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When looking for meaningful Torah messages, we tend to look for a combination of brevity, depth, and practical impact. It is nearly impossible to remain completely loyal to all three of those qualities, but Rabbi Dachs does so expertly. Each piece in this beautiful *sefer* grabs your attention, provides a significant insight, and leaves you with a message to implement, all in the span of a few short engaging paragraphs. Rabbi Dachs is not only a gifted writer and teacher of Torah but also a person who lives in accordance with these beautiful Torah values. Each message truly emanates from his heart and reflects his kindness, ambition, and extraordinary ability.

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!אָן אַלע יאָרן פֿאַר אַן אַרבעט
Rav Aryeh Dachs שליט, Talmid of Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh
and its Kollel and Rav at Congregation Ohr Torah has produced
a marvelous work of clear presentation of fundamental
Torah concepts and their application to daily life. It truly
combines the depth of Torah-wisdom and keen understanding
of the human condition in our day. This is a rare
combination indeed. I am fully confident that one who places his
mind and heart to absorb the ideas found in this sefer
will benefit greatly both in the understanding of critical
principles of the Torah and in the effort to live with
those principles in daily life. My heartfelt wish and
blessing is that the words contained here should indeed reach the
minds and hearts of all who could learn from them, and that
the fullness of that benefit be achieved.

With abundant friendship and respect, אַלע יאָרן אַרבעט

יְהוּדָה שְׁמִידמָן

Yehuda Shmidman

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Sefer Bereishis

Bereishis

A Working Paradise

Following the “Holiday Season”—the month of Tishrei, we can sense a sort of national funk. We just experienced the uplifting High Holy Days, we unified with G-d in the sukkah, spent time with family and friends, and rejoiced on Simchas Torah. That is all behind us now. As we brace for the winter, we need a new way to connect, without the spiritual “glitz and glamour.” The parashah of *Bereishis* presents a unique perspective on the “routine” portion of the year.

After the Almighty created man, the capstone of Creation, G-d placed him in the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was a utopia built specifically for Adam to enjoy. This paradise served as G-d’s expression of love for man. This area was separated from the rest of the planet in what can best be compared to an exclusively designed luxury first-class suite.

The verse tells us that G-d placed man in this paradise “to work it and to guard it.”¹ The question presents itself: What sort of work was necessary in the literal Eden? Why did G-d create a paradise that required the labor of man? Many explain that this verse did not refer to actual physical labor but rather to spiritual “toil.” The work to be done in the Garden was nothing more than the hard toiling needed in the study of Torah.

1 *Bereishis* 2:15.

However, we can explore a more literal interpretation. The *Chovos Halevavos* (Duties of the Heart),² understands this verse to be an actual command, a mitzvah. G-d commanded Adam to work the Garden of Eden, care for it, and tend to its needs. The *Chovos Halevavos* continues that this command was not directed exclusively to Adam; this command is a ringing mandate relevant in every generation. Even today, G-d demands that man “work the land and develop the earth.” The *Chovos Halevavos* explains that one fulfills this demand whenever he advances the world by engaging in commerce, developing countries, and by marrying and procreating.

The nature of this command is curious. Adam was not explicitly commanded to work the Garden, rather the verse states G-d placed Adam in Eden to work it. This was the reason man was placed there. The focus of this mitzvah seems to be deeper than observance. This duty was organic, inherent, the *raison d'être*, the very purpose of his existence there. (This likely serves as the rationale for the *Chovos Halevavos* to expand this command beyond the Garden to all future generations.)

The idea presented by the *Chovos Halevavos* can also answer the question as to why the Garden required the work of man. Man was commanded to work in this Garden because man is built to work, designed to toil. Man must engage in occupation—not any occupation, but meaningful work, work that encourages the development of family, community, and country. Therefore, even in paradise, man was expected to toil. We no longer live in the paradise of Eden, but nonetheless, this dynamic did not change. By design, we are expected to work to develop and to create.

As we near the end of Tishrei, a month of holidays and spiritual connectedness, we get back to “the grind,” we get back to “real life.” For some, this can be a depressing time. Dark mornings, early evenings. All work, no play. However, the *Chovos Halevavos* teaches us that we can find meaning in our toil. By working, toiling, building our families, our businesses, and our communities, we are in fact fulfilling the will of G-d.

2 First published in Spain around the year 1040.

This will is built into our natural consciousness, our very being demands this work, and it can therefore serve as a path to spirituality.

