

בראשית | GENESIS

A PARSHA COMPANION



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Rabbi David Fohrman



Genesis: A Parsha Companion

First edition, 2019

Aleph Beta Press

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Maggid Books

An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

PO Box 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA

& PO Box 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel

www.maggidbooks.com

© 2019 by The Hoffberger Institute for Text Study, Inc.

Book design by Cory Rockliff

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ISBN 978-1-59264-544-2 (hardcover)

A CIP catalog record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

The *Parsha Companion* series
is reverently dedicated by

Ronny & Toby Hersh

in memory of their parents

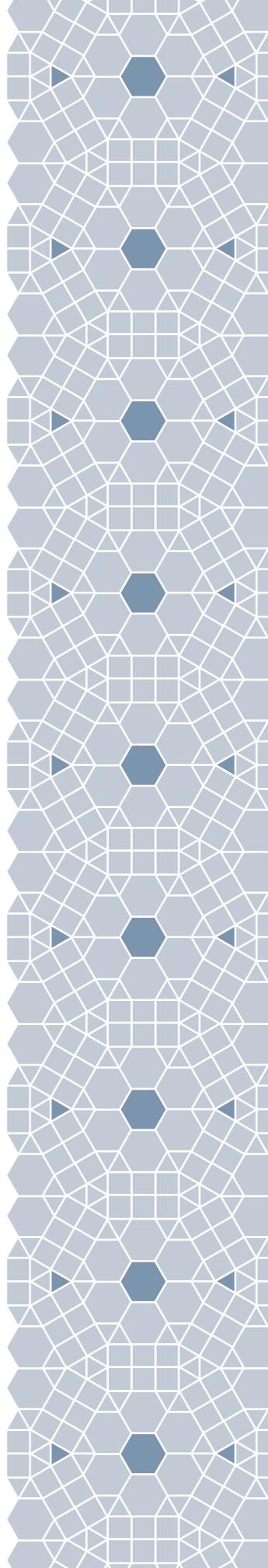
אברהם בן אהרן הלוי ז"ל
אסתר בת אברהם יהושע ז"ל

Abraham & Esther Hersh ז"ל

שמואל משה בן פסח יוסף ז"ל
חיה רבקה בת צירל ז"ל

Moshe & Rivka Zytelny ז"ל

and the many among their family
who perished in the Shoah



About Our Parents

Our parents surmounted great tragedy and hardship to live exemplary lives. They loved us, nourished us, and sacrificed much to help us flourish and become committed Jews. In their example, we saw sacred values of the Torah brought to life. We live in the shadow of their deeds.

ABRAHAM AND ESTHER HERSH hailed originally from the Carpathian mountains. They were both survivors of Auschwitz, and they met after the war in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Shortly thereafter, they made their way from the ashes of Europe to the Land of Israel, where Abraham fought in Israel's War of Independence. He was a fierce lover of both the land and the Torah of Israel. Together, Abraham and Esther lived difficult lives but, through it all, somehow always maintained a deep faith in Hashem. Their strong values — commitment to family and to Judaism, and an abiding love of the State of Israel and the Jewish people — made powerful impressions upon their children.

RABBI MOSHE AND RIVKA ZYTELNY made their way from Europe to America. Toby's father was, in his younger years, a yeshiva bachur in Kletzk. Before Lakewood was a gleam in the eye of history, he became a close student of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, and a *chevrusa* of his son, Rabbi Shneur. He escaped the ravages of war by heading, with his yeshiva, first to Siberia and then to Kazakhstan, where he met his wife, Rivka. The couple moved from Kazakhstan to France — and all this time, despite war and constant upheaval, Rabbi Aharon remained like a father to him. To this day, Ronny and Toby cherish letters in their possession that Rabbi Aharon sent to Rabbi Moshe in France, advising him on major life decisions. Eventually, Rabbi Moshe and Rivka came to America, where he rejoined his rebbe and yeshiva in Lakewood. There, he became part of an unlikely success story, as he helped reestablish a vibrant center of Torah on new and distant shores. All in all, Moshe was the only one in his entire immediate family to survive the war. Together, he and Rivka raised seven children.

Our parents lived through harrowing times and emerged with a steely, strengthened faith; they sacrificed much to pass on their vibrant heritage. We remember them with love, and are honored to carry their legacy forward.

