



Sevara

Torah, reasoned.

Parashat Bereshit

Genesis 1:1 – 6:8 · 5 divrei Torah

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Insights on the Weekly Parasha and the Festivals

In simple, clear language

Before we begin

The goal: that anyone can read and understand with ease – even readers who are not used to the language of the beit midrash.

“In brief”

Every dvar Torah opens with a short box that sums up the main idea in a sentence or two.

Concepts explained

Terms such as “chefetz and gavra”, “kal va-chomer” or “zeman gerama” are explained in simple words, right where they appear.

Short sentences

One idea per sentence. Lists, tables and comparison boxes – wherever they help understanding.

Calendar order

The divrei Torah follow the order of the parashot and the festivals. Notes appear at the bottom of the page.

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Elohim Created in the Beginning

In brief: According to tradition, seventy sages translated the Torah into Greek. All the translations were identical. For example, they all rendered “Elohim created in the beginning” instead of “In the beginning Elohim created”. Why, and what does this teach us about the word “Elohim”?

According to tradition (Megillah 9a), seventy (or seventy-two) sages translated the Torah into Greek in Alexandria, around 270 BCE, at the request of King Ptolemy II. They worked in parallel, each one on his own, yet when the translations were compared they were all identical. For instance, instead of translating “Bereshit bara Elohim” (“In the beginning God created”), they all wrote “Elohim bara bereshit” (“God created in the beginning”). Rashi there explains: so that the gentiles would not think that “Bereshit” is the name of some primordial being that created “Elohim”, implying two gods.

This explanation faces two difficulties. Who ever heard of a god named “Bereshit”? Moreover, Greek grammar, like that of other Indo-European languages, differs from Hebrew, so the sages’ fear of a misreading was not relevant: the structure of the language does not allow confusion between the agent of the action (God) and the time of the action (in the beginning).

Tosafot (s.v. Elohim) offer a different explanation: the Greeks held that the name of the Creator should come first, and so they might have mistaken “Bereshit” for the Creator. The root of the problem: in biblical Hebrew the verb (“created”) precedes the subject (“Elohim”) – like saying “To school went Dan” instead of “Dan went to school”.

Another angle: the problem lies in the word “Elohim”

One could also say that the problem was not the word “Bereshit” but the word “Elohim” itself – a word in the plural form. Ibn Ezra explains that this is a plural of respect, like the “royal we” in European languages. Maimonides supports this too, explaining that this is why God is addressed in the plural (adnut in the plural, rather than “adoni”, “my lord”).

In the Jerusalem Talmud (Berakhot ch. 9), Rabbi Simlai answers heretics who challenged the plural form: the verse says “bara” (“he created”, singular) and not “bar’u” (“they created”, plural), which shows that a single God is meant. But this proof works only in Hebrew: in European languages there is no difference between “created” in the singular and in the plural (in English, for example, “created” serves for both). One may conjecture that precisely for this reason the word “Elohim” was moved to the start of the verse in Greek – to stress that this is a “royal plural” and not a real plural.

Perhaps “Elohim” here is not the name of a god at all

Interestingly, several commentators (Midrash Rabbah 27:4; Ramban on Genesis 6:6) held that the word “Elohim” (at least in certain places in our parasha) is not the name of God Himself, but refers to an angel to whom God entrusted the running of the world. This idea eases several difficult verses – for instance, “And the Lord regretted that He had made man... and He was grieved in His heart”: it was not God Himself who was disappointed, but the angel in charge.¹

Either way, even after the work of translation, there remains something to ponder about the meaning of the verse “In the beginning God created”.

2

Image, Form and Hairstyling

In brief: According to Maimonides, the word “image” (tzelem) applied to man does not describe a physical shape but an abstract purpose – the intellect. And what exactly was the “building” that God built from Adam’s rib? A surprising discussion about braiding hair on Shabbat.

The verses “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” and “And God created man in His image” might suggest that God has a human form. Maimonides, at the beginning of the Guide of the Perplexed, argues against such a view, which was widespread in the Middle Ages.

Maimonides’ distinction

In his view, some words describe only a physical structure (such as to’ar, “shape”, or tavnit, “form”), and are therefore inappropriate for God. By contrast, tzelem (“image”) and demut (“likeness”) are abstract words. The philosophical background: in the Middle Ages it was commonly held that everything has a “purpose” – a good clock is one that shows the right time, a good car is one that drives well. The purpose of man, on this view, is knowledge – the intellect. That is man’s “image”: not his physical shape but his intellect, and in this he has something in common with God.

Yet there is a blessing among the Sheva Berakhot (the seven wedding blessings) that seems to contradict this: “...who created man in His image, in the image of the likeness of His form (tavnit)...”