The Adamah Adam

The most offensive thing anyone ever said to me might have been the woman who looked me in the eye when I was a teenager and said, “You are dumber than dirt!” How and why she would say that, and whether or not she was justified, is a story for another time. Regardless, I always appreciated the depth of that insult. There really isn’t anything lower and less significant than dirt. It is interesting, then, that the Midrash teaches that man, who was G-d’s crowning creation, is named after the *adamah*, dirt.³ Rabbi Yehudah Loew,⁴ the *Maharal* of Prague, explains in his work *Tiferes Yisrael*⁵ that although dirt is low, dirt has one unique and lofty characteristic. When a seed is planted in dirt, it grows. We are named for dirt because of man’s distinction from the rest of the created world in that he is able to develop and grow.

I read an essay by Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum in his work *Yismach Moshe*, where he uses a similar concept to explain another troubling verse. Before creating man, G-d says, “Let *us* create man.”⁶ The Midrash⁷ teaches that Moshe did not want to transcribe this difficult verse in the Torah. He challenged G-d, saying that future heretics might get the wrong idea. Nevertheless, G-d commanded Moshe to specifically use that phrase as a lesson in humility. Before creating man, Hashem did consult with the other celestial beings. The *Yismach Moshe* poses an interesting question on this Midrash. It seems that Moshe’s concern was that other people would get the wrong idea. However, Moshe himself is not troubled by the statement, “Let *us* make man.” Even if there was no risk of future heresy, why was Moshe comfortable with Hashem connoting that there was more than one being taking part in the creation of man?

3 *Midrash Rabbah, Chukas* 19.

4 1525–1609.

5 Ch. 3.

6 *Bereishis* 1:26.

7 *Bereishis Rabbah* 8:8.

As an answer, the *Yismach Moshe* cites the *Sefer Ha'Ikarim*, the 15th-century work by Rabbi Yoseph Albo, who notes that after the other creations, the verse describes how Hashem saw “*ki tov*,” that His creations were “*tov*,” good. The creation of man, however, was not marked with the specific quality, “*ki tov*,” that it was good. The *Sefer Ha'Ikarim* explains that all other living things were *tov* and *shalem*, complete at their creation, whereas man has a job to do. Man is granted free choice, *bechirah*. Man must use his *bechirah* to build and transform himself to become a developed, sophisticated being. This is not a natural process and is certainly not found at the onset of his creation. Man at the onset of his creation is not *tov* yet.

The *Yismach Moshe* expands on this. Man must earn his distinction of being called “*Adam*” through making growth-directed choices. If a person does not engage in a pursuit of Divine purpose, he is abdicating his distinctive quality of *bechirah*, free choice. If he abdicates it, he is not utilizing his *bechirah*, and is therefore no different than any other living being; he is not *Adam* yet. Therefore, Moshe understands, “Let us make man” was a logical statement. G-d does not create man alone. The creation of man is a joint effort between Hashem and man. Without the participation of man there can be no distinctive creation of *Adam*.

Noach

A Lesson in Futility

We are all familiar with the fantastic episode of Noach and the Ark. Noach was charged with single handedly preserving life on this planet. He was the agent of G-d, solely responsible to construct an enormous sea vessel to shelter his family along with the entire animal kingdom for the duration of the Great Flood. The construction of this Ark was a massive undertaking. It was successful, and we owe a certain debt of gratitude to Noach for preserving the world and enabling its continuity.

We can imagine the scope of this project. A boat big enough to house the future of all living things would need to be nothing short of enormous. The Torah explicitly reveals the dimensions of the Ark: 300 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits. This is big, but hardly large enough to house a pair of every single animal species. Many early commentaries struggle with this issue. Rabbeinu Bachya¹ contends that even fifty arks could not possibly house every animal, let alone one Ark. He concludes that this episode was nothing short of miraculous, an open miracle of G-d.

Then Rabbeinu Bachya takes his conclusion one step further. He asks: If in fact this salvation was miraculous, why would G-d demand that Noach build the Ark altogether? Surely G-d could make a different miracle to save the animals. Perhaps they could float or even fly. Why go through

1 1255-1340.

the hassle? Why charge Noach with such a grueling task, with a goal that was physically impossible to actually fulfill? Rabbeinu Bachya explains that even when G-d performs miracles He demands that man participate. “It is the way of the Torah to command man to do whatever he is capable of doing within the natural realm,” only after exhausting the natural order will the miracle be performed.