Ronny & Toby Hersh

The Bereishit volume of the *Parsha Companion* is lovingly dedicated by

**Barbara & Tuvia Levkovich
Zahava & Alan Goldschmidt,
Gabrielle and Ava**

Arel Levkovich

**Talia & Akiva Fried,
Lielle and Adina**

IN MEMORY OF

גדליה בן ישעיה אבא וממציא ז"ל

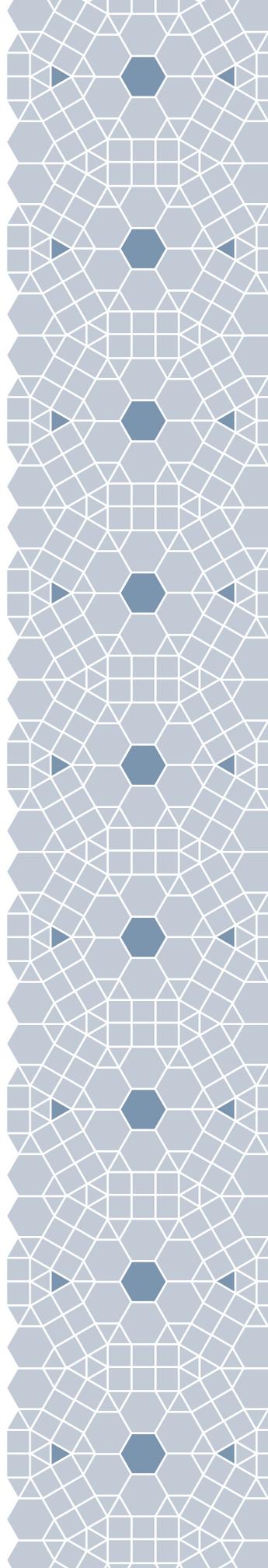
Jerry Pinsky

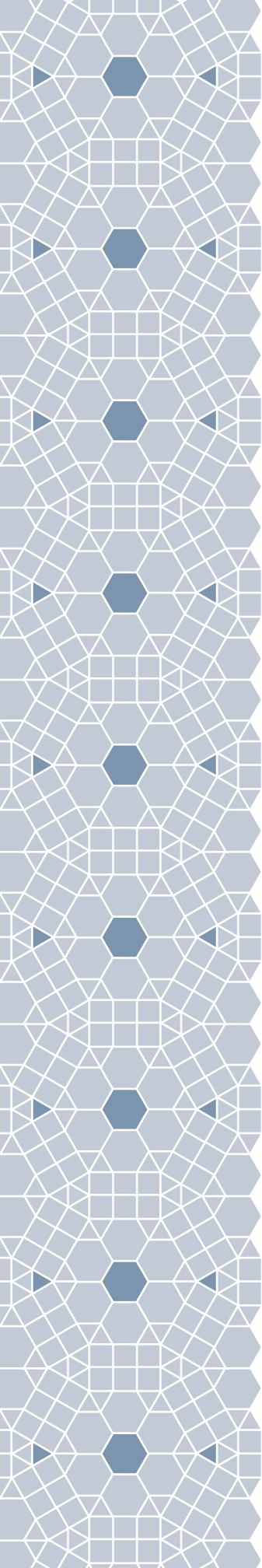
יבדלח"א

IN HONOR OF

יוסף בן שמחה ושיינדל נ"י

José Levkovich





About Our Fathers

OUR FATHERS, GRANDFATHERS & GREAT-GRANDFATHERS

raised us to cherish Torah, to live by its mitzvot and by its ideals, and to understand that Torah is not just to be learned, but loved—and passed on. With admiration and profound gratitude, we lovingly dedicate this volume to them.

JERRY PINSKY, *zichrono livracha*, Barbara's father, was a stalwart of the Jewish community for many years. He was among the initial group of people who helped get the Young Israel of Woodmere off the ground, serving on its board and helping wherever necessary. Over the years, he and Barbara's mother, Sandy, *aleiha hashalom*, became diligent advocates for inclusivity in Jewish education and were founders of P'tach. Over the course of his life, he loved and lost, burying Sandy and two beloved children, Linda and Morris — but he somehow bore those tragic losses with a quiet grace and dignity.

Jerry served his community institutions humbly and without fanfare, and he brought wisdom and impeccable honesty to that service. He was *kove'a itim* to Torah, practiced *chesed*, and demonstrated integrity in all his actions. His commitment to the *klal*, and the devotion and dedication he brought to that work, will always serve as a powerful example to his children, and to his family as a whole. He married again, and spent the last twenty years of his life with Jinny, dividing their time between Woodmere and Jerusalem over the last few years, underscoring their love of Eretz Yisrael. Jerry will be missed sorely by his family for his gentle disposition, his humor, and his great big heart.

JOSÉ LEVKOVICH, Tuvia's father, spent much of World War II quarrying stone in Mauthausen, an Austrian slave-labor and concentration camp. In the camp, he briefly became a part-time servant of a German officer, allowing him to steal some food and other essentials to bring back to his grateful, starving compatriots. One of the SS

officers he suffered under during those years was Amon Goeth, the sadistic SS commandant of the Płaszów concentration camp, whose monstrous persona became well known through Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. After the war, when Goeth had been captured, he was pretending to be a Wehrmacht soldier to conceal his true role in the Holocaust. José identified Goeth for who he really was and testified at the tribunal that convicted him. Goeth was subsequently hanged for his crimes.

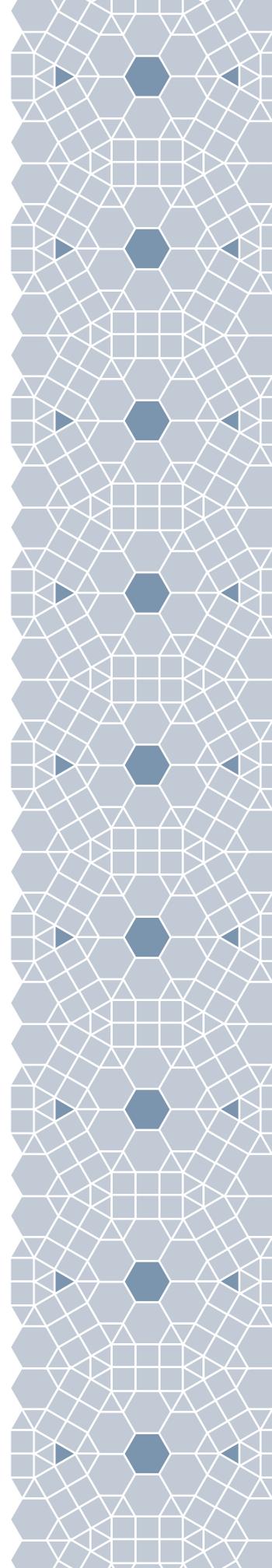
But it wasn't just SS officers José helped identify. After the war, José went back to Europe, bearing with him lists of lost children from local Jewish committees. Some of these children were scattered in the countryside, living with gentiles who took them in, and José sought to find them and reunite them with family members. In some cases, families would not easily give up the children, leading to sometimes dangerous battles. After raising his own family in Bogotá, Columbia, and then Montreal, Canada, and the passing of his dear wife, Perla, z"l, José made *aliyah* on his eighty-eighth birthday. José's strength and resolve in the service of noble causes continue to be an inspiration to his children and grandchildren.

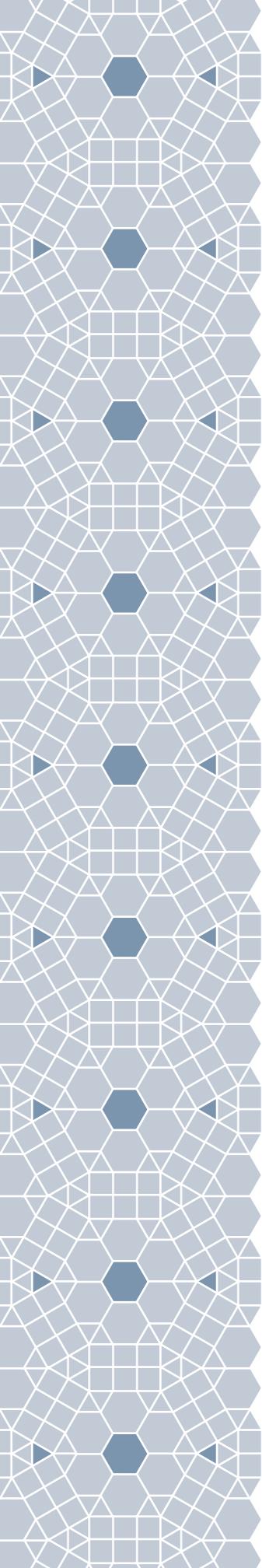
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We gratefully acknowledge the following patrons who, with generosity and vision, have dedicated individual volumes of this *Parsha Companion* series:

