

#Parasha  
Weekly Insights from a Leading Israeli Journalist



Sivan Rahav-Meir

# #PARASHA

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Leading Israeli Journalist

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*#Parasha*  
*Weekly Insights from a Leading Israeli Journalist*

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*To my father and mother*

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# Introduction

Thinking about the place of the Torah in our lives, I often feel it is the topic we talk about least. We skirt around it but do not engage it directly. Here in Israel, we view Torah through the prism of politics, whether arguing about budgets or holding demonstrations. We listen to rabbis and politicians discuss controversial issues, such as legislation on religious matters, and we get angry. And sometimes we are so preoccupied with the issues of the day that we do not even begin to fathom the hidden treasures of the Torah.

For thousands of years, the weekly *parasha* has been the pulse of our lives. We read it every Shabbat in the synagogue and it inspires us throughout the week, giving us food for thought and meaning for our existence. A famous hasidic saying tells us to “live with the times,” meaning we should live with the weekly *parasha*, looking to see how its ideas meet us in our day-to-day lives. As a journalist, I have spent many years reporting on politics, the courts, the religious sector, and government ministries, and I feel that our attitude to Judaism has become very predictable as we move from one scandal, apology, protest, court intervention or legislation to the next. Structuring our lives around the *parasha* rather than the news cycle could go a long way toward improving our discourse.

In this book, I have made a modest attempt to bring the Torah into our daily conversation, to show its relevance to our lives, and to add new voices to the ones we are used to hearing. Throughout the

## Introduction

generations, commentators on the Torah have given us pearls of wisdom and I want to make them accessible to the general public. They have plenty to say about money, relationships, education, jealousy, publicity, and anger. As we delve into the treasures contained in the Torah, it is difficult to believe how Torah has become a source of friction between us, instead of uniting us. The Jewish nation may have returned to its homeland with great joy but here in our own country, the People of the Book is not proud of its own Book, the source of our culture and identity. It seems to me that when we left exile and returned home, we left Rashi, Rashbam, the Baal Shem Tov, the Vilna Gaon, and many other sages behind.

About two years ago, I began sending out on social media a short daily idea from the weekly *parasha*, and was surprised by the scope of reactions I received. As a journalist, audience feedback is not new to me, but with these posts I felt something different. Now I was sharing a common cultural bond with my audience, a bond that brought us much closer together and made the connection more relevant.

The idea of collecting these posts and publishing them in a book came from my readers. Their positive reactions to the posts, and their requests to gather all the WhatsApp messages into one book, were the driving force behind this book. They also started asking me for ideas for speeches: “What can I say to a bar mitzva boy on *Bemidbar*?” “My brother is joining the IDF on *Bereshit*. Do you have an appropriate blessing?” “We are adopting a dog on *Korah* and need an idea for a speech.”

So here it is. I chose the best posts and edited them and also wrote many new ones. I wish to emphasize that the book does not contain any new ideas. The Torah has seventy faces and I have no desire to invent the seventy-first. In fact, my personal aim is quite the opposite. I want to become more familiar with the treasure trove of existing commentaries, to search for valuable explanations that have been forgotten, and to uncover pearls of wisdom that lie gathering dust in obscure volumes.

Yet, now that I think about it, this book does indeed offer something new. Every time we meet the Torah, a new reality is formed



that did not exist previously. Thus, each reader joins me in creating something new when he or she discovers how the Torah has a place in their life.



Three ideas, from three different commentators, each explaining what happens to us when we engage with the Torah, were my inspiration while writing the book. I want to acquaint my readers with these commentators and their thoughts before they begin reading.

The first is Hakham Abraham Azoulay, a rabbi and kabbalist from Morocco. He compares the Torah to a mirror and teaches us that each person is reflected in it and can see himself in the Torah: “The Torah is like an illuminating mirror. Whatever shape or size stands in front of it will be reflected back. Similarly, the soul of each and every person will find an explanation in the Torah personally tailored to him.”

The second is Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, who was a hasidic rebbe and author of the *Mei HaShiloah*. He wrote that the Torah helps us overcome our faults and shortcomings. Just as we use a filter to enhance a picture and hide the blemishes, so the Torah is meant to make us better people: “The Torah was only given to complete what is lacking. Whatever was lacking from the day one was created is completed by the Torah.”

