

THE EREZ SERIES

RABBI ADIN  
EVEN-ISRAEL  
STEINSALTZ | A CONCISE GUIDE TO  
**THE SAGES**

AN OVERVIEW OF JEWISH WISDOM

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## The Erez Series

Dedicated in loving memory of

*Joseph "Erez" Tenenbaum*

Whose love of learning, endless curiosity and zest for life  
Survived the Destruction  
And found full expression in his ultimate return to Zion.

By his son Zisman Tuvia



סדרת ארז

מוקדש לעלוי נשמת

יוסף צבי בן טוביה זיסמן טננבואם

(המכונה ארז)

"אוד מוצל מאש"

שלא נכבה בו אהבת לימוד, סקרנות אין-סופית, ושמחת חיים

ע"י בנו זיסמן טוביה



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## Foreword

This book contains a compilation of the statements of the Sages from the start of the Second Temple era (approximately 300 BCE) through 700–800 CE. The material includes statements of the Sages of the Mishna, i.e., from the days of the Second Temple until the third century CE. The Sages of the Mishna are typically called *tanna'im*, literally, teachers. Most of their work was in the Hebrew language and can be found in the Mishna and other texts. Those who came later and clarified the statements of the *tanna'im* are the *amora'im*, literally, speakers, who lived from approximately the third century until the sixth century CE. Some of them lived and studied in the Land of Israel and some of them in Babylonia. Amoraic literature contains two elements: the halakhic section, which is found primarily in the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, and the aggadic section, which is found in the two Talmuds and the aggadic Midrash. In addition, there is material that appears in the minor tractates of the Talmud, which were edited at a later stage. The core of those tractates originated during the mishnaic period, and they are printed as appendixes to the Babylonian Talmud. Most of the talmudic material is written in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic. The entire corpus of amoraic literature is considered fundamental and was accepted by all Jews.

Rabbinic literature is called the “Oral Law,” because it is not found in the text of the Bible. It was preserved as oral statements that originated with the giving of the Torah and became the focus of study and deliberation throughout the generations. The Oral Law comprises explanations of biblical verses, ancient halakhic traditions not rooted in the text of the Bible, and rabbinic ordinances enacted throughout the generations.

Since the scope of rabbinic literature is enormous, this work is limited to citing the Mishna, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, the minor tractates, and the aggadic Midrash – primarily *Midrash Rabba* and *Midrash Tanhuma*. The basis of this anthology is largely the aggadic material in the Talmud and in the various works of aggadic Midrash. The matters included here serve as commentary on the written Torah. In addition, there is a treatment of many topics, each with a section devoted to it, addressing Jewish life, the cycle of life, and societal and personal issues. Likewise, there are a large number of anecdotes that relate both to the biblical narrative and to accounts of the lives of the Sages. For clarity, brief introductory statements have been added to each of the segments.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

## Introducing the Erez Concise Guides

A Jewish home, at any time or place, cannot be maintained based on the mere identity of its residents as Jews. Whether they conceive of themselves as religious, traditional, or secular, people need to have access to written expression of their tradition through which they can come to know, understand, and “enter” their tradition.

“To enter the tradition” can mean something different for each person. Some are simply curious, others have a particular interest, and there are undoubtedly many Jews who just do not want the worlds of the Jewish spirit to be closed to them. People therefore require bridges and gates to gain access. There is no obligation to use these, but their existence makes it possible for anyone – when that person so desires, to enter, or even to glance within – the way is clear and he or she can do so.

We have thus produced the Erez series, which provides different gates by which one can enter the Jewish tradition. Just as it is told about Abraham’s tent that it was open from all four directions in order to welcome guests from everywhere, these books allow anyone, whenever he or she feels like it or finds something interesting, to enter into the tradition.

There are thousands of books that cover, in various ways and at different levels, the materials presented here. However, most of them require prior knowledge and no small amount of effort to be understood. In these volumes, we have striven to give anyone who seeks it a paved road into the riches of the Jewish world. More than merely a gate, we hope that these books can be said to offer their readers a “ride” into the tradition. Each person can get off whenever he or she desires and continue traveling when their interest is reawakened.