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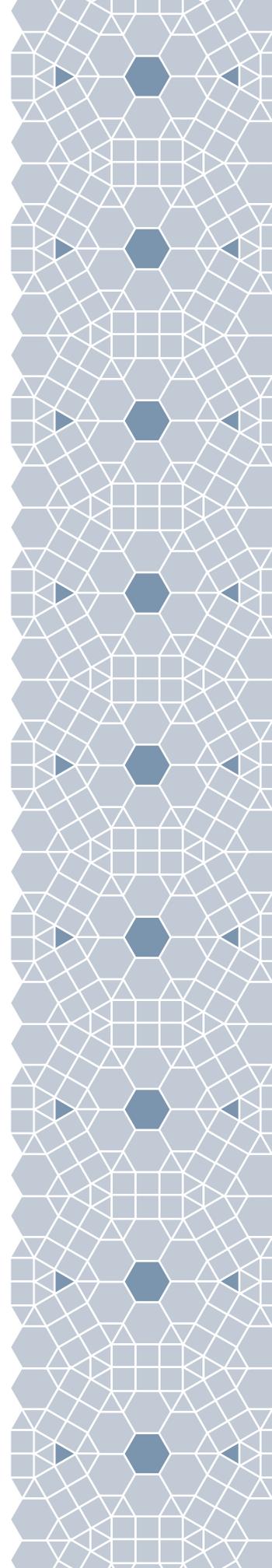
Andrew & Terri Herenstein

We also wish to acknowledge the

Legacy Heritage Fund

which provided a generous grant to help
make this series of books possible.