The third is Professor Nehama Leibowitz, one of the greatest teachers of Tanakh in contemporary times. She would sit in the university library, surrounded by piles of books. When her students once asked her why she looked so excited and curious as she sat in front of these books, she replied: “Just think about a love letter. When a lover writes a letter to his beloved, she reads every word and every punctuation mark with great excitement. She wonders why he used this particular word in one place and not elsewhere, why this sentence ends in a question mark, and why he uses that word twice. For me, the Torah is God’s love letter to us and that is how we should read it.” She then went back to her love letter to examine more messages from her Lover.

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I hope that you will feel that the Torah is a mirror that reflects to us who we are, that balances our shortcomings, and is a love letter addressed to us.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank the many, many commentators who wrote books on the Torah. They are the basis for this book. In many cases, I only quoted from them partially, shortening their words and omitting certain sections.

Thanks to my husband Yedidya. It feels a bit strange to me to thank him because he is really an inseparable part of every word I wrote. (Rest assured, this sentence, like all the others, will be approved by him before it goes to print.)

Thank you to my children who are constantly teaching me so much. I thank them for understanding, more or less, that their mom is sitting in her office, working on her book. And of course, thanks to the army of babysitters who help.

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And finally, thank you to the Creator of the World, who gave us His Torah.

Sivan Rahav-Meir  
May 2017/Iyar 5777

# Genesis

Genesis is a book of beginnings – the first book of the Pentateuch, the creation of the world and humanity, along with stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. It is no exaggeration to state that the foundations of human life, culture, and behavior are laid down in this book. The twelve *parashot* of Genesis span a two thousand-year period, during which great nations rose and fell. However, instead of giving the broad view, the Torah zooms in on the small details: Abraham welcoming his guests into his tent, Rebecca drawing water from the well to feed camels, and Jacob blessing his children before he dies.

Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer was quoted as saying that he learned the art of writing from the Book of Genesis: “Whenever I start reading it, I can’t put it down. I always find new facts, events, or dramatic tension that I hadn’t noticed before. I sometimes imagine that a scribe sneaks into my home when I am asleep or walking and adds new *parashot*, episodes, and names to this wonderful book.”

“Let’s start at the very beginning  
A very good place to start.”

# Bereshit

## Congratulations on Creation

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.

**In the beginning God created** the heaven and the earth.

(Gen. 1:1)

A special name is given to the Shabbat on which we read this first *parasha*, *Shabbat Bereshit*. The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that this Shabbat influences the entire year: “All the days of the year – weekdays, Shabbatot, and festivals, as well as events in the life of an individual, all receive light and vitality from *Shabbat Bereshit*.”

In this first *parasha*, we read how everything was created: the world, the solar system, the animal kingdom, human beings, and the weekly day of rest – Shabbat.

In October 2015, a few days before *Shabbat Bereshit*, Rabbi Eitam Henkin and his wife Naama were murdered in a drive-by terror shooting. She was a graphic artist and also a poet. In her poem “Miracle,” she describes the atmosphere of the tranquility of Shabbat entering the world as being miraculous. These special moments are first described in this *parasha* and recur every week.

And every week  
the sun sets behind the trees

darkness falls, and a great light miraculously appears  
finding us, a herd of lost souls  
standing in line to receive  
our additional portion of spirituality.

And every week  
Shabbat descends and gathers us to her breast  
accepts our souls  
marked by the travails of six days of toil  
to separate the holy from the mundane.



## The Tree Should Also Be Tasty

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּדַשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי  
לְמִינּוֹ אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוֹ בּוֹ עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי כֵן. וַתּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ  
זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי.

And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed-yielding herbs and **fruit trees producing fruit** according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth,” and it was so. And the earth gave forth vegetation, seed-yielding herbs according to its kind, and **trees producing fruit**, in which its seed is found, according to its kind.

