



**Talks on
the Parasha**

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Talks on the Parasha

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Editor's Introduction

This book is a collection drawn from Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's oral discourses on the weekly *parashot*, the Torah portions that we read each Shabbat in the synagogue. As a rule, these discourses touch upon one point in each *parasha*, usually either exegetical or conceptual in nature. This point always illuminates a meaningful idea in the *parasha*, stimulating thought and introspection.

The book was not written as a discrete work. Most of the chapters are based on discourses that Rabbi Steinsaltz delivered over the years to students at his various institutions, including Yeshivat Mekor Chaim, the Bat Ayin Yeshiva, and Yeshivat Tekoa.

Some of the discourses were written especially for this collection. Naturally, the style of these discourses differs slightly from that of the oral discourses.

The book's origins can be traced to a weekly bulletin edited and published by students at Yeshivat Mekor Chaim in the year 5756 (1996). The discourses have now been re-edited, and many others have been added to complete the collection.

The discourses were edited with the intention of basically preserving the speaking style of Rabbi Steinsaltz. Hence, the book's language is conversational and reflective, not necessarily adhering to the formal style found in true written works.

Editor's Introduction

I wish to thank all of the many associates who contributed to the work of collecting, editing, and proofreading throughout the lengthy and complex process of preparing this book. This includes those who worked at transcribing the recordings, finding the sources, editing the discourses, reading and commenting on the manuscript, and offering good advice. Their assistance was greatly appreciated.

Daniel Haberman translated the book into English, Daniel Landman skillfully edited it, and Sima Bozin proofread it with great care. Finally, our thanks to the staff at Maggid Books for their professionalism and dedication in bringing the book to print.

Yisrael Malkiel

Preface

The Torah contains within it many worlds. The themes, the language, all of the myriad ways in which to understand and interpret it – all of these are worlds that both exist independently and are connected to one another, inextricably linked from without and from within.

But from the totality of the Torah's manifold shades of meaning, what emerges is that the Torah is essentially "the book of the chronicles of man." The Torah – addressing, in particular, the Jewish people and the Jewish individual – helps the reader understand not only what happened in the past and what ought to happen in the future, but also the meaning of his own life. The Torah serves as a kind of wondrous looking glass in which we can simultaneously see the end of existence and our own reflection, and within that reflection not only are our outer facades visible, but the image of our true inner selves as well.

For this reason, it is no wonder that even today, new interpretations of the Torah are constantly being generated. In a telling account, the Rashbam wrote of a conversation with his eminent grandfather Rashi, regarding the interpretation of the Torah. Rashi told him that if it were within his power, he would continuously revise his commentary "according to the textual insights that are revealed each day." These new insights unfold not only because studying the Torah is like contemplating a gem that has countless facets, but also because we, too, renew ourselves daily.

Preface

This book is a collection and adaptation of oral discourses that were delivered over several years at Yeshivat Mekor Chaim and other places of learning. During those years, the audience changed, and the speaker changed as well, moving from perspective to perspective in response to the vagaries of his life and its events. At times the members of the audience were alert and lively, and at times they seemed drowsy, not necessarily because the content did not appeal to them. Rather, as we have stated, many new facets are revealed in the Torah each day, and not every facet is meant for every person.

Our sages say that when the Torah was given, God's voice split into 600,000 different voices – one voice for each person present at Sinai. They add that there were perhaps many more voices, each one individualized and personal, since the words were spoken not only for the people of that time but also for future generations. Sometimes a certain interpretation touches upon a meaningful point that a person will internalize and remember for years, and sometimes the emotional and spiritual experience will only last for a moment.

My hope is that these discourses, both as a whole and individually, will serve as a window into the inner and outer realms of the Torah, providing insights that will be meaningful not only for the Jewish people, but to each reader on a personal level as well.

Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

Genesis

Bereshit

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS OF GENESIS

One of Rashi's most well-known exegetical questions can be found in his first comment on the Torah, where he famously asks, "Why does the Torah begin with the account of the Creation?" However, according to Nahmanides, the very question is unwarranted. While it is true, as Rashi points out, that Genesis lacks the sheer quantity of mitzvot that can be found in the other books of the Torah, Genesis stands out as a source of all the basic principles of our faith. Genesis is preoccupied with fundamental questions, its narratives brimming with exemplary figures whose actions shape our lives today. Clearly, it would have been impossible to begin the Torah without them.