¹These commentators bring to mind an error I have seen among several Chabad Rebbes: the Rashab (the fifth Rebbe) held that God not only can create a god equal to Himself, but actually did so. Thus he wrote on the verse “and he called it El, the God of Israel”: God called Jacob “El” – and he dismissed the author of Sefer Halkkarim as one who “was not precise in his words”. The seventh Rebbe added that even the ability to become clothed in a body is not withheld from God, by virtue of His omnipotence (Likkutei Sichot vol. 15, note 3). Wonder of wonders: the fundamentals of Christianity – association (shituf) and incarnation – find a place among the Chabad Rebbes, under the claim that God is not bound by logical contradictions. But a physical contradiction violates the laws of nature that God created (and so He can depart from them by a miracle), whereas a logical contradiction contradicts the very definition of the concepts in every possible world. God is “bound” by logic because a logical contradiction is not a “thing” that can be done, but nonsense and empty words – and so this places no limitation whatsoever on His omnipotence.

– but tavnit is a physical word according to Maimonides! The Semag cites Rav Saadia Gaon, who reads “and in the image of the likeness of his form” with a connecting vav: God created man in His image, and then created woman according to the physical form of the man. But Rav Saadia Gaon is the only authority who added that vav – everyone else, including Maimonides himself, transcribes the blessing without it. Other commentators suggest that “his form” refers only to the connection between body and soul, and not to any attribute of God.

The bridal salon in the Garden of Eden

The Mishnah (Shabbat 94b) forbids make-up and hair care on Shabbat: braiding hair, applying kohl to the eyes and arranging the hair. All agree that it is forbidden – the dispute concerns only the severity: the Sages forbid it rabbinically, while Rabbi Eliezer holds one is liable by Torah law. The Gemara clarifies which category of labor is involved: applying kohl – because of dyeing; braiding and arranging – because of building. The Gemara wonders: is this really “a manner of building”? It answers with the exposition of Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya on “And the Lord God built the rib” – God braided Eve’s hair before bringing her to Adam, for “builder” (banait) is a term for a woman who braids hair.

Which braiding counts as “building”?

The reference may be to the Roman hairstyles of the period – tall, elaborate structures, seen in the statues of distinguished Roman women. According to one study, Roman women even sewed their hair with needle and thread to create a stable structure. This also explains why there is no problem here of “a structure not made to last”.



Does “building” apply to the human body?

There is a dispute over whether the prohibition of “building” applies to something not attached to the ground, such as utensils. But even according to the view that building does apply to utensils, the Avnei Nezer proves that there is no “building” in the human body: Maimonides (Laws of Shabbat 10:17) rules that one who lances an abscess is liable for “striking with the hammer” (finishing a product), not for “building”. This is therefore difficult: how could Maimonides rule that a woman who braids hair is liable specifically for building?

His answer: a small repair to the body, such as opening an abscess, is not “building”. But the creation of the woman from the rib – producing a complete “vessel” from nothing – is indeed considered building.

A difficulty with this answer

The Avnei Nezer assumes that the “building” in the verse is the creation of the woman herself. But in Berakhot (61a) Rav and Shmuel dispute the nature of the “rib”: according to one view it was a “face” (man was created with two faces, male and female together, and the woman was separated

from him). According to the other view, it was a “tail” (the woman was built from an extra piece of flesh). The Gemara notes: according to the “tail” view, “and He built” fits the creation itself. But according to the “face” view – what does “and He built” mean? This is precisely what Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya’s exposition answers: not the creation of the woman, but the braiding of her hair.

It follows that the “building” in the verse is not the creation of the woman at all, but her adornment before she was brought to Adam – in other words, the first bridal salon opened in the Garden of Eden, and God Himself served there as hairstylist.

3

Maimonides on the Sin of Adam

In brief: According to Maimonides, man’s purpose is the intellect. Hence a question: if so, what was wrong at all with the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, which gave man knowledge? And what did Adam actually acquire when he sinned?

We saw how Maimonides understood the word “image”: man’s purpose is the intellect. In today’s terms, this view blurs the line between “good” and “right”. When we say a clock is “good”, we mean that it does its job well. But when we say a person is “good” because he does not steal and helps others, we mean something else entirely. Maimonides, by contrast, holds that a good person is one who has attained his purpose – the intellect.

The question

“A learned man raised with me, many years ago, a remarkable difficulty... From the plain sense of Scripture it appears that the original intention was for man to be like the other animals, without intellect and without thought... and when he rebelled, his rebellion necessarily brought him the greatest perfection of man... It is astonishing that his punishment for his rebellion was to be given a perfection he did not have, namely the intellect.”

