

A Thought on Parashat Bereishit 'Middot, Mitzvot and Chinuch'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



The Netivot Shalom enlightens us as to the lessons to be learned from Sefer Bereishit. It is a book of systematically arranged instruction in good middot as a foundation and preparation for receiving the mitzvot, the legal aspects of the Torah. We begin to see the actual mitzvot only later, in Sefer Shemot, once that groundwork has been put in place, once our characters have become suitably refined in readiness for observing the practical aspects of the Torah in the manner, and with the 'manners,' that Hashem intended His will to be fulfilled.

"וי"ל שזה אכן ענינם של פרשיות התורה מבראשית עד החדש הזה לכם, שהם תורה שלמה בענין טהרת המדות, ומורים לנו יסודות עבודת ה'. כי בתורה אין ספורי דברים בעלמא, אלא תורה היא כמשמעותא מלשון הוראה, שכל התורה על כל מלה ואות שבה מורים לנו תורת חיים ועד"ז כל ספר בראשית מלמד אותנו תורת חיים בענין טהרת המדות, שזהו ענין כל פרשיות אלו שכולם מדברים בעניני מדות." (נתיבות שלום, בראשית, י"ג)

"We can say that this, therefore, is the topic of the parashiot of the Torah from 'Bereishit' until 'This month shall be for you...' for they are a complete body of Torah law in the matter of purifying the middot (character traits) and teach us foundations in the service of Hashem. For in the Torah there are not mere stories; rather, the Torah is what its very name implies, it is from the word 'הוראה' (teaching), for the whole Torah and every word and letter in it teaches us regarding the Torah of Life. Now, according to this view, the whole of Sefer Bereishit teaches us the Torah of Life in the matter of purifying the middot (character traits) for this is the subject matter of all of these parashiyot, for all of them speak about the matter of character traits."

The Netivot Shalom lays out in masterly fashion how the different middot (traits) in which the Avot excelled effected a comprehensive 'tikun' (correction) for the particular evils of the earlier generations. Moreover, the Avot were 'Yesharim' (straight, upright) (Avodah Zarah 25a, and discussed at length in the Netziv's introduction to Sefer Bereishit, in his Ha'amek Davar), and in their merit Bereishit is known as Sefer Yesharim. Rabbi Yissocher Frand writes:

"Before we can attempt to learn the books of Shmos, Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devorim, with all their laws and legal details, we must be introduced to the "Book of the Straight". We need to know how to be 'straight' because manners and etiquette precede the Law (Derech Eretz Kadmah l'Torah)."

(<http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5771-bereishis/>)

Now, upon viewing the whole sweep of Sefer Bereishit in that light, you might understandably arrive at the conclusion that nothing is contained in that book except for guidance in good character traits and moral behaviour. However, this is not so, for while the broad narratives

about the Fathers and Mothers of our Nation indeed constitute basic teachings in human decency, there are many layers of meaning throughout the Torah, in its largest and smallest details, which our great Commentators skilfully identified, drew out, and explained for us. Let us take one example from the wonderful 'Baal HaTurim' commentary (by Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher - the son of the Rosh).

The Baal HaTurim pinpoints and directs a spotlight onto great ideas lying beneath and within the very words and letters of the Torah, and even the very first letter in the word בראשית itself does not escape his penetrating analysis. The Baal HaTurim explains why the Torah begins with the letter Bet instead of with an Alef. The first of three reasons he gives is that 'ב' is the language of 'ברכה,' blessing, while 'א' denotes 'ארירה,' cursing. "Hashem said: I will start with a Bet, the language of blessing, and if only it (blessing) could indeed be established." The second reason is that, just as Bet equals 'two,' so this Bet refers to the two worlds that Hashem created, This World and The Next World. The third explanation is that the Bet refers to the 'two Torahs,' the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, "...to teach you that in the merit of the Torah and those who learn it was the world created."

If you were going to write a peirush (commentary) on the Torah you would surely put much thought into your opening insights, and we can be certain that the Baal HaTurim did just that.