The protagonists of Genesis are *tzaddikim* – supremely righteous individuals – but they are not flawless, one-dimensional characters. These are real people with real failings. To be sure, this does not mean that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or even Joseph and his brothers, should be regarded as sinners, but each of them encountered scenarios in which the correct path was not necessarily clear. Nevertheless, these are our *tzaddikim*, our "pillars of the world." Indeed, four of the "seven shepherds"¹ – the Jewish people's spiritual fathers – are characters from the book of Genesis.

1. Referenced in Micah 5:4, the Kabbalists interpreted the "seven shepherds" as the seven *Ushpizin* who attend our festive meals throughout the holiday of Sukkot, namely, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David.

Parashat Bereshit itself addresses life's fundamental dilemmas in detail. Almost every important issue appears here, including ascent and descent, Creation, and the nature of man. *Parashat Bereshit* is also the single place where the Torah discusses the concept of sin directly: What is sin and what constitutes it? The *parasha* also deals with the more human challenges of life: relationships between people, between husband and wife, between a father and his sons; quarrels between brothers, even murder. These are the building blocks of life, and *Parashat Bereshit* is full of them.

THE NATURE OF CAIN

Shaar HaGilgulim, a kabbalistic work, identifies two different types of souls and elaborates on them: souls that possess the nature of Abel and souls that possess the nature of Cain. This is not a division between good souls and evil souls, for this source attributes the nature of Cain to the souls of many great Torah leaders. Rather, the division is one of character. The souls with the nature of Abel are milder and more pleasant, whereas those with the nature of Cain are stronger and more creative.

This distinction becomes apparent when one considers the Torah's portrayals of Adam's sons, Cain and Seth, and their descendants. Cain is remembered primarily for killing his brother Abel, but we are also told something else about him: He is the first person to build. Indeed, while Adam lived for many centuries and possessed abundant wisdom, Cain is the one who built the first city.

A look at the passage on Lemekh's sons, Cain's grandchildren, reveals that they are involved in creativity and progress. The first is a shepherd – not an ordinary shepherd, but “the father of all those who live in tents and keep herds.” The second is the originator of music – “the father of all those who play the harp and flute.” The third creates weapons – “who sharpened all implements of copper and iron.”

It appears that, in a certain respect, Cain's descendants possess creativity the likes of which is not found among Seth's descendants. In this respect, Cain's legacy recalls Jacob's description of Reuben, his first-born: “Exceeding in eminence and exceeding in power” (Gen. 49:3). The “eminence” that Jacob speaks of here refers to innovation. This quality does not necessarily express itself positively; after all, Cain is also the

first murderer. Nevertheless, Cain is man's first creation, Adam's firstborn son, of whom Eve says, "I have gained a man with God." In making this statement, Eve is actually exclaiming in wonderment, "I have created a human being in partnership with God!"

We don't know much about Seth's descendants, and the little information we do possess is often unclear. Regarding Enosh, one of Seth's sons, the Torah says, "It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name," and it is not at all clear whether "to invoke the Lord by name" refers to something positive or negative. Regarding Enoch, another of Seth's descendants, it says, "Then he was no more, for God took him," and here, too, midrashic opinion is divided as to *why* God took him. According to one midrash, God took him so that he should not become corrupt (Genesis Rabba 5:24). In another midrash it says that Enoch transformed into the angel Metatron (Genesis Rabbati 5:24), and elsewhere it says that he is "prince of the world" (*Tosafot*, *Hullin* 60a).

At first glance, it seems that mankind survives through the line of Seth and Noah, since Cain's line was wiped out in the Flood. However, this is not necessarily the case. There is a difference of opinion regarding the role of Naama, Lemekh's daughter. According to the Zohar, she was "the mother of the demons" (*Bereshit* 55a). In contrast, Genesis Rabba states that she was the wife of Noah (23:3). If the latter opinion is true, Cain's line did not come to an end. Rather, Noah's children, who survived the Flood, represent a continuation of both Seth's line – through their father Noah – and Cain's line – through their mother Naama. This would explain the continued existence of the "nature of Cain" as an aspect of human nature and behavior.

CREATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF ACTION

The nature of Cain is part of our makeup as human beings. What is a person's purpose in this world? To put it simply – as the text hints, "There was no man to till the soil" (Gen. 2:5) – his task is "to till it and tend it" (2:15). Man is charged with preserving the world. He is the one who must water the trees and ensure that nothing is damaged.

But surely man's task cannot be summed up as being the Garden of Eden's caretaker, to tighten loose screws and clean up spills here

and there. Man is charged with a greater mission, namely, “which God created to do (*laasot*).” Man was created to take dynamic action, not just to preserve the present state of things.