This raises an interesting dynamic in the story of Noach. Noach must have known that the Ark he was building to save the animals was somewhat futile. It simply didn’t add up. The size could not work. Yet, this did not stop Noach from dedicating a significant portion of his life to this mission.

The parallel to our own lives cannot be overlooked. We might sometimes feel that our own life-mission is also nothing short of impossible. We are expected to balance our obligation to make a living, along with raising a family, while pursuing our own spiritual goals and a steadfast commitment to the Torah and its laws. As if this isn’t challenging enough, throughout our lives we all face significant tests and challenges that directly impede our mission to accomplish these ideals.

In *Pirkei Avos* the Mishnah states, “*Lo alecha ha’melachah li’gmor ve’lo atah ben chorin li’batel mi’menah*—It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.” A life with G-d demands this balance: we are charged with the impossible, yet we are expected to give it our all. As G-d demonstrated with Noach, when we do our share, when we put in the effort, when we give it our best shot, Hashem will ensure our efforts are not futile; He will ensure that we are ultimately successful.

The Way We Preach

Around one hundred years ago in Lithuania, the yeshiva of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the saintly Chafetz Chaim, was in severe financial distress and at the brink of shutting down. Someone arranged a meeting for the Chafetz Chaim with a wealthy factory owner from Moscow, a simple Jew who was not observant. His factory, which employed over a thousand workers, remained open on Shabbos. Upon making the trip to Radin

and meeting the Chafetz Chaim, the wealthy man was impressed. He immediately placed a sizable donation of ten thousand rubles on the table.

When he saw this large amount of money in front of him, the Chafetz Chaim burst into bitter tears. The man from Moscow apologized; he assumed that his gift must not have been a large enough donation. He assured the Chafetz Chaim that he would donate more; he would give the holy man whatever the yeshiva needed. The Chafetz Chaim immediately dismissed that notion. He was indeed very grateful for the gift. It was more than enough; moreover, he would turn down any additional funds. He looked at the man and told him, “Heaven forbid I should cry for something as trivial as money,” he explained. He was crying for the precious Jew in front of him, a Jew with a benevolent heart who had demonstrated a strong desire to do mitzvos. On short notice this Jew was prepared and willing to expend a small fortune to fortify Torah learning. He explained that he was crying because this distinguished *neshamah* would one day be held accountable for violating the Shabbos! He was crying because he sincerely felt pain for the state of this man’s soul. The man took the message of the Chafetz Chaim to heart and eventually did *teshuvah*, and slowly, over time, began to observe the Torah.

Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, the Klausenberger Rebbe,² explains that the man from Moscow was receptive to the Chafetz Chaim because the Chafetz Chaim did not speak condescendingly toward him. It was obvious that the Chafetz Chaim respected the man and loved him. He spoke to him from the heart, which is why his message was able to have such a profound effect.

Although Noach had 120 years advance notice before the Great Flood, he was unable to influence the people of his time to do *teshuvah*. Aside from Noach and his family, no other human was spared. To explain this failure, the Klausenberger Rebbe cites a Midrash that describes the way the onlookers reacted to Noach. They saw Noach building the Ark and asked him what it was about. He replied, “So said G-d, He will bring a great flood to the world.” The people responded, “The flood will be on the house

2 1905-1994.

of *this* man [Noach's house]." The Rebbe explained that they responded this way because they felt Noach was threatening them, lording over them. His rebuke directly attacked them, therefore in a typical fashion they reacted in kind, telling Noach, "You deserve it, not us." Noach's message was not wrong, Hashem did tell Noach the world would be destroyed. The people were clearly in the wrong and paid the price; they should have considered their lot and changed their ways. Nonetheless, Noach's rebuke was ineffective. Unlike his descendant, Avraham, Noach was unable to reach the masses.

Even the most consequential message of truth can be entirely ineffective if we fail to package it correctly. On the other hand, the Chafetz Chaim was able to communicate the direst message in a genuine, nonthreatening way, which ultimately left a profound impact on his fellow man!

His Likeness

I used to live near an inner-city neighborhood. Whenever I walked through the main strip there, I'd encounter a host of personalities. I remember someone, probably deranged, yelling, "Y'all don't respect me! Y'all don't respect me!" It got me thinking. Whatever state of mind that man was in, he not only expected to be respected, but demanded it. Why did he do so? Really, this is a question for all of us. We all want and expect to be respected. But why is this so? Why should the people around us respect us? Where does that attitude come from?