Here are three fundamental ideas which the Baal HaTurim is perhaps suggesting in his insights on the first letter in the Torah, and which may form the vital backdrop to a life of Torah and service to Hashem:

1. Blessing: we depend on it, and pray to Hashem for it, in the knowledge that He is the source of all Blessing. All that we have is due to the blessings and miracles He generously grants us every day, as we say in our tefillot:

ועל נסיך שבכל יום עמנו, ועל נפלאותיך וטובותיך שבכל עת, ערב ובקר וצהרים (שמונה עשרה, ב'מודים')

"...and for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and favours in every season - evening, morning and afternoon." (Shemoneh Esrei, in 'Modim')

2. Living with an appreciation that this physical world is a preparation for the next world, which is all spiritual, focuses us on the truly important things.

3. Dedicating ourselves to the dual gift of the Written and Oral Torahs, in all their breadth, depth and detail, fills our lives with the holy mission for which we were created.

What is most remarkable is that if this single Bet contains such multi-layered meaning, then so must every other of the remaining 304,804 letters.

Let us now attempt to bring together the ideas we have discussed. On the one hand, the Netivot Shalom teaches us that the narratives in Bereishit are there to prepare and hone our characters for receiving and beginning to observe the Torah's practical aspects. Prior to receiving the mitzvot in Sefer Shemot we must devote ourselves to suitable personal preparations for the privilege of that moment. Meanwhile, the Baal HaTurim points us to three fundamental ideas contained, or concealed, within the 'ב' of בְּרֵאשִׁית: Blessing, the two Worlds, and the two Torahs. Is there a tension here? How can we be contemplating such lofty notions as Divine blessing, the World to Come, and the Written and Oral Torahs whilst devoting ourselves to character refinement and perfection of the middot?

Perhaps we can suggest the following: while the 'function' of Sefer Bereishit is indeed to help us attain sufficient refinement of character for receiving the mitzvot, that very endeavour of perfecting our middot nevertheless itself requires the right focus from the very outset. We need to be aware of the reasons for our efforts in working on ourselves throughout Bereishit, and those reasons are rooted in the inaugural Bet and then become the driving force that fuels our journey through Bereishit, keeping us on the right road and focused on the right horizon. With those lofty concepts embedded in the first letter in the Torah, the lessons of Bereishit are then themselves infused with purpose, direction and vision.

The notion of building good character through Sefer Bereishit prior to, and as a preparation for entering the world of mitzvot finds a notable parallel in the relationship between home and school. This is articulated with characteristic skill and eloquence by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch:

"Only in the context of informal family life at home, where the child's personality is allowed free play and where there is opportunity for the free development of the child's individuality, his tendencies, his desires, his impulses and his aspirations, is there a possibility to train and guide the child to submit, gladly and of his own free will, to the controls and the requirements of the moral law. Only in the home can the child acquire the virtues of truthfulness, respect for the law, altruism, charity, forbearance, forgiveness, peaceability, serenity, humility, moderation, modesty, conscientiousness and a happy sense of duty, and make all of these an integral part of his personality. School life rarely offers opportunities to put most of these virtues into practice. True, the school sometimes has the occasion to praise the presence of these virtues, or to criticise their absence, in a child, but the school is not in a position to train the child, to "raise" him to become a virtuous human being..."

("Collaboration Between Home and School" in Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Volume VII: pp.104,105)

Rav Hirsch later notes:

"...The very fact that the school does not receive the child until he has completed the fifth or sixth year of his life, in other words, that the child spends the first five or six years of his growth and training for his future life under the care and guidance of the home, means that the fundamentals of his spiritual education are the responsibility of the home..." (Ibid. pp.111,112)

As if he is writing today, Rav Hirsch makes clear the importance of ensuring children learn and develop good character in time for entering school, for good learning depends for its success,

in so many ways, on the readiness and receptiveness of fertile minds and hearts. As Sefer Bereishit is to the subsequent books of the Torah, so is home to school.

As we begin the Torah again from 'Bereishit...', may our tefillah be that the coming year indeed spill over with sublime blessings for us and our families, all of Klal Yisrael, and all the world, and may we merit to fulfil our holy mission in this world through Torah and Mitzvot, and always remaining focused on the truly important things. May we know the supreme importance of Chinuch – the education, training and rearing of our children in the ways of Torah - and may we be blessed with the wisdom to get it right.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy