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Parshat Bereishet

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EVE OF LIFE

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Doom and despair and destruction. It all happened so fast after the promises of an idyllic life. And all from two bites of the forbidden fruit. Man, who was promised eternal bliss in the Garden of Eden is now cursed with a plethora of misfortunes. He must toil by the sweat of his brow, work an earth that will produce thorn and thistle. His wife must bear the pain of childbirth with all of its physiological implications. All these are crowned with the most powerful malediction that “you are of dust and to dust you shall return.

But it seems that Adam takes all the news in proper perspective. In the verse that immediately follows the curses, Adam does not spread blame or lament his fate. He continues developing civilization exactly where he left off. Prior to his meeting Eve and partaking of the forbidden fruit, Adam began classifying all living things with names that appropriately described their attributes. After the curses he continues. He names his wife.

“Adam called his wife Chava because she was the mother of all life.” (Genesis 3:20)

Isn't it unsuitable for Adam to name his wife Chava — the mother of all life — immediately following the curse of death? What message is the Torah sending us with that juxtaposition?

Rav Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev was known for his love and good will toward his fellow Jews always trying to assess the good in people rather than expose the bad. Once on the Fast of Tish'a B'av he saw a Jew eating in a non-kosher restaurant. He tapped lightly on the window of the establishment and summoned the man outside.

“Perhaps you forgot that today is a fast day?” Rav Levi Yitzchok queried.

“No, Rebbe,” the man replied.

“Then perhaps you did not realize that this restaurant is not kosher.”

“No, Rebbe, I know it is a traife (non-kosher) eatery.”

Rav Levi Yitzchok softly placed his hands on the man's shoulders and looked heavenward.

“Ribbono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe,” he exclaimed. “Look at how wonderful your children are. They may be eating on a fast day. In a non-kosher restaurant to boot. Yet they refuse to emit a falsehood from their lips!”

Adam heard the curse bestowed upon himself, his wife, and humanity for eternity. His immediate reaction was not scorn or criticism. He named his wife Chava, derived from the word life. He viewed the woman whom he had once blamed for his downfall with a different perspective. He saw only the eve of life — and thus named her so. After tragedy and defeat there is enough blame to share and spread. Adam picked up the pieces and cherished the beauty of what was left.

He did not see himself on the eve of destruction. He saw himself standing at the dawn of life. And he appreciated that life dearly.

Genesis and Creation

by Katia Bolotin

Our Sages tell us that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were the building blocks of the creation of the world. Through these letters, God created the entire cosmos.¹ More than just symbols, the Hebrew letters embody dynamic spiritual energies. They are channels through which reality was created and is maintained. The twenty-two letters and their permutations are manifest in every realm of the physical world. While scientists call atoms, molecules, and elements “the building blocks of creation,” these actually are just the physical manifestation of a parallel spiritual reality. All physical creations emanate from a spiritual source.

Consequently, the phenomenon of creation has been continually unfolding. Unlike a one-time catalyst set into perpetual motion, the renewal of creation is constant. Creation can be seen as an ever-present act of dynamic, evolving potential. *Bereishit* (In the beginning), the first word of the Torah, alludes to this regenerative process. Emanating from one infinite source, *bereishit* is the Divine impetus behind a profuse, ongoing creative energy. As an artist’s signature is upon his work, how much more so does God’s creation bespeak a Supreme Being. *Bereishit* expresses the signature of a Creator imprinted on everything in creation. It embodies the archetypal energies from which all of creation emanates.

Bereishit can be likened to the DNA code from which reality perpetually develops. It begins with the Hebrew letter *beit*—the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet—corresponding to the number two. *Beit* represents the concept of duality. Therefore, the word *bereishit* reveals that our world is permeated by an underlying dualism: the physical and spiritual interface in a seamless embodiment of dualistic wills. The ability to activate free will provides us with the opportunity to choose between good and evil. We can choose to act upon our instincts or to act above them. Humanity is endowed with the capacity to make choices freely and to bear the consequences thereof. These choices proliferate an ever-changing pattern of values and beliefs that interact against the backdrop of history.

From the outset, the personalities in the Book of Genesis represent conflicting character traits common to all. Their inherent duality poses ongoing friction and challenges. Adam and Chavah (Eve), along with their offspring, are enveloped by the gamut of human emotions. Stretching and testing the limits within their parameters of free choice results in ramifications that appear to alter God’s original plan—or does it? Was the plan static or dynamic, allowing for the possibilities of not adhering to the playbook?

Throughout the narrative, character development is a recurring theme—not in a literary context, but in the refinement of core ethical values.

The Book of Genesis introduces us to the concept of *middot*, the Hebrew word for “character traits” and also for “measurements.” Accordingly, each individual has differing degrees of positive and negative *middot*. They need to be balanced, refined, and, oftentimes, transformed. The underlying dynamics within the Divine plan are affected by the actions and choices of individuals.