LEGACY HERITAGE FUND



Contents

Some Words of Appreciation xvii

Introduction 1

בְּרֵאשִׁית

BEREISHIT

Does Man “Acquire” Woman? 7

נֹחַ

NOACH

Apocalypse Plow: Noah & the End of the World 17

לֶךְ-לְךָ

LECH LECHA

Covenant with God 31

וַיִּירָא

VAYEIRA

What Kind of Test Was the *Akeidah*? 61

חַיֵּי שָׂרָה

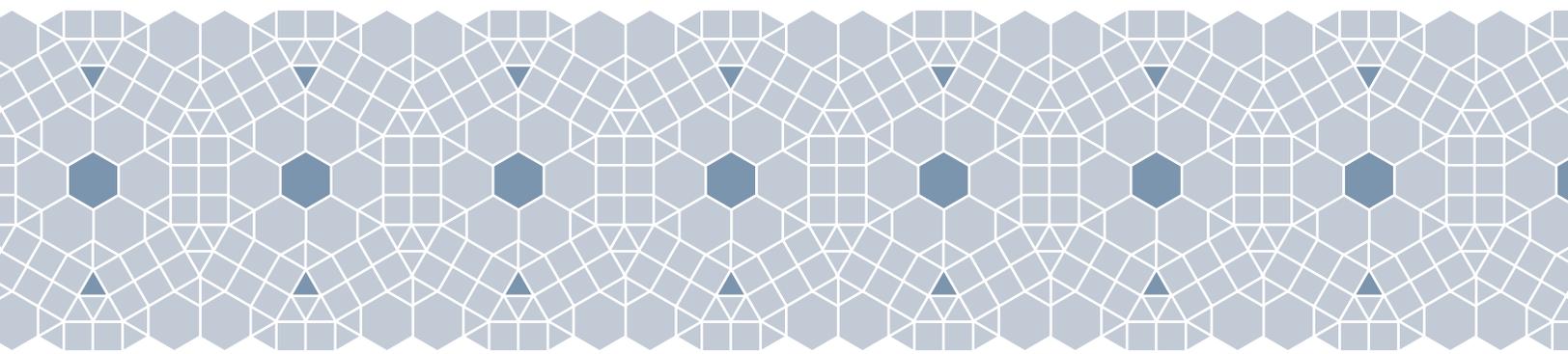
CHAYEI SARAH

What Makes for an Extraordinary Life? 79

תּוֹלְדוֹת

TOLDOT

If You Were Rebecca’s Lawyer 91



וַיַּצֵּא

VAYEITZEI

Jacob Meets Rachel — and Cries? 115

וַיִּשְׁלַח

VAYISHLACH

Jacob, Esther & the Hypotenuse of Hope 129

וַיֵּשֶׁב

VAYEISHEV

The Greatest Crime That Never Happened? 143

מִקֵּץ

MIKETZ

Why Didn't Joseph Write Home? 167

וַיִּגַּשׁ

VAYIGASH I

The Timeless Echo of Judah's Plea 177

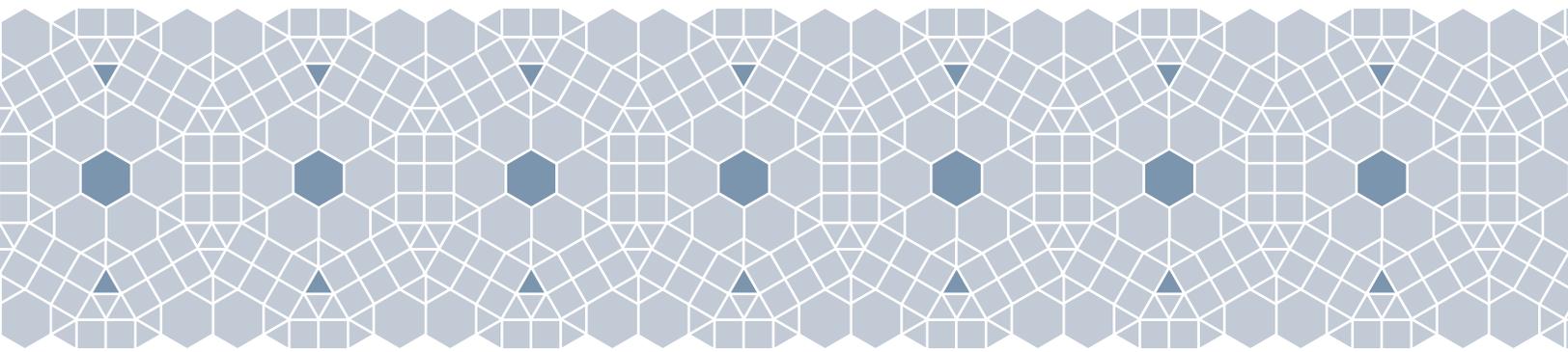
VAYIGASH II

Jacob, Joseph & the Echoes of Eden 191

וַיַּחֲדִי

VAYECHI

The Fence of Thorns 205



Some Words of Appreciation

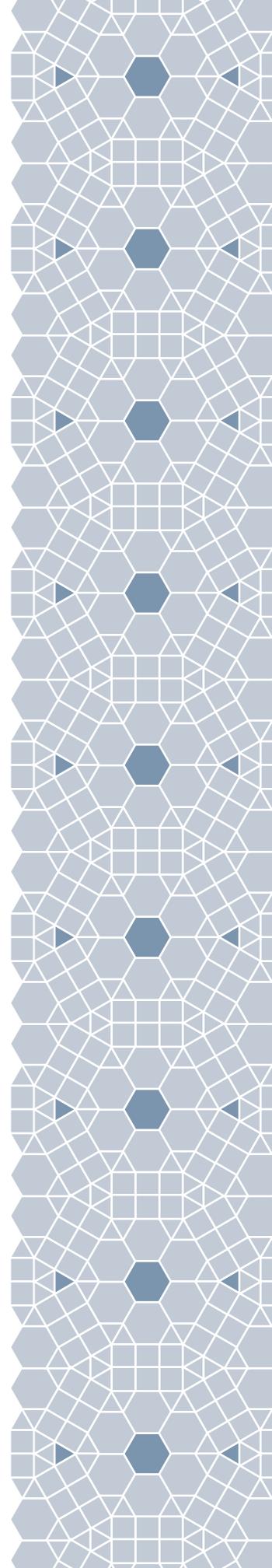
CREATING THIS BOOK has been quite a journey for me. But that journey has not been a solitary endeavor, by any stretch of the imagination. I am in debt to a wonderful motley crew of partners, whose care, attention, generosity, and wisdom helped transform mere ruminations into the volume you hold in your hands.

Chief among those partners are Ronny and Toby Hersh, the “anchor patrons” of this five-volume series of books. I originally met Ronny and Toby when they joined the Woodmere community a couple of years ago. Since then, Ronny and I have enjoyed delving into the weekly parsha on Shabbat afternoons. Ronny’s enthusiasm and joy in connecting deeply with the text is palpable, and we savored the delight of discovering new vistas in Torah together. In dedicating these volumes, Ronny and Toby are, in a way, opening up those study sessions to a much wider audience. If, reading these books, you too experience some of that thrill and joy in learning Torah, Ronny, Toby, and I will consider ourselves very richly rewarded.

Ronny and Toby have dedicated this series to the memory of their parents, Abraham and Esther Hersh, *z”l*, and Moshe and Rivka Zytelny, *z”l*, whose own personal stories were great journeys in their own right. I am deeply honored that this series of volumes bears their name. I hope it will prove a worthy continuation of their legacy.

This particular volume of the series (essays on Bereishit) has been generously sponsored by Barbara and Tuvia Levkovich and their children. One of the things that stands out about Barbara and Tuvia is their palpable belief that what really lends surpassing meaning to their lives, above and beyond their own personal or professional accomplishments, is the sense that they’ve become an effective bridge between generations. They’ve distilled values, beliefs, and ways of living that they saw in their parents, and passed them on to their children — and now, grandchildren.

In an expression of that belief, the Levkovich family has dedicated this volume in honor of Tuvia and Barbara’s respective fathers. Tuvia’s father, José, is still living; Barbara’s father, Jerry, *z”l*, has recently passed



away. Each has inspired successive generations of their descendants in profound ways. An appreciation of each appears a couple pages earlier in this volume. Take some time to read them; you'll be fascinated, and maybe even touched too.

I'd also like to express my profound appreciation to the Legacy Heritage Fund, which provided a generous grant that made this series of books possible. The foundation focuses much of its effort on supporting Jewish day schools in innovative and trendsetting ways. I am honored that the Legacy Heritage Fund has chosen to include this series of books among the many worthy projects they've chosen to support.

An author writes, but writing alone does not magically produce a book. Many others have helped take mere words and craft out of those words the book that you hold in your hands. I am greatly indebted to these good folks, so let me introduce you to them:

Shoshana Brody edited, proofread, and managed the production of this volume. She spent many painstaking hours working assiduously on each essay, refining ideas, challenging assumptions, and eliminating any trace of fluff or redundancy she could find in the writing. Each essay in this collection is manifestly better for her involvement. In addition to her editing and proofreading contributions, Shoshana also capably managed the dizzying administrative workflow associated with the book's production.

Shoshana was assisted in her efforts by Beth Lesch and Raquel Alfandari. Beth went through the entire manuscript, giving it another round of editing and proofreading, and also helped Shoshana coordinate administrative support. Her clear thinking and attention to detail helped enrich the essays and make them stronger. Raquel assisted in administration, and also read sections of the manuscript, contributing valuable comments and perspective.

Beyond Shoshana, Beth, and Raquel, other editors for this volume were Immanuel Shalev, Daniel Loewenstein, and Rivky Stern. Immanuel helped provide an important "50,000-foot view" of each essay, and lavished important attention on overall flow, style, introductions, and conclusions. His talent for finding potential weak links in arguments is a wonder to behold, and was an invaluable asset to me. Daniel's easy way with words helped enrich a number of pieces, including what I think of as one of the real gems of this volume: a rather complex piece on **Parshat Vayeishev**

that helps elucidate Rashbam's view of the sale of Joseph. Rivky reviewed just about the entire manuscript, and her sharp eye for detail and nuance improved it throughout.

Rabbis Eli Rafal and Elinatan Kupferberg contributed valuable research to this volume, combining near-encyclopedic knowledge of classic biblical exegesis with keen and seasoned judgment. Their work helped provide context for many of the essays, allowing more advanced readers to see how a given idea I propose "fits," interacting with or playing off of various writings of classical biblical commentators.

I am grateful to all those outside the orbit of the Aleph Beta office who also gave of their time to read through essays and provide important feedback. These include Zach Beer, Marc Bodner, Etta Brandman, Alan Broder, Avram Cooperman, David Curwin, Ethan Davidson, Jeremy England, Mark Gerson, Micah Gimpel, Bruce Greenstein, David Hamburger, Terri Herenstein, Sima Hertzberg, Steve Kowarsky, Carrie Lenga, Eli Mayerfeld, Robbie Rothenberg, Glenn Schoenfeld, Dani Schreiber, Daniel Schwartz, my son-in-law Yosef Segal, Esther Sutofsky, Phillip Ullman, Barry Waldman, and Esther Wein. Thanks to all of you for giving of your time, and providing to me your many prescient comments and insights.

