting. But we can ease one burden. We can prevent one unnecessary hurt. We can bring reassurance to one person who needs it.

That is something to look forward to this Shabbos: the opportunity to receive Hashem's kindness and to share it.

The world He created is sustained by giving. The Torah He gave us shows His concern for our pain. And the home we prepare for Shabbos can become a place where another person feels some of that concern.

May Hashem ease the pain of His children, bring peace and safety to Klal Yisrael, and help us bring comfort to one another.

Let us enter this Shabbos with one intention: someone will feel a little less pain because I am there.

Gut Shabbos.