To be sure, at the conclusion of Creation it says, “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31) – the soil is “good,” the trees are “good,” the lights are “good” – but this does not mean that everything is perfect. When God creates the world, He intentionally leaves things in an incomplete state. It is as if He says, “Look, I made the pattern, but I left you several things to complete on your own.” This introduces man’s requirement “to do” – *laasot* – to take action, to become a partner, as it were, in the Creation. This is part of our essence as human beings.

Man, by his very nature, affects the world in a significant way. But it is not enough to simply maintain the world; he is also responsible for improving it. The very fact that man is capable of this demonstrates that he is also required to do so. Throughout history, our sages have disputed this subject, discussing the nature and scope of man’s role in the world. Tineius Rufus,² a Roman governor of Judea, famously challenged Rabbi Akiva on the matter of *brit mila*, asking, “What right do I have to cut off part of an organ that a person was born with?” (Tanḥuma, *Tazria* 5). Rabbi Akiva pointed to the changes that man effects on the soil. Man does not leave it in its original state. He plows it, sows it, and constantly interferes with God’s work. Man does not perform these actions merely to preserve the soil, but to improve on it as well, allowing it to yield crops that are greater in quantity and quality. Man is continually changing the order, improving nature – and this is exactly as it should be.

The same basic question arises in other contexts as well. Many have argued that seeking the services of a physician is a form of heresy. If God ordained that someone should be ill, how can you intervene and try to cure him? Likewise, if God ordained that someone should be poor, how dare you interfere with His doings? The answer is that although God indeed decides that some people should fall ill and some people should be poor, there is no requirement to preserve that reality. Man is permitted – even required – to intervene.

2. Known in the Talmud as Turnus Rufus.

Even Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who denounced physicians in the strongest terms, saying that when the Angel of Death understood that he could not kill everyone by himself, he appointed the physicians to do it for him (*Sihot HaRan* 50), did not oppose medicine per se. He himself claimed, on another occasion, that a father who does not vaccinate his son against smallpox is a murderer. Apparently, his opposition to physicians did not stem from a conception that it is forbidden to interfere with God's doings, but simply from his deep distrust of the physicians of his time. In a certain respect, he was truly justified in this distrust.

When the Torah says, "which God created to do," this means that the world is full of imperfect things. As the Midrash puts it, "Everything created during the six days of Creation requires rectification" (*Pesikta Rabbati* 23). One can always question whether the "imperfections" we encounter in life result from a defect in Creation or from the sins of human beings. But once it is clear that the thorns and thistles of life – for whatever reason – do exist, we must not abide them. We fight them, destroy them, and try to grow other things in their place.

Although none of these issues are discussed explicitly in *Parashat Bereshit*, they are present in the background of all the stories that concern Cain's line. Forging copper and iron entails a thorough transformation of the raw materials of nature – an act that only human beings are capable of undertaking. The process of refining iron and copper entails many stages, and once this is accomplished, one can then progress further, to steel and aluminum. This creativity is not limited to practical, technical areas such as mining, cutting, or chiseling. In spiritual areas as well, man acts within the world, advancing it toward perfection. Any man can sing with his own voice, but a man "who plays the harp and flute" uses the world's resources to develop aspects of humanity that extend beyond his basic existence.

THE TORAH'S ATTITUDE TO PROGRESS

Whether we like it or not, progress is always bubbling in the world. What is the proper attitude to these constant changes? There is a formula attributed to the *Hatam Sofer*: "Innovation is forbidden by the Torah." Indeed, there are many Jews who try to live by this mantra. Ultimately, however, it is notable that even Jews of the most conservative streams do

not take this opposition to innovation as far as some non-Jews do. There are some non-Jews who truly believe that innovation is forbidden – the Amish in the United States, for example, whose dress resembles that of *ḥaredi* Jews, with black hats and black garments. They abstain from technology almost entirely, do not travel in cars, and use no mechanical tools. They work the land, build their own houses – all in the old-fashioned manner. They do this because they believe, simply, that all innovation is a product of the devil. Some object to airplanes, reasoning: If God had wanted human beings to fly, He would have created them with wings. This is an excellent rationale, but I do not know of any Jew – neither from the *Edah HaḤaredit* nor from the *Neturei Karta* – who refuses to fly because of it. Jews do not express their opposition to innovation in this way. In general, even those of us who claim to refuse innovation will not hesitate to benefit from the innovations of others. The permissibility of using electricity on Shabbat can be debated from various angles, but no one contests its use during the week.