The beautiful cover design, illustrations, and layout were created by Cory Rockliff, who typeset the volume and crafted all things related to its aesthetic presentation. Cory is the rare typesetter who also proofreads and edits; in my case, I was fortunate to have him serve as the last line of defense against errors, awkward wording, and all sorts of other sundry mishaps.

I also want to acknowledge those who stood behind this volume in other ways. LeRoy Hoffberger, *z"l*, was an incredibly important figure in my life. He was an early "student" of mine in a course I gave at Johns Hopkins University, and from then on, he never left my side. He founded the Hoffberger Institute for Text Study, which has supported my research, teaching, and writing for years now. Beyond that, he was also a great friend and *chevrusa* for me. Although I met him when he was already in his later years, he still had a kind of boyish delight in the beauty and intricacies of Torah thought. He left this world several years ago; I miss him terribly, but I continue to feel his presence in my work.

My *rosh yeshiva* at the Ner Israel yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, *z"l*, introduced me to the joy and depth to be found in the deceptive simplicity

of *pshat*, and Rabbis Tzvi Berkowitz and Ezra Neuberger, also of Ner Israel, reinforced that invaluable perspective. I also want to thank Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, *z"l*, for the time he spent with me reviewing and analyzing ideas in Genesis, and for his encouragement to teach the material I'd developed (and the methodological approach that underlies it) as far and as widely as possible.

Many of the ideas in this book on Genesis had their *own* genesis, as it were, in parsha videos I created with the help and support of the amazing team at Aleph Beta (you can find those videos at www.alephbeta.org). I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge, with gratitude, the folks behind the scene who make Aleph Beta's success a reality: its founders, board of directors, and officers. They are Kutzy Shalev, Robbie Rothenberg, Steve Wagner, Etta Brandman, Daniel Schwartz, Donny Rosenberg, Alan Broder, David Pollack, and David Hamburger, along with Jeff Haskell and Josh Malin.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family. My wife, Reena, is a wonderful, faithful partner in the greatest journey of all. As part of that journey together, we've raised seven wonderful children. How do you ever adequately say thanks for all that? She and my kids — Moshe, Shalva, Avigail, Shana, Yael, Ariella, and Avichai — have participated in shaping this book more than they might imagine, for they are *my* "parsha companions." Many of the ideas contained in these pages were born, shaped, or refined in animated discussions with them around the Shabbos table. For me, there's nothing like the thrill of pulling out our *chumashim* between the main course and dessert on Shabbos afternoon and starting a journey of discovery together. Continuing to learn Torah with my family is a constant opportunity to talk about things that matter deeply with the people I care about the most — and what could be better than that?

Rabbi David Fohrman

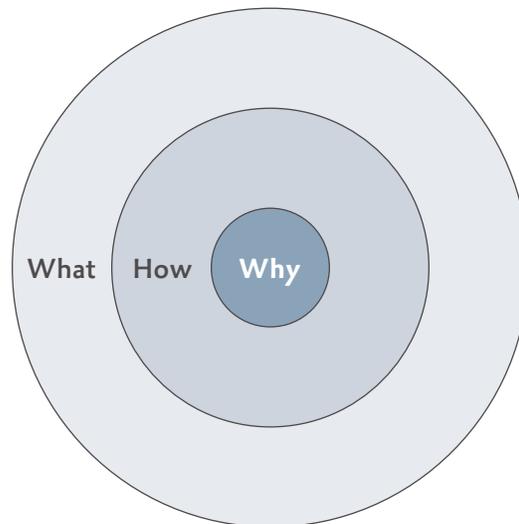
Inwood, NY
September 2019

Introduction

THE BOOK YOU HAVE in your hands is entitled *A Parsha Companion*. It will, I hope, be what its name implies: a faithful and engaging companion to you as you encounter the weekly parsha. That's *what* I hope this book will be, but it's not the most important thing I have to say in introducing this volume to you. There's also a *how*. And more importantly, there's a *why*.

The Power of Why

“What?” “How?” “Why?”—I once came across a short talk by Simon Sinek that meditated upon the relationship between these three simple words. He made the argument that whenever a person or a company does something, you can imagine three concentric circles:



Every company, Sinek argues, knows *what* it is that they do: if I'm Apple, I know I make computers. Some companies also know *how* they do what they do: they can articulate, clearly and cogently, the process by which they go about things. But only a very few companies, he argues, know *why* they do what they do. What vision, exactly, compels them? What dream do they have that they are trying to achieve?

The most compelling thing a company or a person can do, Sinek argues, is to try and articulate that “why” and communicate it to others. Apple makes computers, yes, but their logo — the apple with a bite taken out of it — contains something of the subversive “why” Steve Jobs sought to cultivate: a commitment to rebel, just a bit, against conventional wisdom, with faint memories of the Tree of Knowledge; to “think different,” in the words of their advertising slogan, and to express that way of thinking in the products the company makes. Martin Luther King Jr.’s most captivating speech wasn’t his “I Have a Plan” speech; it was his “I Have a Dream” speech. In it, he shared his deepest-held beliefs, all the “whys,” the hopes and dreams that animated all the “whats” he did, that gave reason and meaning to all the “hows” by which he did it. Without the “why,” nothing else really matters.

Recently, I started thinking about Sinek’s point in relation to my own work. For years now, I’ve been studying and teaching Torah. That’s *what* I’ve been doing. There’s a particular methodology I’ve been using — that’s the “how.” But what about the “why”? Why have I been doing this for all these years? What do I hope people will get from these efforts?

The answer, I think, has to do with what I *myself* have gotten from these efforts. It’s something precious, and it’s something I want to share. It can be summarized in a single, hard-to-pin-down word: *love*.

The Trees and the Forest

Love was pretty far from my mind back in grade school, when I was first exposed to Torah study. The way I was taught back then went kind of like this: you start, say, with a verse. God tells Abraham to go and leave his birthplace for a land that God will show him. It’s a very nice verse. It seems intuitively understandable. But then you learn that it’s not so simple. Rashi has one view of the verse, Sforno has a different view, and Ramban sees the whole thing in an entirely different way. Moreover, Rashi’s view of the verse isn’t really so clear: Mizrachi thinks Rashi means one thing; *Siftei Chachamim* thinks Rashi means something else. And did we forget about Hirsch? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has his own, unique way of interpreting all these words. OK, got all that? Great. Let’s go on to the next verse, and we’ll do it all again. At the end of the week, we’ll have a quiz, and at the end of the month, a test.