The static trait of inertia is incompatible with the dynamic propensity for personal growth. Accordingly, the degree of one’s inner will to overcome inertia and advance beyond his or her natural inclinations fuels the progress of an individual. Wherever our starting point in life may be, we are here to learn how best to utilize and direct our energies toward positive change. We can only measure our achievements in comparison to our baseline. How far have we come in transforming our negative traits into positive, productive ones? How much more are we revealing and actualizing our inner potential? How close are we coming to projecting our real selves, in the best version possible? Not just what is seen, but what cannot yet be seen, is waiting just beneath the surface to be activated. How effectively are we bridging the disparity between who we presently are and who we could be?

With the birth of every baby, this arduous developmental process begins anew.

Subsequently, the word *bereishit* is the call to every human being from his Creator to become more. It is a single, multidimensional word that conveys a timeless message for every generation. It encapsulates the purpose of why we are here. *Bereishit* is the mandate bestowed upon every human being, by our Creator, to develop the innate ability for renewing ourselves and our narratives. Collectively, as families, as communities, and as nations, we are intertwined in life’s expanding tapestry. But just as a tapestry is formed by single threads woven together, humanity is refined and advanced by the actions of individuals. And so, our purpose unfolds incrementally. Because of *bereishit*, the future emanates forward as a blast from the past that never stops.

Why Was Humanity Created Last?

by Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein

In Bereishit, we read about the creation of the universe. The entire early history of creation is covered in just a few short passages, and every small detail is of seminal importance. One detail that demands particular scrutiny is the order of creation. And perhaps the most glaring question of all – why were humans created last? Why did we only appear on the scene late on the Friday of creation?

It's a question that the sages of the Talmud engage with. The Talmud ([Sanhedrin 38a](#)) presents a number of different answers.

The first is that human beings were created last in order to establish God as the sole author of creation. If people were around from the beginning, says the Talmud, later generations might be swayed to regard creation as a partly human undertaking, rather than a wholly Divine endeavour. They might come to believe that we were God's co-creators, so to speak, in the work of creating the world.

That presumption itself is an extraordinary statement about the greatness and creative genius of human beings. And indeed, just by looking around us, we see how so many wonders of our world are man-made. Buildings and infrastructure, electricity, running water, cars, the internet – the sheer scale and scope of human ingenuity is breathtaking.

It is also true that, as our Sages state, human beings are called on to be God's "partners in creation" – partners in creating a better world, and in bringing the world to its perfected state. Ultimately, though, it's important to acknowledge God as the One who created the universe alone, who set everything in motion, who created the framework within which human creativity can be unleashed. We need to acknowledge that we live in a world created, *ex nihilo*, *yaish m'ayin*, by God – that we ourselves are His creations, and that all of our amazing creative powers are God-given.

Our sages teach us to embrace this dual nature of humankind. That on the one hand, we have this awesome creative potential, but on the other, we are not self-made; we are, in a fundamental sense, entirely indebted to and reliant on God for both our existence and our amazing gifts and abilities.

Later on in the parsha, we learn that human beings are created in God's image, which touches on this dualism. Being created in God's image means we all have a Divine soul within us. So we have this almost supernatural greatness, but it's a gift from the One who made us.

This relates to the second answer the Talmud provides to the question of why humans were created last – to instil in us a sense of humility. Because of the awesome Divine greatness within every human being, there is a natural tendency to be arrogant, and so we need to be reminded that we are God's humble creation. As the Midrash says, even the mosquito was created before us.

A third reason is that God wanted Adam and Eve to walk into a world which was ready and waiting for them. Human beings are the purpose of creation. Why? Because we alone – among all of God's creatures – are blessed with the gift of free will. We have the ability to do good, to do what's right, to fulfil God's will, not because we have to, but because we choose to.

None of the other creations of this world possess free will. The animal kingdom operates on instinct – animals do not and cannot make moral choices. Even the lofty angels are beings without free choice. They are pre-programmed to praise God and carry out His will. Human beings, on the other hand, have free will. We can make moral decisions and choose between right and wrong. Though our instincts and impulses are extremely powerful, through the force of our will, we are able to rule them – or at least channel them in positive directions. This is the qualitative difference between human beings and any other creature that God has created. Indeed, the Rambam (The Laws of Repentance, Chapter 5) says this ability to choose freely is the defining characteristic of a human being.

So, all of creation in its balance and beauty and perfection is but an elaborate stage for human beings to live a meaningful life, making moral choices aligned with the will of our Creator. And of course, free will is also the foundation of the Torah, the blueprint for living a moral, meaningful, Godly existence.