A God-fearing individual need not necessarily fear the “new”; he need not necessarily feel that it is his duty to fight against new things and protest them. On the contrary, we believe that if “God created to do,” then our duty is to improve and perfect the work of God in the world. God says, “I finished My work; now it is your turn.”

Life is full of problems. This reality is an essential and built-in part of life. It is not merely a local problem, such as whether to wear leather belts or what to do on a rainy day; it is a question of approach: How should we deal with matters that require attention and rectification? Adam was told, “Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you” (Gen. 3:18). If a person sows in the ground, and thorns and thistles grow instead of his desired crop, he must ask himself: What should I do with this problem? This is an essential question, one that is not connected to external conditions or to advantages that some people may have over others, but only to how each person decides to deal with the problems that arise in life.

FEAR OF SIN TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER WISDOM

Nowadays, when the power and the tools that man possesses are incomparably superior to those of the past, the question of how they should be utilized becomes critical. Our forebears never could have imagined

what is available to us today. Once, for example, not everyone could be expected to know thousands of books by heart, whereas today we possess machines that put all these books at our fingertips, besides affording many other possibilities. This progress merely accentuates the imperative and the urgency of the question: What must be done with these tools? How can we exploit them to their fullest?

Here, however, a different side of progress presents itself. Many of the awful things in the world today exist as a result of technology. This is not because the tool itself is awful, but because its use was perverted. Today, everyone has more free time, but few people utilize this time properly. There are countless examples of things that once could not be done but now are possible. But what are we doing with all these possibilities? Are we improving the world with these new opportunities, or abusing them?

Deuteronomy 32:18 can be expounded as follows: "You neglected the Rock that begot you" – the Rock, God, created you with the capacity to forget, so that you should not remember everything that happens to you. We experience trouble, pain, and suffering. God was concerned that all this would weigh down on us, so He created in us the ability to forget. Yet what did people do? The verse concludes, "forgot the Lord who brought you forth." God created you with the capacity to forget things that you don't need to remember, but instead you forget God Himself.

Our sages say of David and Bathsheba, "She was intended for David... only that he took her before she was ripe" (Sanhedrin 107a). The same applies to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge as well. Adam took it before it was given to him, before the proper time had come, like an unripe fig. According to this interpretation, the tree and its fruit were actually intended for Adam; it was only prohibited to eat from it because the proper time had not yet come: Either the man was not yet ready, or the fruit was not yet ripe. The assumption is that there was an order to the world, a plan as to how things were supposed to unfold, and it went awry. There are certain things that, when experienced at the right time, can be beneficial, but when experienced at the improper time can be damaging.

In light of this, we must ask today whether the world is running too fast. Is it progressing beyond all proportion? The human race now has

tremendous power, primarily the power to destroy, on a scale that was unattainable to earlier generations. Do people today have more power than they require? Is it more than we can handle? Is our power greater than our ability to judge how to use that power? Is it possible that we are eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge when it is not yet ripe?

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* criticizes the person “whose wisdom is greater than his deeds” (3:17). This is not a repudiation of wisdom, but merely a safeguard: If a person does not want wisdom to affect him like a “deadly poison,” he must always apply it. To be sure, no matter how much one applies his wisdom, it is never enough; one must always progress and improve. The Talmud in Ketubbot 50a advises teachers of young children that once a pupil has reached the age of six, “stuff him like an ox,” i.e., feed him as much knowledge as possible. At the same time, however, a person’s fear of sin should take precedence over his wisdom – his wisdom must never exceed his ability to use it.

Noah

CRITICIZING NOAH

Rashi's comment on the first verse in the *parasha* – “Noah was a righteous man, pious in his generation” (Gen. 6:9) – is a bit puzzling: “Some interpret it to his credit ... while others interpret it to his discredit.” If the verse can be interpreted to Noah's credit, why would Rashi, echoing our sages, interpret it to his discredit?

Noah appears at the end of *Parashat Bereshit* as the world's great hope. The world is rife with criminals and thieves, and only one man exists who stands out in his generation: “But Noah found favor in God's sight” (Gen. 6:8). Even Noah's name attests to this assessment: “This one will bring us relief (*yenahamenu*)” (5:29). This is a child who is born amidst great hope. But Noah – despite all the praise, and although he spoke with God and was close to Him – ultimately reaches a state in which his character is interpreted negatively.

It seems clear that this negative assessment of Noah cannot be completely negative, as it would be very difficult to claim that everything he did was bad. Rather, Noah can be seen as a negative character when held up to the standard of Abraham. In other words, when our sages interpreted Noah negatively, it was not so much to discredit him but to emphasize Abraham's worthiness.