

TIMELESS TORAH

BEREISHIT - Perspectives & First Principles

The Power of Perspective

'The task is...not so much to see what no one has yet seen; but to think what nobody has yet thought, about that which everybody sees.' (Arthur Schopenhauer, d.1860)

One of Rashi's first comments on the Torah is remarkable, not only for its content but for its deviation from the style that generally characterises Rashi's commentary. Rashi examines the grammatical construct form of the word '*bereishit* – in the beginning' which appears to be incongruous in the context of the verse. Before offering a simple explanation of how to read the verse, Rashi cites the Midrashic interpretation; the Midrash teaches that this word alludes to the fact that the Heavens and the earth were created for the sake of the Torah and for the sake of the Jewish nation, both of which are referred to as '*reishit* – the first and most significant'. Rashi, however, is known in general for his focus on the simple explanation of the verses, and, in fact, this is his explicitly stated aim (see, for example, Rashi on Bereshit 3:8). Why, then, does he present the homiletic interpretation of this verse prior to the simple explanation?

It may be that the reason for this divergence from Rashi's normal methodology is that Rashi wants to convey an overall perspective on the story of Creation. The world was created, Rashi is reminding us, for an ultimate purpose: for the sake of the Torah and adherence to its principles. It is only through bearing this in mind as we work our way through the Torah as a whole, and particularly the account of Creation, that we will be able to comprehend the true values that the Torah is teaching us through the words contained within.

To cite an example of this concept, the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, d. 1933) commenting on the verses that tell of the Creation of the celestial luminaries, writes that these verses underscore the vast disparity between our perspective on the world and the true perspective that is meant to be gleaned from the Torah. While we might imagine that the primary 'purpose' of the sun and the moon is to provide light and warmth to the world, the verses (1:14-15) are explicit that this is not the case. The primary purpose of these beings is to provide us with a frame of reference by which we can track time - days, months and years - which is crucial for the formation of our calendar and its annual Yamim Tovim. What we perceive to be the main function of the sun - light and warmth - is mentioned by the Torah only as a periphery benefit! Ultimately, this point of view is the true introduction to the simple explanation of the Torah. The values and ideals that the Torah teaches us can only properly be appreciated when we learn to think differently about that which is so familiar to us, constantly seeking the deeper meaning behind the eternal words of the text.

The Paradox of Human Nature

The first recorded person in the Torah to have offered a sacrifice was Kayin. But we do not find that he was commanded to do so or was even taught about the significance of such an activity. Indeed, the Ramban (d.1270), writes that Kayin delved into the secrets of Creation and independently comprehended the value of bringing *korbanot*. Clearly, then, Kayin was a deeply thoughtful individual.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

We find, however, that Kayin's *korban* was rejected, and our Sages teach that this was because he offered only his mediocre crops to Hashem, as opposed to Hevel, who brought as a *korban* his choicest animals. Moreover, we find that Kayin, despite having experienced direct communication from Hashem Himself, immediately denies Hashem's knowledge of what transpires in the world and murders his brother (4:6-9). How can it be that such a superlative philosopher and prophet could at the same time have behaved in such a nefarious manner?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (d.1979) sees this as a pivotal episode in understanding the secret of human failure. As difficult as it is to comprehend, a human being contains the most profound contradiction to be found in the entire cosmos: the ability to reach immense heights, and at the same time, the drive to deceive oneself and turn away from that which one knows to be correct. In Rav Shmuelevitz's words, this is the 'light and the dark that operate concurrently within a person'. As great as a person might be, their inherent desire for negative behaviour means that they can never be fully confident in their successes.

Truly Honourable

Rav Shmuelevitz taught that the Midrash alludes to one specific tool that a person can utilise to overcome this dynamic. In Parshat Vayeira, the Torah recounts that Avraham was sitting outside his tent, experiencing a prophecy from Hashem, when he saw three men walking towards him, and he immediately ran in their direction and invited them to rest and eat in his home.

In these verses, the word *vayar* - and he saw - is written twice. The Midrash explains that indeed, Avraham waited to observe two separate things before interrupting his Divine audience. First, he waited to see if the Divine Presence would take note of them, which would indicate to him that these were important people, but even when this did happen, he did not yet know if they were honourable people - *nichbadim*. When Avraham saw that they honoured and respected each other, he was confident that were dignified individuals, deserving of his own respect and honour.

From this Midrash, Rav Shmuelevitz taught a profound principle. A person may be an important person, endowed with many qualities, but that does not necessarily make them worthy of honour. As we learn from Kayin, a person's greatness can easily be overridden by his undesirable traits. When, however, the person is open to seeing the positive values of other people, honouring and respecting them despite their inevitable flaws, this is a sure sign of true greatness. The Sages teach, 'Who is an honourable person? One who honours others' (Pirkei Avot 4:1); this a primary way in which a person can counter the forces of darkness within themselves and allow their light to shine.

Next Week - Noach: Timeless Torah
resumes in person on Wednesday, 22nd
October at 8:00pm - 8:45pm