It felt like you had to be really smart, really good at remembering lots of details, just to keep pace. Now, don't get me wrong: learning the Rishonim is important; these sainted commentators were brilliant interpreters of the text, and they are a crucial part of our tradition. But somehow, I was getting lost on the simplest of questions, like "What does the story, as a whole, *mean*?" I'm reading the story of Yehudah and Tamar in Genesis 38, and I can tell you why there might be three extra words in the third verse according to *Ohr HaChaim*, but somehow I'm hard-pressed to tell you anything about what the story is trying to *teach* me, what the story is doing there, interrupting the Joseph saga so blatantly. I was seeing a lot of trees, but somehow, the forest was passing me by.

Eventually, in an effort to regain my footing, I tried a bit of an experiment: I tried getting back to basics, as it were. These commentators of generations past — Rashi, Ramban, Sforno, Malbim, Hirsch, and others — all had the same starting point, it seemed to me: they read the text of the Torah carefully and made their best attempt to understand what was going on. Whatever else these greats were doing, they certainly *started* with that first, basic step. Nowadays, we call this basic reading comprehension. Moreover, not only did they do that themselves, they must have expected their readers to do that too. You wouldn't read a commentary on a text before reading the text itself, would you? So if that's the case, I found myself thinking, maybe I should just start there: let me clear my mind of everything else I thought I knew, go back to the basic text of the Torah, take a deep breath, and try to read it carefully.

In practice — wouldn't you know it? — I found that this wasn't so easy. Having read the stories of the Torah over and over again, it's not the simplest thing in the world to clear your mind, forget everything you know about them, and read them afresh, paying close attention to the words without leaping to conclusions. But gradually, I got better at it. I found that there was a deceptively simple set of tools — little games, almost — that were helpful in the process. You could look at a set of laws and play "Which of these things is not like the other?" You could read a story and stop half-way through, trying to guess the ending, playing "What happens next?" — and then go back and notice how very different the actual ending is from the ending you would have predicted. You could take a biblical story, pay close attention to the words, and play "Where have we heard these words before?" identifying in this story an uncanny echo of an earlier one, or

a foreshadowing of a later one. All of these “games” are things little kids learn to do on *Sesame Street*. I began to find that everything you needed to know to start learning Torah, you learned in kindergarten.

Over time, I began to discover something that caught me by surprise: this “basic reading comprehension” was yielding results that weren’t so “basic.” It was helping to open up the deeper meaning of stories for me in entirely unexpected ways. It was as if, just under the surface of the Torah’s most familiar stories, lay whole other layers of meaning, just waiting to be discovered — and these basic reading techniques were the spades, chisels, and brushes that helped me carefully lay bare some of these layers. And as I began to poke around still further, I began to realize that I wasn’t the first to see any of this! The ancient rabbis of the Midrash, in their own inimitable way, had pointed to many of these deeper themes thousands of years ago. It was as if, concentrating on these kindergarten basics, I was rediscovering elements of an ancient but powerful methodology for approaching our most sacred texts.

Eventually, I began to notice something else: all this was changing me. It wasn’t just that I was starting to *understand* the text better, or even learn its lessons better. It was something beyond that. I found myself kindling a romance with the Torah’s text. I found myself falling in love with this book.

Who Falls in Love with a Book?

It’s a strange sensation, to fall in love with a book, but that’s what was happening. There was something . . . special about this text. Of course, on some level it sounds silly to say that — as an observant Jew, I always held the Torah to be sacred, to be a divine work. But it’s one thing to *believe* that a sacred text is unique and special, and another to *see* that with your own eyes. I found that I didn’t need to be preached at to believe there was something deeply sacred in this work. If I just sat down and *read* it, the text would invariably leave me with something unexpectedly profound, and along the way, with a wink and a nod, it would find a way to remind me that this was no ordinary book. Its layers of meaning would dazzle me.

I had an interesting experience along these lines a number of years ago, back when I was teaching a non-credit class on the book of Genesis at Johns Hopkins University. I had been modeling the basic technique I described above: clear your mind, start fresh, ask the basic questions, sift the text for clues, observe the language carefully — and let the larger

picture the text is painting slowly reveal itself. As I was about to begin the sixteenth and last class, someone in the back of the room — Jerry, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine — raised his hand and asked, “Could you say a few words about the authorship of the Bible?”

Truth be told, the question of authorship was something I had been assiduously avoiding in that class. It just didn’t seem appropriate to bring it up. Here I was, an observant Jew, teaching under the aegis of Johns Hopkins, a secular university. While I had my own religious convictions about the Bible being a divine work, this wasn’t something I was keen to share with students there. They weren’t coming to be preached to; they were coming to learn. So my approach was to take the question of authorship pretty much off the table. One way or the other, I had told them, the Bible is the greatest bestseller in the history of the world. There’s got to be a reason for that. Let’s study the text and see what we make of it.

But now Jerry was threatening to blow my cover. I hesitated a bit in answering him. To buy a little time, I asked him to clarify. He responded, “Well, I had always learned that the Bible was put together by a scattershot collection of authors. There was an E author and a J author, Isaiah found Deuteronomy, there was maybe a priestly author, too, and then all this was kind of pieced together by some redactors,” he said. “But I’m having a hard time seeing how that could possibly be so. I mean, it’s all so *interconnected*. The word patterns and structural features of Genesis are woven into those in the book of Numbers, which are woven into those in Exodus. It all seems so amazingly . . . unified. I don’t see how more than one author could have possibly written this!”

I turned around and joked to the class that I didn’t even pay Jerry to say that, and we all moved on. But Jerry’s comment taught me something: it wasn’t just *me* who noticed what was special about this book. The people in that classroom — my fellow explorers in this journey through the biblical text — saw it too. Despite my best attempt to remain mute about what I saw as the sacred quality of the Bible, what was special and uncanny about this book was shining through. There, in a nondescript room in Shaffer Hall, the text had begun to work its magic on a disparate group of students from backgrounds as diverse as you could possibly imagine. They were beginning to fall in love with this book too.

That sense of romance is what I want to try and share with you here in this book. More than anything else you get out of reading this *Parsha Companion*, above and beyond any particular insight you may perceive, or

any methodological tool you might glean, I hope you get this: a sense of wonder and adoration for this shared treasure we have in our possession, the Torah.