These volumes contain some of the fundamentals of Judaism. In each of them there are elements that can be considered hors d’oeuvres that can be snacked upon and others that are more comparable to entrees that require more time for digestion. In either case, the invitation offered by *A Concise Guide to the Sages* in Proverbs (9:5) is relevant: “Come, partake of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed.” The books were deliberately designed to be accessible to everyone, whether he or she is highly educated or someone whose source of intellectual stimulation consists of occasionally reading the newspaper. Anyone can enjoy something, whether by means of an occasional taste, or by sitting down to a hearty meal. The way is open and anyone can find the gate appropriate for him or her, without effort.

We have aimed to keep the translation as true to the original Hebrew and Aramaic as possible. As some of these texts are not easy to understand, we have added clarifying comments in square brackets where appropriate. Further explication is appended in notes at the end of certain passages. When we have felt it appropriate to use a transliteration, the transliterated term is first explained and then followed by the transliteration in square brackets. At the end of each book we have provided a glossary of Hebrew terms mentioned in the series. Some of the terms found there may not be found in this book, as we have used the same glossary for all the volumes of the Erez series. *The Reference Guide to the Talmud* has a far more extensive glossary, as is necessary for that work.

Given the antiquity of the texts collected here, there are many occasions where it was impossible to avoid gendered usage, and we have followed the texts themselves in using the male gender as the default.

Each of the volumes in this series stands alone, with only occasional citations connecting them. The first volume, *A Concise Guide to the Torah*, contains the translation of the Torah taken from the *Steinsaltz Humash*; we have abridged the commentary that can be found there. One can take this volume to the synagogue but also peruse it in the comforts of one's home.

The second volume, *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, is an anthology of rabbinic literature, organized by topics. One part includes rabbinic thinking associated with the Torah, while other topics are also addressed: the cycle of the Jewish year, the cycle of life in rabbinic eyes, as well as other topics where a person can find something that fits his or her needs.

The third volume, *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, addresses spiritual matters. It contains an anthology of non-halakhic literature from the Jewish spiritual tradition: kabbala, Jewish philosophy, the Musar tradition, and hasidic writings. Here too, the texts are presented in a manner that is accessible to all, in clear English. This volume addresses a broad array of topics: Besides comments and explanations on the Torah, there are sections devoted to the cycle of the Jewish year, the life cycle, and fundamental questions of human life such as parenthood, marriage, and death. There are many other topics addressed in this volume and one can open it at random and find wisdom that touches the soul.

The fourth volume, *A Concise Guide to Halakha*, is a survey of practical *halakha*. It does not delve into the sources of *halakha* and provide an opportunity for intensive study but serves rather as a guidebook to what the *halakha* instructs one to do in various situations. In this way the book offers

a summary of the *halakhot* of Shabbat and the holidays, of life cycle events, and of those mitzvot that any Jew is likely to encounter. If one wishes to act in accordance with the *halakha*, he or she will know what to do with the help of this volume. It is written in clear English with a minimum of technical language so that it is accessible to anyone, man, woman, or child. And if he or she decides to act accordingly, may he or she be blessed.

The fifth volume, *The Reference Guide to the Talmud*, is a reprint of the work that was issued as a companion to the *Koren Talmud Bavli*. It is an indispensable resource for students of all levels. This fully revised, English-language edition of the *Reference Guide* clearly and concisely explains the Talmud's fundamental structure, concepts, terminology, assumptions, and inner logic; it provides essential historical and biographical information; it includes appendixes, a key to abbreviations, and a comprehensive index.

For improved usability, this completely updated volume has a number of new features: topical organization instead of by Hebrew alphabet, re-edited and revised text to coordinate with the language used in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, and an index of Hebrew terms to enable one seeking a Hebrew term to locate the relevant entry.

These books are certainly not the entire Torah, but they are beneficial for any Jew to have in his or her home. If one finds something interesting, or is curious about something, these books offer a resource to investigate that topic. Even if one opens one of these volumes by chance, he or she will gain from reading it, both intellectually and spiritually. In short, these are books that it is convenient to have in one's home.

Our thanks are extended to all the people who participated in the project of writing these books, editing them, and finding the sources therein. We likewise would like to thank the publisher, and those first readers who offered helpful criticism and advice, and finally those generous people whose donations made it possible to create these books.