In other words: the naive view sees Adam before the sin as a kind of “happy idiot” in the Garden of Eden, and after the sin he is punished with hard labor – but gains the intellect in return. What kind of punishment is that?

Maimonides’ answer

Maimonides replies: what Adam acquired from the Tree of Knowledge was not intellect (“intelligibles”, muskalot) but another kind of knowledge – aesthetic and social notions (“conventions”, mefursamot), what we would today call “culture”: fashion, manners, taste. These are social conventions with no connection to “truth”, so there is little point in discussing them. The intellect itself, by contrast, is always good – so the sin cannot really have “paid off”.

1. Is culture a burden? According to Maimonides – yes: the time and resources invested in clothing, food, poetry and theater could have been invested in developing the intellect.
2. Are there really only two categories – intellect and culture? Today we would almost instinctively add a third: morality. We see the moral order as something that does not derive from the intellect (but is a kind of axiom), and yet we are not prepared to say there is no point in discussing it.

What was Adam’s moral state before the sin? Could he have struck Eve without any pang of conscience? This is an open question, but it seems that Maimonides tries to attach the good character traits to the intellect: the purpose of the perfect man also includes what we today call “morality”, but the motive is entirely different. The “ethical” person is interested in others, whereas Maimonides’ “perfect man” is interested in his own development – except that, incidentally, this leads him to act with kindness.

Similarly, the “good” soldier in the eyes of many commanders is not always the ideal patriot, but the tough adventurer who seeks to prove himself. The two types may look identical from the outside, but the motive is utterly different.

4

Why Does the Torah Open with Stories Rather than a Commandment? Learning Values from the Bible Today

In brief: The Bible once taught the world basic values and morality. Today these already reside in our conscience, so in the stories of the Bible we mostly find what we already believed.

Rabbi Yitzchak’s question

Rashi opens his commentary on the Torah with the words of Rabbi Yitzchak: “The Torah should have begun only from ‘This month shall be for you’ (Exodus 12:2), which is the first commandment Israel was given. Why, then, did it open with Bereshit?”

What matters here is not the answer but the assumption behind the question. Rabbi Yitzchak assumes that the Torah is essentially a book of command and instruction. On this view, every part that contains no commandment needs justification. And that is no small part: the whole of Genesis and a quarter of Exodus.

“The Book of the Upright”

Tradition calls the book of Genesis “the Book of the Upright” (Sefer HaYashar), not “the Book of Law” or “the Book of Commandments”. The reason: the patriarchs and matriarchs were upright people. The way they lived and made decisions is a model to imitate.

The claim

It seems that the Bible once changed the world. It taught a cruel humanity what basic morality is.

Today that mission has been accomplished. Moral values have penetrated deep into the human conscience. So when we read the Bible, we do not learn new morality from it. We find in it confirmation of what we already believed.

Two things that happen when we read the Bible today

1. **A familiar message.** If a person finds a message such as “one should be humble”, this is not learning something new. It merely reinforces what his conscience already tells him.
2. **A message that seems immoral.** A person will not say “I was morally mistaken”. He will reinterpret the verse: as a temporary ruling (*hora’at sha’ah* – a law stated only for that time), as a parable, or with a forced reading, until it fits his moral sense. As the Talmudic rule has it, “better to strain the language than to strain the reasoning”: it is better to read the words in a somewhat forced way than to accept an idea that the mind rejects.

The conclusion: in the non-halakhic parts, we interpret the Bible in light of our conscience, and not the other way round. Today the source of morality is the conscience, not the text. The same goes for facts: in the account of creation the Torah did not come to teach us physics or geology, and the Rishonim already taught that the creation narrative is not entirely literal. The text is, at most, a source of inspiration.

5

Mitzvot of Action and Mitzvot of Result: A Study of the Commandment to Procreate

In brief: The mitzvah of “be fruitful and multiply” requires an actual son and daughter – which sounds like a “mitzvah of result”. But the result is not in a person’s hands; only the action is. Which definition is correct, and what is the halakhic difference between the two?

A Jew is commanded to bring two children into the world – a son and a daughter. On the face of it, this is a clear-cut “mitzvah of result”: the Torah is interested in continuity, not in the actions that lead to it. Yet the result is not in a person’s hands but in Heaven’s – all that is in his hands is the action. It may therefore be that halakha defines the mitzvah as a “mitzvah of action”, even though what it really wants is the state of affairs itself.

