

The Person in the Parasha  
Discovering the Human Element in the  
Weekly Torah Portion



Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh  
Weinreb

**THE  
PERSON  
IN THE  
PARASHA**

Discovering the Human Element  
in the Weekly Torah Portion

OU Press  
Maggid Books

*In Loving Memory of Our Beloved Brother*

*Jamie Lehmann*

חיים מנחם בן מנשה רפאל ושרה

*Jamie was an ish eshkolot – a loving, joyful, gentle, brilliant soul;  
the embodiment of Torah im derech erez.*

*He is missed more every day.*

עַל יַד קֶבֶר בְּנֵי אִשָּׁר בְּהַר הַמְּנוּחֹת

כֶּךָ אָנִי עוֹמֵד רוֹמֵם

אָב גִּלְמוּד מֵיָתֵם

מוֹל מְצַבְתֶּךָ

הַצְּרוּרָה בְּצִרוּר

עַרְפְּלֵי עָרֵב

הַיּוֹרֵד עַל הָרֵי יְהוּדָה

וּבְצִרוּר עֲנֵנֵי בְקָר

הַצְּלוּלִים

הָעוֹלָלִים אֵט אֵט

נֶגֶד פְּנֵיךָ

עִם עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר.

הֵן הֵן שִׁפְתוֹתֶיךָ

הַדּוֹכְכוֹת אֵלַי בְּקֶבֶר

וְאוֹמְרוֹת

אֵינְנִי גִלְמוּד פֹּה, אֲבָא,

בְּאַרְץ הַחַיִּים הַקְּרוּשָׁה.

וְאֵנִי עוֹנָה וְאוֹמֵר

אָמֵן, כֵּן תְּהִי

נִפְשֶׁךָ צְרוּרָה

בְּצִרוּר הַחַיִּים

בְּנֵי אֶהוּבֵי.

מנשה רפאל ליהמן

Dr. Manfred Raphael Lehmann

*Dedicated by*

*Yitzchok and Barbie Lehmann Siegel and Family*

*In Loving Memory of*

*Rabbi Nachum Muschel*

הרב נחום בן מאיר

מחנך למופת

*"An Educator's Educator"*

*"The Persons of the Parasha" were his extended family,  
his soulmates, his mentors, and the subjects of his life's study.*

*He so memorably taught their lessons – and how to  
teach those lessons – to generations of family, students,  
colleagues, friends, and all who wished to learn.*

*Dedicated by*

*Elizabeth and Michael Muschel and Family*

*In Honor of*

*Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb*

*whose wisdom, friendship, and sensitive  
leadership continue to guide us*

*Dedicated by*

*Lani and Shimmy Tennenbaum and Family*



*In Loving Memory of Our Dear Parents*

*Abraham and Sylvia Weinreb*

אברהם בן חיים יצחק  
טשארנע סאשע בת גיטל

*Chaim Yitzchak and Yona Taub*

חיים יצחק בן האדמו"ר שאול ידידיה אלעזר  
יונה בת עזריאל

*who remain our constant inspiration*

*Dedicated by*

*Chavi and Tzvi Hersh Weinreb*

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## Preface

**T**he book you have in your hands is a collection of some of the columns I have written on the weekly *parasha* during the past seven years. These columns have a history, which was initiated by Mr. Stephen Steiner, OU Director of Public Relations, in the spring of the year 2009. At that time, I was preparing to end my tenure as Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union. It was agreed that I would stay on with the OU in an emeritus capacity, but it was not initially clear to me what that capacity entailed. It was Steve who suggested to me that my new role would allow me to spend more time writing, something I had long dreamed of doing.

Steve further suggested that I might write a weekly column on *parashat hashavua*. He identified a need for a column that would reach all Jews, whatever their educational background and whatever their degree of religious observance.

But Steve went further than that. Because of our many years of collegiality, he was aware of my professional background and abiding interest in psychology, and particularly of my fascination with the inner spiritual lives of human beings. It was out of our initial discussions that



## Preface

I consented to write such a column and to focus upon the human element contained in every weekly Torah portion. This human element often goes unnoticed or is, at the very least, under-emphasized.

In the early stages of my excitement over the prospect of writing such a column, the title *The Person in the Parasha* occurred to me. That title would allow me to concentrate upon the biblical characters who play a part in the drama of almost every chapter of the Pentateuch. But that title would also allow me to introduce the reader to numerous other individuals, drawn from my own personal life experiences, as well as from the vast world of literature of which I am so fond.

