

Rabbi Aaron Levine

SPIRIT OF NOBILITY

SERMONS ON THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

GENESIS AND EXODUS

The RIETS Hashkafah Series
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, Series Editor

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Genesis and Exodus

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*In loving memory of
Sarah Levine*

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Foreword

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine was a quintessential gentleman and scholar, embodying the values of Torah virtue and ethical behavior that he taught in his classes and writings. He was a world-renowned economist who served as the Samson and Halina Bitensky Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University, and as the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics*. His published works, including *Free Enterprise and Jewish Law*, and *Case Studies in Jewish Business Ethics*, are considered classics in the domain of Jewish business ethics and law.

In addition, Rabbi Levine served as the Rabbi of a synagogue in Brooklyn for many years, during which time he inspired his congregation with homilies on the Torah portion of the week and on the Festivals, providing timely commentary on the topics of our times. As the grandson and namesake of the Reisher Rav, a preeminent Polish scholar who was the author of *Ha-Derash ve-ha-Iyyun*, a masterful collection of insights into the Torah, Rabbi Levine adroitly continued his family tradition of extracting penetrating ideas and lessons from the weekly Torah portions.

This book, edited with love by his family, is a compilation of Rabbi Levine's sermons on the weekly Torah portion that he delivered in his synagogue. Each essay is a self-standing gem, offering timeless wisdom in both scholarly and succinct fashion. Rabbi Levine's penchant for academic precision, combined with his reverence for the word of God, enabled him to convey an authentic Torah Weltanschauung for the complex political and socioeconomic challenges of the modern age. We are now all able to be beneficiaries of these pithy pearls of perspicacity.

Foreword

The Talmud (*Hagigah* 15b) teaches us: 'אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבקות יבקשו תורה מפיהו ואם לאו אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו', "if the Rabbi resembles an angel of God, then learn Torah from his lips, but otherwise do not learn Torah from his lips." One only had to gaze at Rabbi Levine's countenance to recognize the face and demeanor of an angel. Those of us who were privileged to be his students can attest that he was a man who occupied a special plane of holiness. This book, endowed with the beauty of the words that once emerged from Rabbi Levine's lips, is similarly blessed with the sanctity of his spirit.

It is thus with great pleasure that we present this important volume in homiletics as the latest installment in the RIETS Press series. We are of course indebted to our indefatigable executive editor, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, as well as to the past and present visionaries and architects of the RIETS Press, former Presidents Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and Richard M. Joel, President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, and RIETS Dean Rabbi Menachem Penner. It is through their herculean efforts on behalf of the Yeshiva that we continue to imbibe the fruits of YU and RIETS scholarship.

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Director, RIETS Press

Preface

With deep gratitude to Hashem, we present this volume of sermons of our dear father, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt"l*.

A renowned authority on Jewish business ethics, Rabbi Dr. Levine was the Samson and Halina Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University. A paragon of *Torah u-madda*, he published widely on the interface between economics and Jewish law, particularly as it relates to public policy and modern business practices.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was also a distinguished pulpit rabbi, toiling tirelessly in the rabbinate for nearly thirty years. In his sermons, he would urge his congregants to seize nobility, to leap toward greater achievement in religious observance and refinement of character. In his personal conduct, he was the very embodiment of those ideals.

This volume is a selection of Rabbi Dr. Levine's sermons on the weekly Torah portion, transcribed from his manuscripts dating from 1982 to 2011.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Rabbi Yona Reiss for including this volume in the works published under the auspices of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, and for his eloquent and meaningful Foreword. To Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, we express our sincere appreciation for his enthusiasm toward this work and his steadfast devotion in shepherding it through the publication process.

To Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ashirah Firszt, Tomi Mager, Ita Olesker, Shira Finson, and Caryn Meltz of Maggid Books, we

Preface

extend a special note of thanks for their thoughtfulness, dedication, and professionalism in bringing this book to publication.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was born on the second day of Passover and passed away on the first day of Passover. On Passover, we observe the mitzvah of *haggadah*, the telling of the story of the Exodus, so that we can feel as if we ourselves had gone out of Egypt. As Rabbi Dr. Levine noted, “We are bidden to somehow leap the generations and touch the lives of our ancestors, to make the biblical figures come alive and vicariously feel their pain and triumph, to feel the birth pangs of a nation of Hashem.”

May the recounting of these sermons strengthen our Jewish identity and commitment to the Torah, connecting us not only with our father, the author of this work, but with the previous generations, back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Family of Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt”l*

Genesis

Bereshit

Let Us Make Man

October 20, 1984

Human arrogance and pride are sometimes so intense that we crave recognition for even imaginary achievements. Yes, in a moment of generosity, man will acknowledge the contribution of others to his work and perhaps even allow others to take credit from some minor achievement of his. But when it comes to his magnum opus, his crowning achievement, his work of unparalleled genius, man will yearn for nothing less than universal recognition. He will fight with a ferocious tenacity any attempt to detract from his achievement.