The thing with adoration, though, is that it's ephemeral — and it's something not easily communicated directly. After all, how interested are you in listening to someone swooning over the wonderful qualities of their beloved girlfriend or boyfriend, wife or husband? A person in love *can't stop talking* about their beloved. They'll happily chew your ear off for what seems like hours. But most listeners . . . well, after a while, they'll just roll their eyes. Give them any chance to change the topic, and they'll take it.

I don't want to make that mistake with you. I don't want to preach to you, lecturing you on how special the Bible is. I just want to . . . learn with you. I want to embark on a shared adventure with you.

Come with me. Let's give it a whirl.

The Limits of Objectivity

The essays you'll find in this book are written a little differently from many expository treatments of Torah. Usually, an essay is written to make a point. Objectivity is prized; cogent, ruthless thinking is paramount. And to some extent, that remains true in this book: I *do* want to make a point and argue a case. But I'm also trying to do something else: I'm trying to share with you what some of these narratives mean to *me*, and why. My tone — often conversational, sometimes personal — will reflect that, or is meant to. I'm not so much making an argument here as inviting you to think along with me, to discover along with me. I'll end each essay with something of a meditation on what this all means to me. Perhaps it will resonate with you, or perhaps you'll find that to *you*, it means something altogether different. The Torah has a way of allowing for multiple perspectives, each worthy of contemplation. So if you travel along with me, rest assured that if you find yourself at odds with my conclusions, I'll be just as thrilled as if you find yourself nodding in agreement with my every word.

BEREISHIT

Does Man “Acquire” Woman?

זאת הפעם עצם מעצמי
ובשר מבשרי לזאת
יקרא אשה כי מאיש
לקחה-זאת:

This time, it is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh. This one shall
be called *ishah* [woman] because
this one was taken from *ish* [man].

GENESIS 2:23

BEREISHIT

Does Man “Acquire” Woman?

I WANT TO GRAPPLE with something that is perhaps just a tad controversial, what would seem to be a decidedly un-egalitarian aspect of traditional Jewish marriage. The issue stands out pretty clearly in the opening words of the first mishnah of tractate Kiddushin:

הָאִשָּׁה נִקְנִית בְּשָׁלֹשׁ דְּרָכִים A woman is acquired in three ways

Mishnah
Kiddushin 1:1

The mishnaic text here is characterizing marriage (or to be more precise, *kiddushin*, or betrothal — the first stage of marriage) as an act of *acquisition* of a woman undertaken by a man.¹ Now, doesn't that make you cringe a little? It almost sounds as if a woman is being treated as mere chattel, like she's some kind of object that can be *bought*. Is that what we think is happening under the chuppah? That romantic moment when the bride circles the groom seven times, when her eyes meet his over a gleaming goblet of wine, when the crowd hushes as he gingerly slips a ring over her finger ... What is he doing right then? Is he really “acquiring” her? A man buys himself a carton of milk, a pair of shoes ... but a *wife*? Is that *really* the Torah's understanding of marriage?

An answer to this vexing conundrum can, I believe, be found in **Parshat Bereishit**, where the Torah describes what is arguably the first marriage in the history of the world, that between Adam and Eve. Let's take a look at that text together.

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- 1 The mishnah is based on Deuteronomy 24:1, which also describes marriage using the language of “acquisition”: כִּי־יִקַּח אִישׁ אִשָּׁה וּבָעֻלָּהּ, “When a man *takes* a wife and marries her ...”

The Dating Game

What is the story of Adam and Eve’s courtship? It’s unconventional, to say the least. After bringing Adam into the world, God assesses His new creation and concludes:

Genesis 2:18

לֹא־טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ
אֶעֱשֶׂה־לוֹ עֶזְרָא בְּנִגְדּוֹ:

It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate for him.

Now, imagine that you’re God. You’ve just created man, and you’ve decided that he shouldn’t be alone. He needs some kind of companion. What would you do next? *This would be a good time to create Eve, wouldn’t it?* But that’s not what God does. Instead, the world’s first romance takes a decidedly unromantic turn. God decides to create some animals:

Genesis 2:19

וַיִּצַר יְקוּהָ אֱלֹקִים מִן־הָאָדָמָה
כָּל־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף
הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְבִא אֶל־הָאָדָם
לְרִאוֹת מֵה־יִקְרָא־לוֹ וְכֹל
אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא־לוֹ הָאָדָם נִפְשׁ
חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man would call every living creature, that was to be its name.

The Almighty takes this opportunity to create a whole menagerie, every beast of the field and every fowl of the air. The Lord then parades each animal before Adam to see whether it might be Adam’s mate. One can imagine the scene: first comes the hippopotamus, then the flamingo, and then the giraffe. One by one, Adam names the animals — and finds himself disappointed in them. It sounds like some sort of bizarre dating game.²

Genesis 2:21–22

Alas, there’s no companion for Adam to be found among the animals. So what does God do? He puts Adam to sleep,^o removes one of his ribs, and makes it into a woman. He presents the woman to Adam, just as He has presented all the animals. And how does Adam react?

² For more on this, see my earlier work *The Beast That Crouches at the Door*, pt. 1, ch. 5.

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הַפֶּעַם
 עֲצָם מֵעֲצָמֵי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי
 לָזָאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ
 לְקָחָהּ זֹאת:

And man said, “This time, it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called *ishah* [woman] because this one was taken from *ish* [man].”

Genesis 2:23

A very beautiful, romantic declaration, no doubt. But it’s followed immediately in the text by something decidedly puzzling:

עַל־כֵּן יַעֲזֹב־אִישׁ אֶת־אָבִיו
 וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ
 וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

This is why a man leaves behind his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24

What, exactly, is happening here? Up to this point, the Torah has been telling us a story — but all of a sudden, the narrator, as it were, steps out and “breaks the fourth wall,” speaking directly to the reader. *By the way, folks, here’s something you should know, a great timeless lesson for you: this is why a man leaves his parents behind. This is why a man gets married.*

Evidently, the Torah considers this message to be so compelling that it doesn’t simply leave it to the astute reader to infer, but instead drills the point home overtly and explicitly: *This is why people get married; get it?* It’s as if the Torah itself is telling us why this story is so important — it’s not just filling in some idle historical details about the love story of the first man and woman; it’s telling us about all our love stories, for all time. It’s telling us something about why man seeks to marry, something we need to know right here, right now, and in every generation.