It was after several years of writing these columns that a reader approached me and told me that she had discovered my secret. She knowingly, and correctly, exclaimed, "Why, *you* are the person in the *parasha*!" Indeed, her observation was on the mark. Whereas I only rarely refer to myself directly in the columns, I do rely heavily upon the major personalities who had an impact upon my life. They include my own parents and grandparents, and occasionally my siblings, classmates, and friends. But mainly, I introduce the reader to my religious and spiritual mentors over the years and most especially, my paternal grandfather, Chaim Yitzchak Weinreb, of blessed memory, who was a Talmudist *par excellence* and who inspired me to adopt a lifelong commitment to the study of rabbinic texts.

A preface such as this primarily serves the purpose of thanking those individuals who played a role in the conception of the book and in its writing, editing, and publication. Steve Steiner deserves first mention because he conceived of the idea and prodded me to do it. The many individuals whose lives, works, and teachings provided the material for the columns also deserve to be thanked, although it is impossible to enumerate them all.

A special statement of gratitude is due to Mrs. Yocheved Goldberg, whose remarkable editorial skills, sensitivity to religious language, and commitment to proper English usage in every detail are admirable and laudable and very much appreciated by me. Yocheved has been my loyal and dedicated assistant for many years now, and she and her husband Avi and their lovely children deserve special thanks.

Thanks too to Mr. Matthew Miller, who heads Koren Publishers Jerusalem, for agreeing to co-publish this work and for the many opportunities he has given me to utilize my fascination with the world of books. Matthew's outstanding staff also deserves honorable mention, especially assistant editor Tomi Mager and proofreaders Shira Schreier and Shoshana Rotem.

I am privileged to be on the editorial board of the Orthodox Union's publishing arm, known as OU Press. My dear friends and colleagues, Rabbi Menachem Genack and Rabbi Simon Posner, spearheaded this important undertaking, and I feel especially honored that this book is now numbered among the many excellent contributions that OU Press has made to the world of traditional English-language Jewish learning.

There is one person who heads the list of "persons in the *parasha*." I refer, of course, to my dear wife Chavi. I may never have explicitly mentioned her by name in any of my hundreds of weekly columns, but she has been the inspiration of each and every one of them. Her loving encouragement has enabled me to produce a column every week of the year for many years on end. She has helped me overcome innumerable episodes of writer's block and has been the first reader to see each column after its final draft. Her invariably positive reactions have propelled me to persist with this project and to undertake the writing and editing of other publications.

I extend my blessings to all who have helped me achieve this goal. I close by inviting the reader to share his or her responses to this book with me. I have long ago learned the value of feedback, and I assure those of you who will respond that I will take your comments very seriously.

Tzvi Hersh Weinreb  
12 Nissan, 5776  
Monsey, NY

# Genesis

## *Parashat Bereshit*

# Creation Conversation

**A**nyone who has ever taught anything can confirm the adage of our sages, “I have learned from all my teachers, but I have learned most from my pupils.” It is especially true that one learns a great deal from his students if one does not limit himself to lecturing to them, but rather engages in face-to-face conversation with them. It is in candid and interactive dialogue that one learns most from his students.

The immense value of simple conversation between teacher and student was brought home to me many years ago in a conversation I had with two very different students. They both attended a series of lectures I gave for individuals with very little prior exposure to the Jewish religion and its teachings. One of them was almost exclusively interested in what he called, “the rules and regulations” of Judaism. The other was far less interested in Jewish law. He was more of the “spiritual” type and had a plethora of questions about the nature of God.

The first individual, let’s call him Rick, was interested in a meaningful way of life. He wanted to be part of a congregation, to celebrate the holidays, and to learn how to live daily life as a Jew. The other student, let’s call him Seth, was consumed by questions of cosmology and

the origins of the universe. He saw God as an almost impersonal force behind nature. He wanted a relationship with God, but questioned whether that was at all possible. Both students had in common an interest in engaging me, their teacher, in conversation after class. Usually, those conversations took place in the local kosher pizza shop.

I vividly recall the evening I gave a lecture on the opening chapter of *Parashat Bereshit* in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 1:1–6:5). Rick and Seth appeared equally eager to corner me in the pizza shop after that lecture.

Rick began the conversation by firmly questioning why the Torah even bothered to give us details about the creation of the world and God's role in it. "As a Jew," he maintained, "I just need to know how to live my life, how to celebrate the holidays, what food is kosher and what is not, and what is right and wrong in the spheres of ethics and morality. I can satisfy my curiosity about the origins of the universe by consulting some scientific book on the matter. For me, this has nothing to do with religion."

Seth, sitting across the table, was absolutely astounded. "What?!" he exclaimed. "This opening chapter of Genesis is precisely what I need to know as I begin my exploration of Judaism. I need to know about God, from beginning to end. And this is His beginning."

I was fascinated by this conversation because it helped me put into a new perspective the conflicting opinions of two of the greatest rabbinic commentators on the Bible, Rashi and Nahmanides.

Rashi (Shlomo ben Yitzhak), in the very first words of his magisterial commentary on the entire Pentateuch, asks the same question that was bothering Rick. He begins by quoting a Rabbi Yitzhak who, some have maintained, was none other than his own father. He avers that the Torah should have begun with the chapter in the later Book of Exodus, which outlines the mitzvot that Jews were supposed to fulfill. Rashi struggles to find a reason for the Torah's description of creation and the detailed narratives of early human history.

"Rick," I was able to say, "your question was anticipated many centuries ago by a great man whom you never heard of." I continued to introduce him to the man who was Rashi and to his indispensable commentary. Rick was gratified that Rashi too seemed to conceive of

the Torah as primarily a book of “rules and regulations,” so that he felt compelled to seek a reason for its beginning with an account of the creation.

Seth was obviously hard put to restrain himself, but before he began to protest against Rick, and against Rashi, I attempted to placate him. “There was another great rabbinic commentator on the Bible,” I explained. “His name was Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman. Some call him Nahmanides. Traditionally, we call him Ramban and consider him second only to Rashi as a rabbinic commentator.”

I told Seth, and Rick who was listening reluctantly, that Nahmanides, in his opening paragraph of his commentary on Genesis 1:1, contests Rashi’s very question. “Of course,” he asserts, “the Torah had to begin with a description of the creation. That is the root of our faith, so anyone who believes that the world always existed but was not created by the Almighty at one specific moment in time, has no share in the Torah at all.”

Rick and Seth were gratified to discover that their differing views on what is important in Judaism has precedents in the writings of two great medieval rabbis. I hastened to disappoint them. I told them that it was incorrect to conceive of two mutually exclusive definitions of Judaism. It is not a matter of a “rules-based” religion versus a “God-based” one.

I quoted to them the marvelous passage in the writings of Maimonides in which he speaks of the mitzva to love God, and he explains that there are two ways to achieve this. One way is by studying His Torah and its laws, and the other way is by contemplating His astonishing creation, the world of nature.

I admonished them to carefully avoid reducing our faith to one or the other conception. “Our faith is not a simplistic one,” I argued. “As you proceed in your study of Judaism in general, and of the Five Books of Moses in particular, you will come to realize that our religion emphasizes that our God is both Creator and Lawgiver. Any conception of Him as one but not the other is not authentic Judaism.”

I thanked them for once again demonstrating to me the great value of conversation between student and teacher. Before we parted that evening, I shared with them a story of another conversation between a

## *Bereshit*

teacher and a student that I had read about in philosopher Samuel Hugo Bergmann's memoirs.

Bergmann recounts the story of Hermann Cohen, the German-Jewish philosopher who drew closer to religious Judaism in his later years. The climax of his life's work was his book, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*. It seems that the philosopher Cohen once entered into a long conversation with an old and old-fashioned Jew who resided in the university town of Marburg with him. The philosopher attempted to explain to the old Jew his elaborate and highly intellectual theory about the nature of God. The old man listened with the respect due to a university professor. When Cohen was finished with his learned and lengthy discourse, his elderly partner in conversation responded in Yiddish, "I understand everything you said, but something is missing. *Vu iz der Bashefer?* Where is the Creator?"

Cohen heard the old Jew's response, and "got it." His eyes welled up with tears, but he remained speechless.

The opening chapter of *Parashat Bereshit* assures that everyone who reads it will not make the philosopher's mistake, but will realize, along with the old-fashioned Jew, that whatever else God may be, He is primarily *der Bashefer*, the Creator.