

TIMELESS TORAH

BEREISHIT: A WORLD OF CONTINUOUS CREATION WHAT BEREISHIT TEACHES US ABOUT MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Rebuilding the Foundations

In the opening pages of *After Virtue* (1981), Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre asks us to imagine a catastrophe in which the natural sciences are destroyed. Laboratories are burned, books are shredded and teaching is banned. Later, when people try to revive the disciplines, all they have are scraps: half-remembered theories, instruments nobody knows how to use, a single page from a journal. They assemble these into something they call physics or chemistry, never realising that the coherent whole is gone. MacIntyre's claim is that this is exactly where our moral vocabulary stands. We still say 'good', 'fair' and 'courageous', but we have lost the framework that gives these concepts their meaning.

Seen in this light, the Torah constitutes the framework upon which a moral society can be built. Among Rashi's very first comments on the Torah is an aggadic explanation of the words '*bereishit bara* – In the beginning He created'. Rashi explains that the word *reishit* is used elsewhere in Tanach to describe both the Torah and the Jewish people. The verse therefore means that the world was created 'for the sake of the Torah, which is called *reishit*', and 'for the sake of Israel, who are called *reishit*'. Yet Rashi's style throughout his commentary is to focus on the simple meaning of the verses rather than the aggadic. Perhaps the reason Rashi begins with this comment is to guide us towards understanding how to learn Chumash. The Torah contains plenty of 'what', but its essential aim is to teach us 'why' – why do we exist, why did Hashem create the world, and

what is our purpose in Creation. The study of Chumash is a tool for discovering what underpins the moral concepts by which we seek to live.

Not long after the Warsaw Ghetto was established, in 1941, the Piaseczno Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, used this Rashi to inspire his congregation as they began a new cycle of the Torah under Nazi oppression. If the Jewish people have such a central role to play in humanity, we can be confident that the dark times will pass. Even when the entire world seems opposed to us, we can hope and expect that Hashem's purpose will ultimately be revealed.

Humility Worth the Risk

The Torah's account of the creation of humanity includes one phrase that appears to take a perilous gamble. In contrast to the rest of Creation, the verses describe how Hashem 'consulted' with the Heavenly court regarding the creation of Man: '*Naaseh*

“Without humility, humanity risks falling at the first hurdle

adam – Let us make man' (1:26). The plural form, as Rashi points out, is a dangerous invitation to heretics to 'prove' a theory of dualism. Indeed, a Midrash quoted by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chaim (d. 1933), portrays Moshe as objecting to this verse, but Hashem responds, 'Write it, and whoever wants to misunderstand it will misunderstand it'.



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MAY THEIR MEMORIES BE A BLESSING.**

By accepting this risk, the Chafetz Chaim explained, the Torah teaches an essential principle. Although a different wording would have been a theologically easier way to encourage belief, it was more important for the Torah to demonstrate here the need for a person in a senior position to consult with their juniors. Without humility, humanity risks falling at the first hurdle, because everyone will be caught in a constant competitive race to the top.

The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) shows beautifully how Adam immediately understood this lesson. The verse states that after the sin of the *Eitz HaDaat*, Adam named his wife Chavah, 'for she was the mother of all life (*eim kol chai*)' (3:20). If so, asks the Ohr HaChaim, she should have been called 'Chayah', a name much more closely related to the meaning Adam intended to convey. The Ohr HaChaim explains that her name could instead have been Chivya ('serpent' in Aramaic), since she had allowed herself to listen to her seducer. Nevertheless, Adam, although he was less culpable than her and was therefore in this case the stronger party, respected the fact that it would be Chavah who would bear the principal travails of bringing life into the world. In recognition of this, he adapted her name to reflect her position as 'mother of all life'. By keeping Chavah's failings hidden and instead announcing aloud her dignity, Adam emulates the trait taught by *naaseh adam*.

Misplaced Shame

The ensuing passages show a tragic failure of the same test. Hevel's offering is accepted and Cain's is not, and the episode ends in tragedy, with Cain murdering his brother. In His rebuke to Cain, Hashem asks him, '*Halo*

im teitiv se'eit – Why are you angry? ... Surely if you do well, you will be uplifted' (4:6–7). The Ramban's explanation of this cryptic verse is that Hashem was saying to Cain that if he focused on mending his ways, he would be superior to his brother. The psychological diagnosis here is sharp and precise. Cain had been ashamed that his younger brother had succeeded where he had not. This shame led to jealousy, and eventually to murder. Hashem was teaching Cain how to rectify this: focusing on his own responsibilities would give him the strength and humility to appreciate his junior's accomplishments. Succumbing to unhealthy patterns of thought, however, would only lead Cain to ever darker places.

The famous poem of Holocaust survivor Dan Pagis (d. 1986), *Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car*, brings this chilling trajectory to life:

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i —

The poem ends in mid-sentence, representing the unspeakable consequences of humanity's collapse. At the same time, portraying both Cain and Hevel as sons of the same mother underlines the fact that all mankind shares the same essential moral responsibility.

**NOACH: The Foundations of Humanity:
What Holds the World Together?**