After Noach leaves the Ark, he is introduced to a new world order. He builds an altar and offers sacrifices to Hashem, establishing his fidelity to the mission of G-d. Hashem blesses and directs Noach and his family. He instructs Noach to avoid bloodshed, specifically, "Whoever sheds the blood of a man through man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d He made man."³

Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher,⁴ in his work *Leket Sichos Mussar*, points out that there are many logical rationales for outlawing murder. Most

3 *Bereishis* 9:6.

4 D. 1952.

obvious, if murder is acceptable then nobody is safe. The whole world that G-d created could be imperiled. In a more nuanced approach, our Rabbis teach that murder is wrong even if the act doesn't directly impact the world as a whole. The Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* explains that man was created alone to teach us that one who takes another man's life, it is as if he has destroyed the entire world. Just as Adam fathered a whole world, every human has that potential. Yet, this is not the reason given in the Torah. The most cogent reason for the commandment against murder is "For in the image of G-d, He made man."⁵ The Torah views man as a powerful and G-dly creature, endowed with a great soul, a "part" of G-d in him. If we destroy a human being, we, in a way, destroy a bit of G-d's Presence in this world.

With this perspective, we gain a new understanding on the value of human life. Moreover, we gain a deeper understanding of why we feel the need to be respected. What follows is a clearer imperative for us to treat others with respect and dignity. Because a person is created in the "image of G-d," all people are worthy of dignity and respect. We naturally sense this about ourselves and on a good day we sense this in the others around us. If we are not sensitive to the dignity of others, we lack an understanding of their Divine value. Alternatively, if we recognize the Divinity in the people we encounter, we lift the world a little higher.

5 *Bereishis* 1:27.

Lech Lecha

Seeking Merit

The first Midrash in *Lech Lecha* begins with a parable, a *mashal*, to explain the circumstances around the first time Hashem appeared to our forefather Avraham Avinu. The Midrash likens the occasion of Avraham's first revelation to that of a wandering man who comes across a magnificent palace. He is aghast to see that the palace is ablaze and no one is around to protect it. The man wonders, "Is it possible for a magnificent palace such as this to be without an owner, without a caretaker?" The owner of the palace peers out, notices the man and declares, "I am the owner of this palace." Similarly, when Avraham looks at the magnificent world around him, which looks to him to be spiritually ablaze and abandoned, Hashem "peers out," sees Avraham, and tells him, "I am the owner; I am here."

I came across an interesting insight by Rabbi Avraham ben Yaakov Moshe Helin,¹ Chief Rabbi of Głogów in Poland, who is the author of the work *Zera Avraham*, which can be found in many editions of the *Midrash Rabbah*. He asks, why does this *mashal* exist? What lesson is the Midrash teaching with this *mashal*?

1 D. 1725.

He explains that before Hashem appears to Noach, the Torah informs us that “*Noach ish tzaddik*—Noach was a righteous man,”² which gives cause as to why Hashem appeared to him. Hashem was about to destroy the world, which was completely corrupted, save for one man, a *tzaddik*, Noach. Therefore, G-d appeared to this *tzaddik* and instructed him to build the Ark to save himself and his family. In the case of *Parashas Lech Lecha*, the Midrash is attempting to explain why Hashem spoke to Avraham. Avraham had a different characteristic: Avraham was searching; he noticed that the way the world was operating seemed imbalanced. He was bothered, curious, and trying to make sense of the world, to understand the ways of G-d. Why was such a spectacular world devoid of any meaningful existence? The Midrash explains that this is why Hashem appeared to Avraham. Hashem’s appearance to Avraham and the new mission for him was a response. It was a response to him “knocking on the door,” searching for answers.

The lesson is a powerful one. Some, like Noach, merit distinction by G-d because they are righteous; they earn it. Others, like our forefather Avraham, merit distinction because they are searching with a deep, authentic desire to experience and understand G-d. This desire is commendable and warrants a response.

We intuitively understand the value of the righteous man, as the man earns his spiritual place through his steadfast commitment to the Torah. The *Zera Avraham* brings to light the value of a *mevakesh*, one who seeks truth. When we take the time to search for G-d we distinguish ourselves. Every quest for truth is an integral part of our journey and is valued immensely by G-d.

A Frustrating Legacy

In *Parashas Lech Lecha* we begin to read the saga of our patriarch, Avraham Avinu. The legacy of Avraham is aptly linked to his response to the *Asarah Nisyonos*—the “Ten Tests.” Throughout his life, Avraham was faced with ten significant challenges, each of which he met with

2 Bereishis 6:9.