But for all the urgency the Torah attaches to this lesson, the question persists: What, exactly, *is* the lesson? The Torah’s intent seems a bit obscure. It says עַל־כֵּן (*al kein*), “*this is why*,” a man leaves behind his father and mother and chooses to get married. But what exactly is “this”? Because of *what* does man leave behind mother and father? Seemingly, it’s because of the last thing the Torah said — or to be precise, the last thing Adam said: “This time, it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called *ishah* [woman] because this one was taken from *ish* [man].” The

Torah is telling us that there is something in those words, in the declaration Adam made, that explains why it is that men desire to get married. Were it not for that mysterious “something,” we are asked to believe, a man would never get married. He’d never want to leave behind his mother and father; he’d just grow old in his childhood home.

So what is this mysterious something?

The Drive for Marriage

What *did* Adam find so attractive about Eve? How did he know that she was Mrs. Right? The Torah doesn’t leave us to speculate about this; it tells us. When Adam first sees Eve, he recognizes, with a sense of immediate understanding mixed with astonishment, that she is different, she is special . . . Why? Because, Adam says, she *came from him*.

And, of course, she did. Adam and Eve were once a single, unified being. God put man to sleep and took his rib from him. In doing so, one might say, God took the feminine part of man from him and made it into a separate being. Adam sensed the loss of his feminine side and desired to recapture it in marriage.³

Think back to those animals that God paraded before Adam. Why didn’t they seem like suitable mates to him? The answer now seems clear: because they were fundamentally foreign to Adam.

Not so with Eve. When Adam sets eyes on her for the very first time, he feels an immediate kinship with her. He senses that she is a lost part of himself, and so he yearns to reunite with her. Therein lies his drive to marry her.

To Leave Mother and Father

Now let’s come back to that narrative aside, the moment the Torah “breaks

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- 3 The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 8:1 and Vayikra Rabbah 14:1 goes even further, stating that Adam was initially created as a dual being, both male and female. The midrash seems to be grounded in an intriguing ambiguity in the biblical text:
- וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:
- “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created *him*; male and female He created *them*” (Genesis 1:27). The use of a singular pronoun followed by a plural one suggests that man really was once a singular being, but a being that was also a plurality: he was indeed “one” with his feminine side. Hence, in the creation of Eve, he experiences a genuine sense of loss, which he feels bound to recoup.

the fourth wall” and addresses the reader: “This is why a man leaves behind his father and his mother . . .”^o We wondered before: What is it about Adam’s declaration upon seeing Eve that explains, of all things, why a man would “leave behind his father and his mother”?

Genesis 2:24

But now, it’s not so strange anymore: there really *is* a fundamental commonality between man’s relationship with his wife and his relationship with his mother and father. What is that commonality?

What is the common denominator between man’s relationship with his wife and his relationship with his mother and his father?

Move over, Freud; the Torah was here first. The answer is that he was once *one* with them. He comes biologically from mother and father; before birth, he truly *was* of one flesh with them.

That unity is very compelling. There is, indeed, a part of man that never really wants to leave home. It is that childlike part of him that wants to stay unified with his source, his parents, where he comes from. But the truth is that he can’t really recapture that unity. So what’s going to get man off his parents’ couch? There is only one thing that can convince him to move forward in life and establish a home of his own — and that is the chance to really, truly, attain an alternative unity, the unity that a man can experience with his wife. In recapturing the union of masculine and feminine, man truly attains oneness in this world, the unity of his original being, the oneness that he enjoyed before Eve was ever taken from him.⁴

So the Bible portrays marriage as man reuniting with his lost self. Seems kind of romantic, doesn’t it? But — to come back to the question we started with — when you open up tractate Kiddushin, the Mishnah’s portrayal of marriage seems anything but romantic. Why use a word like “acquisition” to describe marriage, this most romantic of acts? It sounds so harsh, so transactional.

So I want to suggest a theory here. It’s a bit of a radical theory, but bear with me.

Revising Our Understanding

We misunderstand the concept of acquisition. We think acquisition is about owning things, about controlling them — and to some extent, when

4 Cf. Ibn Ezra and Radak to Genesis 2:24. Both make the point that when the Torah states that man and woman will “therefore . . . become one flesh,” this idea is grounded in the prior verse, where Adam describes Eve as “flesh of my flesh.”

acquisition is about *things*, maybe it is. When I buy a lawnmower, I control it. But there are other kinds of acquisition that have very little to do with “control.” Take, for example, man’s relationship with the Torah itself. Consider this statement from Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers):

Pirkei Avot 6:6

הַתּוֹרָה נִקְנֶיִת בְּאַרְבָּעִים
וּשְׁמֹנֶה דְבָרִים The Torah is acquired with
forty-eight qualities

There’s that word: נִקְנֶיִת, “acquired”— the same word that describes a man’s “acquisition” of a woman in marriage. The Torah, according to this mishnah, is *itself* something to be acquired. But how would you translate “acquired” in this context? Do I, the one who learns Torah, *control* it? If anything, *it* controls *me*! The Torah demands a certain lifestyle of me — and yet I “acquire” it!

This kind of acquisition has very little to do with *control*. It seems, instead, to be about *responsibility*. I don’t “control” Torah — that would be an act of defilement. The Torah that I learn is mine, perhaps, in the sense that it “completes” me, and my responsibility is to treasure it, to appreciate it for what it is, and to keep it safe.

To Have and to Hold

Perhaps something similar is going on with “acquisition” in the context of marriage. Yes, a man “acquires” a woman — but what does that mean? Are his rights to her paramount, or his obligations to her? She *completes* him, and because of that, he is to treasure her immensely and keep her safe.

Completion. Indeed, at its deepest level, maybe that’s the great hope that lies at the root of all “acquisition.” *Whenever* we seek to acquire something or someone — the Torah, a wife, or a Lamborghini — what, really, is our motivation? Beyond financial gain, beyond economic security, we seem to be responding to a deeper need. We are trying to feel *complete*. But we are apt to delude ourselves in that quest, and that delusion can have sad consequences. Ironically, it can rob us of the happiness we seek: the person who has fifty million dollars and, in his waning years, works like mad to make fifty-*one* million, sacrificing time he could spend playing ball

with his grandchildren to do it—what delusion is he suffering from? We humans can often feel that we are *missing* something, that there is a void within us, and if we can only acquire a certain thing (and then the next thing, and then the thing after that) we will somehow feel whole. But it never really works.

It doesn't work because *things*, for the most part, don't complete us. They are foreign to us, like the animals were to Adam. Animals were always external to Adam, so they could not possibly make him whole. Only one acquisition really completes us, and this is *the* acquisition par excellence: man's “taking” of woman. Marriage.

In marriage, masculine and feminine come together as one. In the end, marriage is the one moment in our lives when the great hope of acquisition can truly be realized. It is the moment we become whole.