(Gen. 1:11–12)

We tend to concentrate on achieving goals and belittle the means used to achieve them. If after having plowed his field, sown the seeds, and worked the land for an entire year a farmer receives a low yield on his investment because of a drought, he will consider the year to have been unsuccessful. Our sages point out a shift in the wording in the above verses. God first wishes to create “fruit trees producing fruit” but the earth only gave forth “trees producing fruit.” The tree is just a tree, and not a fruit. Since Creation, there has always been a distinction between

working and the fruits of one's achievement, between toiling and the sweet fruits of success.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook explains:

At the beginning of Creation it was intended that the tree should have the same taste as the fruit. But the earthly existence brought it about that only the taste of the fruit, the final coming to fruition, the primary goal, is experienced in its pleasure and splendor. The earth sinned, denied its essence, limited its strength, followed trends and purposes, did not give all its hidden strength so that the taste of the tree could be like the taste of its fruit.

In an ideal world, the tree would be as tasty as the fruit. Yet in our physical world, the tree itself has no taste, and we only enjoy the fruit. Although we plant a tree for the fruit it will eventually produce, the means for achieving this goal are found in the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves, which make up the major part of this organism. A large part of our lives can be compared to a tree preparing to produce fruit. We study for a degree in order to work in our profession, in order to make a living, in order to buy food, in order to live. We spend most of our time working, eating, and sleeping. The creation of the world presents us with a utopian existence in which the sweet taste of hard work and effort reminds us that the means also serve a purpose.



## Build a Relationship

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפַּעַם עָצָם מֵעֲצָמַי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה  
כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקָחָהּ זֹאת.

And the man said, "This time is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; **she shall be called Woman**, because she was taken out of Man."

(Gen. 2:23)

## Bereshit

We all know that *Parashat Bereshit* tells of the creation of heaven and earth, animals and man. But we are less aware that the relationship between husband and wife was also created at the dawn of the world. The following is the text that Rabbi Netanel Elyashiv, a teacher at a pre-army academy, reads out when officiating at a wedding. In honor of the first couple in the world, you are invited to read it.

Discussing the marital relationship, the sages note: “If they are worthy – the Divine Spirit resides between them.” Is it really so good that something or someone comes between man and wife? Wouldn’t it better if the only thing between them is love? No, because even romantic love requires a context. No less important than the partner with whom we choose to spend the rest of our life is how we view that relationship. When husband and wife know there is more to their marriage than being nice to each other, when they have a shared mission and purpose, then their entire relationship is put into context.

Compare this to army life. The soldiers in a military unit all have different views and personalities, yet ongoing disagreements between them are rare. However, if those same people were to meet in a civilian setting, chances are that they would soon end up arguing. In the army, they share a joint purpose which automatically reduces the potential for discord.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, wrote: “Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.” A relationship based on feelings alone will have a very rocky foundation since emotions change. Obviously, feelings are vital and without them there is no relationship. However, a spiritual basis is also necessary. Then one thinks twice about hurling a hurtful insult and makes peace more quickly because the two partners are working together throughout their relationship for the same purpose. When you bring God into your relationship, you are really making more space for both of you.





## The Motive Was Unclear

וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהַרְגֵהוּ.

Cain rose up against Abel his brother **and slew him.**  
(Gen. 4:8)

What was the motive?

The brand-new world is all wrapped up ready for its opening festivities. Then the first murder in history occurs. The first civil war was literally a war between two biological brothers – Cain and Abel.

The Torah does not give the reason why Cain murdered his brother; it simply describes the event. We are not explicitly told what Cain said and what happened in the field. A famous midrash looks for his motives. The sages first suggest the brothers were arguing about land, money, and clothes, i.e. property, even though the entire world belonged to just the two of them! Then they suggest the brothers were arguing about the location of the Temple – in whose territory it would be built – at a time when hardly anyone else inhabited the entire world. Another suggestion is that they were arguing about a woman who was born together with them. These three motives – money, religious beliefs, and relationships between men and women – have been the reasons for outbreaks of violence ever since.

We are often told that romantic, criminal, or nationalistic reasons were the motives for murder, as if to justify the act. There is probably good reason why the Torah is vague about the first murder, why no context or motive is given. Whatever the reason may have been, no motive ever justifies murder. What was true regarding the first murder in history is equally valid to this very day.