The fourth reason that Adam and Eve were created last on the Friday of creation, says the Talmud, so they would enter straight into Shabbat. God orchestrated creation in such a way that the mitzvah of Shabbat – a full, complete 'day of rest' – would be one of humankind's first experiences on this earth. Why does Shabbat occupy such a central place in the human experience, going back to the beginning of the world? Why is it that Shabbat had to lay the foundation for human development?

The answer to this question, as we shall see, ties together all three of the other answers provided by the Talmud.

Firstly, Shabbat touches on the very purpose of creation, which is, as we have discussed, to exercise our free will in fulfilling God's will. We do so by performing the mitzvot of the Torah, which is a revelation of his will. And Shabbat, we

know, is one of the Torah's central mitzvot. This is why one of the first experiences humanity entered into was Shabbat. One of the first things we did in this world was to perform a mitzvah. We were born into mitzvah. The very purpose of creation was that we should become the loyal servants of God.

And by beginning human life on earth with a mitzvah, this idea is conveyed in the most powerful way.

Our sages teach that with the creation of Adam and Eve, God becomes a king for the very first time. As our sages explain, there is no king without a nation – meaning that you cannot be described as a king unless there are free-willed subjects who acknowledge your kingship. So with Adam and Eve entering into the mitzvah of Shabbos at the very beginning, they were, in fact, acknowledging God as King, and we do the same each week when we keep Shabbos.

Human history begins with Shabbos and ends with Shabbos. Our sages compare the messianic era to a great Shabbos that arrives at the world after no longer than 6 000 years – the seventh millennium is the great Shabbos of human history. And so human history begins with Shabbos and ends with Shabbos. It begins with a connection and an acknowledgement of God as King through the very first Shabbos, and ends with an acknowledgment of God as King with the final Shabbos of the world, when the entire world will recognise the kingship of Hashem.

Shabbos is also a testimony to our faith in God as the Creator of the universe. This is crucial. Although Adam and Eve had an intimate knowledge of God and understood that He was the Creator of the universe, with each passing generation, this knowledge and understanding faded. Shabbos is our weekly reminder that God created the world. When we recite Kiddush on Friday night, we testify to God's existence and His sovereignty over all things, and we make explicit mention of His "Acts of Creation".

Shabbos is also an act of humility and restraint on the part of human beings. As we have mentioned, it is the very Divine greatness that God has blessed us with that can lead us away from Him as we get caught up in our own abilities. Shabbos helps dispel that sense of arrogance that can creep into our hearts. On Shabbos, we cease imposing our will on the world around us. On Shabbos, we step back from all our creative endeavours, and acknowledge that God is the ultimate creative force in the universe. On Shabbos, we remind ourselves that our greatness comes from God.

An Insight Which Can Be Appreciated by Those Old Enough to Remember Watergate

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

We all know the story of Kayin and Hevel. Kayin kills Hevel and the *Ribono Shel Olam* curses Kayin: "Therefore, you are cursed more than the ground, which opened wide its mouth to receive your brother's bloods from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall not continue to yield its strength to you..." [Bereishis 4:11-12] In effect, the Ribono Shel Olam curses the land. Why does He curse the land? What happened here? Kayin committed fratricide, and then he buried his brother in the ground. Which is the bigger *aveira* (sin) – killing his brother or burying his brother in the land? Obviously, the indictment against Kayin should be for murder, not for burial! Why, then, is the focus of the Almighty's curse against the land that swallowed up the blood of Hevel?

The sefer Avir Yakov makes an observation, to which Americans with a good sense of history can relate. For those of us old enough to remember "Watergate" (June 17, 1972) – what was the big mistake of that infamous political scandal which led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon? The big mistake was not the breaking into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters. The big mistake was the cover-up that followed the burglary! Kayin's burial of Hevel in the ground is the first "cover-up" in world history!

When Hashem asks Kayin "Why did you kill your brother? What did you do?" Kayin could have explained "It was a crime of passion." Most murders are crimes of passion. The murderer is so angry at his victim that he kills him. So for the act of murder, there may be somewhat of a "*teretz*" (an excuse): I was overcome by the passion of the moment. But after the fact, when a person attempts to cover up his crime, it indicates that he has no remorse. He thinks he can get away with his crime. Burying the victim and covering him up in the ground is no longer an act of passion. That is an act of denial – denying the crime.

The *Ribono Shel Olam* focuses on the essence of the crime: The essence of the crime is the cover-up, the denial that a crime ever took place. People make mistakes. People momentarily lose control. That we can understand. But to go ahead and cover up a crime, indicating a total lack of remorse, that is unforgivable. Therefore, the curse starts with the ground, before it continues with Kayin himself.

“Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (2:24)

Rabbeinu Bachya, in his introduction to Parshas Vezos Habracha, discusses the final chapter of Mishlei, which we refer to as “Eishes Chayil.” He writes: “From this chapter, we learn mussar and derech erez that a man should seek a good wife, for she is the foundation and most important person of the household and it will be built up and established through her efforts. The chapter mentions the important character traits found in a good wife using alphabetical order as a mnemonic. This shows that a good wife who possesses all of these good traits possesses the equivalent of the entire Torah which is composed of this alphabet. A good wife is the necessary preparation for a man to achieve excellence in Torah and mitzvos.” Some of the desirable character traits outlined in Eishes Chayil are devoted work on behalf of her household, involvement in charitable causes, refined speech and fear of Hashem. It is important for men and women to focus on these types of factors when choosing a spouse. This will enable them to build a Jewish home founded upon Torah values.

“And she continued to bear his brother Hevel, and Hevel was a shepherd of flocks, and Kayin was a tiller of the soil” (4:2)

HaKesav VeHaKabbala asks: Why did Kayin and Hevel need to find jobs for themselves? Did the few living people need the milk and wool provided by a large flock of sheep? Did they need so much food that they had to establish plantations? He answers that these professions are really just indications of how Hevel and Kayin chose to spend their time. A shepherd is someone who spends long periods of time away from other people. His job is not very physically demanding and does not get caught up in the hustle and bustle characteristic of urban settings. He has much free time for contemplation and focusing on the greatness of Hashem and His creation. This is how Hevel chose to spend his time. However, Kayin chose to spend his time in the same manner as someone who runs a plantation. This is hard work which is both time-consuming and labor-intensive. Even when he is not working, a farmer can be too tired to focus on matters of the spirit. Perhaps as a result of this difference, Hevel understood how to bring a proper offering to Hashem whereas Kayin did not appreciate the need for his offering to meet a high standard. Each one of us makes a choice about what career we pursue and how we spend our time. Hevel was dedicated to spiritual growth and chose to spend his time in a way that would enable him to maintain a focus on this goal. Kayin chose to till the earth, despite the fact that this is a profession which requires long hours and hard toil that would prevent him from having the freedom to focus on the spirit. It is up to us to bear these considerations in mind when making similar decisions for ourselves.

“Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it” (4:7)

Rashi interprets the latter half of this posuk to mean that the evil inclination always desires to make a person stumble, but a person can always overcome it if he so chooses. Rashi teaches us that we are not forced to give in to our desires. How we respond to the yetzer hara is within our control. One solution to combating the overtures of the yetzer hara is to fight fire with fire. We learn from Rashi that the yetzer hara is fueled by a constant desire to make us fail. The best way to defeat him is to cultivate a corresponding desire to do good. When our passion to do the right thing equals the passion of the yetzer hara to make us sin, then we will be able to resist temptation

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

A Meaningful Life

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah covers quite a bit of ground in a very short period of writing in this week's first parsha of the Torah. The ten generations from Adam to Noach are dispatched of without too much detail or description. The Torah in its entire narrative does not spend effort to inform us of the particularities of the lives of many of the people that it mentions. The Torah instead concentrates on detailing the lives of the people whose lasting moral impression on humankind was so great that they live on throughout the generations.

The Torah in fact comes to teach us the great lesson of opportunities granted and either frittered away or positively exploited. The Torah obliquely mentions our father Avraham already at the beginning of its narrative even though he will not appear in real life for another twenty generations. The Torah thereby points out to us the truism that our rabbis in Avot stated, that Avraham exploited his opportunity for spiritual greatness and received the reward of all of the preceding generations while those people preceding him did not, either out of passivity or willfulness.

The lesson here is obvious. In every generation, each and every person has an opportunity to enhance spirituality and morality in the world. It is those that exploit this opportunity that the Torah details and expands upon. They are the true builders of civilization and goodness in God's world. The Torah slows down, so to speak, to enable us to analyze their lives and deeds and to draw conclusions from this to apply to our own lives.

The length of life of the people that the Torah mentions in this week's parsha is also astounding. Centuries on end did they live and yet apparently they had very little accomplishment to show for all of those years. Though length of life is certainly an important factor in one's own life, apparently it is not the most important factor.

There are those who accomplish much in a relatively short time and those who leave little inspiration behind them after living many decades. King Solomon in Kohelet makes note that even if a person lived a thousand years that would not be a guarantee that a productive and meaningful life took place.

We are bidden by Moshe in his famous psalm to "count our days in order to bring forth a wise heart." The phrase can certainly be understood to mean that one should attempt to make one's days count as well. Our father Avraham is described as having come to his old age with his days in his hand. Time is a precious commodity and squandering it is one of our foolish and self-defeating habits.

Adam is criticized by the Midrash not only for his original sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden but for withdrawing morosely from life for so many long decades thereafter. Avraham is complimented for being active and vital even till his last days on earth. The attitude of Judaism towards life is to make it meaningful and elevating, productive and noble. It is for this purpose that we were in fact created.