The Editors

# Torah – Genesis



# Bereshit

The portion of *Bereshit*, the first portion in the Torah, presents the story of Creation and the central events during the dawn of humanity, but it does so with great concision. The rabbinic literature provides the background and details of those events, along with explanations of their significance.

The following text discusses the letters, and the names of the Creator, with which the world was created; the creation of Man – his uniqueness; why he was created as an individual, not as a species; the considerations that were raised before he was created; the seduction by the serpent; and the motives of Cain in his killing of Abel.

## The First Letter in the Torah

The Torah begins with the word *bereshit*, which itself begins with the letter *bet*. The Sages explain why the Torah does not begin with the letter *alef* – the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

**And why with a *bet*? Because it is an expression of blessing;<sup>1</sup> and not with an *alef*, which is an expression of curse,<sup>2</sup> so that those who live in the world will not say: How can the world, created with an expression of curse, endure? Instead, I am creating it with a *bet*, with an expression of blessing, and perhaps it will endure.**

(Jerusalem Talmud, *Hagiga* 2:1)

## The World Attests to Its Creator

What did Rabbi Akiva respond to a person who sought unequivocal proof of the existence of a Creator?


**It happened that a heretic came and said to Rabbi Akiva: This world – who created it? Rabbi Akiva said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He. The heretic said to him: Show me some clear proof! Rabbi Akiva said to him: Come to me tomorrow. The heretic came to him the next day. Rabbi Akiva said to him: What are you wearing? He said to him: A garment. Rabbi Akiva said to**

- 
1. The Hebrew word for blessing, *berakha*, also begins with the letter *bet*.
  2. The Hebrew word for curse, *arira*, begins with the letter *alef*.

him: Who made it? The heretic said to him: The weaver. Rabbi Akiva said to him: I don't believe you; show me some clear proof. The heretic said to him: And what should I show you? Don't you know that the weaver made it? Rabbi Akiva said to him: And you, don't you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world?

That heretic took his leave. Rabbi Akiva's students said to him: What is the clear matter? Rabbi Akiva said to them: My children, just as the house attests to its builder, and the garment attests to its weaver, and the door attests to its carpenter, so the world attests to the Holy One, blessed be He, that He created it.

(*Otzar HaMidrashim* [Eisenstein], *Temura*, p. 583)

 **Further reading:** For more about the existence of the world as proof of the existence of the Creator, see *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, p. 130.

## The Attribute of Justice and the Attribute of Mercy

God has many names, and each name expresses a certain aspect of revelation. The Tetragrammaton, spelled *yod, heh, vav, heh*, known as *Hashem*, the name, expresses the attributes of kindness and mercy, while the name *Elohim* expresses the attribute of justice. The Sages explain why both names are employed in describing the creation of the world.

“This is the legacy of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, on the day that the Lord [*Hashem*] God [*Elohim*] made the earth and the heavens” (Genesis 2:4).

This verse concludes the act of Creation, and in it two names of the Creator are mentioned – *Hashem* and *Elohim*.

***Hashem Elohim*** – This can be compared to a king who had empty cups. The king said: If I place hot water into them, they will break; cold water, they will shrink. What did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water, and he placed it into the cups and they remained intact. So too, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone – the sinners will be many;<sup>3</sup> with the attribute of justice alone – how will the world be able to endure?<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will create it with both the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy, and perhaps it will endure.

3. As people will have no fear of God.

4. As people will be dealt with strictly for even the slightest infraction.



## The Deliberation with Regard to the Creation of Man

The depiction of the creation of the first human being in the Torah differs from the depiction of the creation of the rest of the creatures. God speaks of this creation in the plural (“Let us fashion”), and the Sages interpret that expression as a deliberation that was conducted either between God and Himself or between God and the ministering angels. This deliberation concerned the question of whether it is indeed appropriate to create humans.

**Rabbi Shimon said:** At the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create the first person, the ministering angels divided into factions and groups. Some of them said: He should be created! Some of them said: He should not be created! That is the meaning of that which is written: “Kindness and truth have met; justice and peace have touched” (Psalms 85:11).<sup>5</sup> Kindness says: He should be created, as he performs acts of kindness. Truth says: He should not be created, as he is falsehood in his entirety. Righteousness says: He should be created, as he performs acts of righteousness. Peace says: He should not be created, as he epitomizes strife.