Such is human affairs. But when the Master of the Universe created the world, His name was attached to all His creations except His crowning creation, man. With respect to man, Hashem said, “*na’aseh adam*,” “Let us make man” (Genesis 1:26). This phrase is quite dangerous. It could lead to an error that, God forbid, there was more than one Creator. When Moses recorded the Torah, he objected to the phrase.¹ When the seventy-two scholars were summoned by Ptolemy II Philadelphus

1. Genesis Rabbah 8:8.

to translate the Torah into Greek, each independently recognized the prudence of changing the phrase to “I shall make man.”²

Why did the Torah record the creation of man in this manner? Our Sages tell us it was to teach us that just as Hashem consulted with the Heavenly Hosts, so, too, it is proper for an eminent person to consult with those of a lower status.³

What was the result of this consultation? *Hesed* said, “Let him be created because he will perform acts of kindness.” *Emet* said, “Let him not be created because he is full of falsehood.” *Tzedek* said, “Let him be created because he will perform righteous deeds.” *Shalom* said, “Let him not be created because he is full of strife.” To break the deadlock, Hashem took truth and cast it to the ground, as it is written, “He hurled truth down to the earth” (Daniel 8:12). Then the ministering angels protested, “Hashem, how can You treat Your seal⁴ in such a manner?” Hashem responded, “Let truth rise from the earth,” as it is written, “Truth springs up from the earth” (Psalms 85:12).⁵

What the Midrash is telling us, in our view, is that Hashem proclaimed that man could achieve his divine potential not by trying to arrive at truth or peace directly, but rather by utilizing his capabilities, i.e., righteousness and kindness. With those capabilities, truth will sprout from the earth. Why? Because truth and peace are diametrically opposed to each other. One who relentlessly pursues truth will harbor an intolerance for those with views that differ from his. He will also have an impatience and contempt for those who do not share his fervor and enthusiasm. Before we know it, the battle lines of ideology are clearly drawn.

On the other hand, the champion of peace has a completely accommodating nature. He tolerates any evil, big or small, for the sake of peace. He has the divine wisdom to arrive at the magic blend of truth and peace. Moreover, both truth and peace are really empty concepts, mere

2. *Megillah* 9a.

3. R. Solomon b. Isaac (*Rashi*, France, 1040–1105), *Rashi* to Genesis 1:26, s.v. “*na’aseh adam*”; Genesis Rabbah 8:8.

4. The seal of Hashem is truth. *Shabbat* 55a.

5. Genesis Rabbah 8:5.

platitudes. Only one who understands righteousness and kindness has a concept of truth and peace, and can synthesize these elements. While truth and peace detract from each other, righteousness and kindness reinforce one another. The man who is committed to a society where everyone respects the rules and abides by them, and in the microcosm of his own world, fulfills all his commitments, will never give up on a system of justice, even when he is the victim of injustice.

The individual must sacrifice himself for the interests of society. Hence, from the legalistic man is born the sacrificing, compassionate man. The man who has a profound sense of kindness will be satisfied only with a profound justice, a justice that takes into account all external costs and benefits, and all long-term and short-term effects of one's actions.

Why did Hashem choose to allow the creation of man to be so open to error and misunderstanding? It was to teach man the lesson that it is precisely at those moments of *na'aseh adam*, when man feels the deep anguish of being denied credit for his achievement, when man is not the cynosure or the center of attention, that he makes his greatest contribution of *imitatio Dei*. For the building blocks of creative progress are not the grand insights into truth and moments of peace that man achieves, but rather it is the sparks of righteousness and kindness throughout time that coalesce and produce the powerful moral climate that brings about advances in truth and lasting peace. It was not any profound insight that the Jewish State should exist and that Israel belongs to the Jews, or the uneasy peace that the superpowers achieve through a balance of power, that brought about the creation of the State of Israel, but rather the sparks of suffering, death, and even evil that took place, the great Holocaust that decimated the flower of Jewry.

And why did the Jewish State have to be formed from the blood and tears of Jews? Why could it not have been formed in a much easier way? If we ask such a question, we have no concept of eternity and permanence.

Now, if Hashem gave credit to the Heavenly Hosts for partial truth and even for opposing views because those views crystallized man's divine potential, then so must we. And we must realize that every achievement is not an isolated event, but rather builds on the shoulders of giants. We are dwarfs resting on the shoulders of giants.

Bereshit

“God saw all that He had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). As R. Samson Raphael Hirsch states, every creation by itself is good, but when everything harmoniously blends together and works as a unit, it is “very good.”⁶

6. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808–1888), Genesis 1:31.