Proofs that it is a mitzvah of result

- Halakha requires that a person have a son and a daughter, and that they themselves also have a son and a daughter – fulfillment is measured by an existing state of affairs, not by the performance of an action.
- One whose children were born and then died has not fulfilled the mitzvah, even though he performed the action.
- According to several Rishonim, one who fathers a mamzer (a child of a forbidden union) fulfills the mitzvah, and there is no problem of “a mitzvah brought about through a transgression” (fulfilling a mitzvah by means of a sin) – because the transgression and the mitzvah do not occur at the same moment.²
- A gentile who fathered children and then converted has discharged the obligation to procreate – what is required is that he actually have descendants, even if they were born while he was exempt.³ Consequently, the first son born after his conversion is not considered a firstborn for the purpose of the double share of the inheritance (Yevamot 62a).

A proof that it is a mitzvah of action

A slave belonging to two masters – one of whom freed his share while the other did not – is half slave and half free. He may not marry a Jewish woman (since he is still half slave) nor a maidservant (since he is already half free), so the court compels the second master to free him completely. Tosafot (Bava Batra 13a) ask: why is compulsion needed? The mitzvah of procreation should override the prohibition (“a positive commandment overrides a negative one”). They answer that a positive commandment overrides a prohibition only when both occur at the very same moment; but here the prohibition takes place at the start of the act (ha’ara’ah), while the mitzvah is fulfilled only at its completion (gemar bi’ah).

Hence: what is incumbent on the person is the act of intercourse itself, while the result (the birth) is not entirely under his control – even though the purpose of the mitzvah is precisely the result.

Implications

- A woman who conceives from bathwater containing semen, without any intercourse or act on the father’s part. The practical difference for the mitzvah of procreation: there is a result (a son or daughter), but no action whatsoever by the father. Several poskim (Beit Shmuel, Even HaEzer 1:28; Beit Shmuel ibid. §10) wrote that he has fulfilled the mitzvah.
- A further question sharpens here: do mitzvot require intent? According to the view that they do – must the intent be specifically at the time of intercourse, or is intent at the time of birth (the

²The Rishonim dispute whether the rule “a mitzvah brought about through a transgression” applies by Torah law or only rabbinically.

³Although some hold that gentiles too are commanded to procreate.

mitzvah itself) sufficient? It seems that, according to all views, mitzvot of result do not require intent.

- Cooking and sowing on Shabbat: does the prohibition apply to the result (the actual cooking, the actual taking root) or to the act itself (placing on the fire, placing in the ground)? Practical difference: someone who placed a pot on the fire before Shabbat and the food cooked on Shabbat itself. Likewise, someone who sowed on Shabbat and picked the seed out of the ground on a weekday before it took root. Does it turn out retroactively that he is exempt?
- Circumcision – going back over shreds of skin (small remnants of skin at the site of the circumcision) that do not invalidate it: according to the Tur (Yoreh De'ah 264), one does not go back over them on Shabbat but does on a weekday; according to Maimonides, one never goes back over them. This depends on whether the mitzvah is “to circumcise” (the action, which ends once it is finished) or “to be circumcised” (the state, which can continue to be improved).
- Charity: is it a mitzvah of action (giving, which improves the giver's character) or a mitzvah of result (improving the poor person's situation)? The Talmud itself appears to contradict itself on this point, and Maimonides' words suggest a resolution: in the prohibition (“you shall not harden your heart”, commandment 192) the emphasis is on the giver, that he not acquire a trait of stinginess; in the positive commandment (“you shall surely give”, commandment 232) the emphasis is solely on improving the poor person's situation.

A third possibility: there are no mitzvot of result at all

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank proposes distinguishing between fulfilling a mitzvah and becoming exempt from it: one who fathers a mamzer, or who fathered children while a gentile, has not fulfilled the mitzvah – but is already exempt from it, because the desired result has in fact been achieved. On this view there are, in practice, no “mitzvot of result” at all: at most there are “mitzvot of action that require the attainment of a result” – and when the result is achieved without the action, there is no fulfillment, but there is an exemption.

The reason for a mitzvah versus its definition

Maimonides (Sefer HaMitzvot, second principle) rules that we do not expound reasons, even when the Torah itself reveals them. A possible explanation: when it comes to mitzvot of action, what determines the details of the law is the action – not the result. So even when the reason (= the desired result) is known, it cannot determine the details of the halakha. Why? Sometimes because the result does not depend on the person at all (as with having children), and sometimes for other considerations.

Caution: this argument is almost too strong

There is a problem: the same argument can be raised for almost every mitzvah, and then it no longer says anything. One can always claim “the reason merely explains why this action was chosen, but in practice only the action is decisive” – even when there is no real basis for this. The argument is weakened (and precisely for that reason becomes more convincing) in a case where the result itself

depends entirely on the person, such as building a parapet: there the action (the building) and the result (preventing a fall) are essentially the same thing – so that is exactly where it is hard to claim a difference between the reason and the definition.