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth and cast it to the earth.<sup>6</sup> The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, why are You demeaning Your seal? Let truth rise from the earth, as it is written: “Truth will spring from the earth” (Psalms 85:12).

When the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to create the first person, He consulted the ministering angels. He said to them: Shall we make Man? They said before Him: Master of the Universe! “What is a mortal that You remember him, a person that You take him into account?” (Psalms 8:5). He said to them: This person that I seek to create in My world has greater wisdom than you.

What did He do? He assembled all the animals, beasts, and birds and He passed them before the ministering angels. He said to them: What are the names of these creatures? And they did not know. Once He created the first person, He assembled all the animals, beasts, and birds and He passed them before him. He said to Adam: What are the names of these? Adam said: This should be called an ox, and this should be called a horse, and this should be called a camel, and this should be called a vulture, and this should be called a lion. That is what is written: “The man called names for every

5. The verse in Psalms describes an encounter between the attributes of kindness, truth, justice, and peace.

6. Leaving a majority of groups supporting the creation of people.

animal and for the birds of the sky and for every beast of the field” (Genesis 2:20).

God said to him: And what is your name? He said: Adam. God said to him: Why? He said to Him: Because I was created from the earth [*adama*]. He said to him: And Me, what is My name? Adam answered: *Adonai*. He said to Adam: Why? Adam answered: Because You are the Master [*Adon*] over all Your creations.

(*Bereshit Rabba* [Theodor-Albeck] 8;  
*Pesikta Rabbati* [Ish Shalom] 14: *Para*)

## Creation of Man in the Plural

The Sages address the question of why the creation of the first person was formulated in the plural, “Let us fashion man,” despite the erroneous conclusion one may make from such wording.

When Moses was writing the Torah, he would write what was formed on each and every day. When he reached this verse, which states: “Let us fashion man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), he said before Him: Master of the Universe, I wonder: Why do You provide grounds for the heretics? He said to Moses: Write, and let one who seeks to err, err.<sup>8</sup> The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Moses, this person that I created, won’t I establish both greater people and lesser people from him? If the greater people will come to consult with the lesser people, and will say: Why do I need to ask permission with one lesser than I? The lesser people can say to him: Learn from your Creator, who created the heavenly and the earthly. When He came to create Man, He consulted with the ministering angels.

(*Bereshit Rabba* 8)



**Further reading:** For more about the meaning of the creation of man in the image of God, see *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, pp. 131, 139.

## Man Was Created Alone

There are several explanations provided by the Sages with regard to why one person was created alone, and from him all of humanity developed.

**The reason why Adam was created alone is to teach you that with regard to anyone who destroys even one soul from the Jewish people, the verse**

- 
7. Who may claim that there were multiple gods that created Adam.
  8. People can choose to mislead themselves if they wish.

ascribes blame to him as though he destroyed an entire world.<sup>9</sup> And with regard to anyone who sustains even one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes credit to him as though he sustained an entire world. Another reason is due to maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My ancestor is greater than your ancestor. Another reason is so that the heretics will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven.<sup>10</sup> Another reason is to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore,<sup>11</sup> each and every person must say: The world was created for me.

(Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:5)

## Creation of Man and Woman

The Sages discuss the creation of the first woman from a perspective that views man and woman as two halves of a single entity.

Rabbi Yirmeya ben Elazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam the first person, He created him androgynous.<sup>12</sup> That is what is written: “Male and female He created them” (Genesis 5:2). Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam the first person, He created him with two fronts,<sup>13</sup> and He then split him and made for him two backs – one here and one there.<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Yohanan said: Adam and Eve were created at the developmental age of approximately twenty years old.

(*Bereshit Rabba* 8, 14)



**Further reading:** For more about Man and Woman as two halves of a single entity, see *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, p. 16.

9. Because all of humanity emerged from one person.
10. Each of whom created another person.
11. Since the first person was created alone.
12. One with both male and female sexual organs.
13. One male and one female.
14. God separated him in the middle, and two backs were provided for those two fronts, i.e., they were divided into two separate entities.

## Preservation of the World

Although God created the world for the benefit of humanity, people bear great responsibility for the preservation of the world.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam the first person, He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him: See how beautiful and excellent My creations are, and everything that I created, I created for you. Ensure that you do not ruin and destroy My world, because if you ruin it, there is no one else to restore it.

*(Kohelet Rabba 7)*

## Eve and the Serpent

The Sages discuss the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, explaining the serpent's contentions as well as what caused Eve to convince Adam to eat the fruit.

The serpent went and said to the woman: Is it true that also you<sup>15</sup> are commanded with regard to the fruits of this tree? She said to him: Yes, as it is stated: "But from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God said: You shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die" (Genesis 3:3). From her words,<sup>16</sup> the serpent found an opening through which it could enter [and undermine the prohibition]. The serpent said to her: This command is nothing more than stinginess,<sup>17</sup> as at the moment that you eat from it you will be like God. What does He do? He creates worlds and destroys worlds – likewise, you will be able to create worlds and destroy worlds. Just as He brings death and gives life, you too will be able to bring death and give life.

The serpent went and touched the tree. The tree screamed and said: Wicked one, don't touch me! The serpent went and said to the woman: I touched the tree and I did not die, you too touch it and you will not die. The woman went and touched the tree and saw the angel of death approaching her. She said: Perhaps now I will die, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will form another woman for Adam. I will cause him to eat with me. If we die, both of us will die, and if we live, both of us will live. She went and took and ate of the fruits of the tree, and gave of its fruits to her husband too, so that he would eat with her.

*(Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 13)*

15. In other words, are the fruits prohibited not only to me but to you as well?

16. Her adding a prohibition against touching the tree, which had not been commanded by God.

17. To prevent you from becoming like God.

 **Further reading:** The narrative of the Tree of Knowledge is found in *A Concise Guide to the Torah*, p. 8.

## The Killing of Abel

The Sages elaborate on the first murder. Why did Cain kill Abel? What was Cain's reaction after the murder, and what was his punishment?

“Cain said to Abel his brother” (Genesis 4:8). What did Cain say to him?<sup>18</sup> Cain said to Abel: Shall we divide the world between us? Abel said to him: Yes. Abel took his flocks to graze and Cain took the land to cultivate, and they agreed that neither of them would have any claim against the other. When Abel took his flocks, he began to shepherd the flocks, but Cain would pursue him from mountain to valley and from valley to mountain.<sup>19</sup> This went on until they encountered each other and fought. Abel triumphed over Cain and Cain fell beneath him. When Cain saw that Abel had prevailed he began to scream: Abel my brother, do not do me harm. Abel pitied him and released him, and Cain rose and killed him.

Once Cain killed him, he said: I will flee from my father and my mother, who will ask me about him, as there is no one in the world other than me and him. Immediately, the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to Cain and said to him: You can flee from your parents, but you cannot flee from Me... “Where is Abel your brother?” (4:9). God said to him: Woe unto Abel, as he pitied you and didn't kill you when you fell beneath him, and you rose and killed him.

How did Cain kill him? He made several wounds and several injuries with a stone, in Abel's arms and legs, as Cain did not know from where his life departs. Cain continued striking Abel until he reached his neck... Cain said to God: Master of the Universe, I did not know and I had never seen anyone killed in my life. How could I know that if I smite him with a stone he would die? Immediately, He responded to Cain: “And now, cursed are you from the ground that opened its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it shall not continue giving its strength to you” (4:11–12).

Cain said before Him: Master of the Universe, do You have informants who inform on people before You? My father and my mother are on earth and do not know that I killed Abel, and You are in the heavens; from where

18. The verse does not tell us what Cain said.

19. Wherever Abel would shepherd his flocks, Cain would claim that the land on which they were grazing was his.

do You know? God said to him: Fool! I bear the entire world ... Cain said to Him: You bear the entire world and You are unable to bear my iniquity? Is my sin too great to bear? (4:13). God said to him: Since you have repented, depart and be exiled from this place ... When Cain departed, every place that he would go, the land would quake beneath him and the beasts and the animals would quake and say: What is this? They would say to each other: Cain killed his brother Abel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, decreed in his regard: “Restless and itinerant you shall be” (4:12).

*(Tanhuma, Bereshit)*