

### About this week's sidra and essay:

*Succoth is the holiday of transition from the old year to the new, the turning of the year (Shemot 34:22) – a fitting time to complete the Torah readings of the passing year and begin the Torah readings of the coming year. Traditionally, Zot haBeracha which concludes the Torah is read not on Shabbat, but on the day of Simhat Torah – and it is always followed immediately with the reading of the opening of Bereishit, so that the cycle begins anew with no interruption. We read first the parting blessings of Moshe to the varied “tribes” of the nation which, along with the bittersweet story of his final moments, fill Zot haBeracha (literally, “This is the blessing...”). Then we are thrust suddenly into sonorous Creation, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. . . .*

*FrameWorks follows the same format this week with an essay focusing on the transition itself: the conceptual link of the Torah's end with its beginning, and the thematic unity of the Torah as a whole.*

## “The End from the Beginning”

*To whom will you liken Me to compare...Who declares the end from the beginning. . . .  
(Yeshai'a 46:5,10).*

This week, as we read both end and beginning of the Torah, that “end from the beginning” is difficult to discern. The transition from the sophisticated complexities of Moshe's blessings to the majestic but unadorned simplicity of *Bereishit* is startling, and is no help at all in exposing the thematic unity so indispensable for grasping the integrated oneness of the Torah. This is not a literary problem, but a conceptual one: if we cannot plainly articulate what the Torah is all about, how can we – from untutored child to sagacious elder – fathom it and *live* it?

I believe it is wrong to see the studied connection in the Torah reading of end and beginning as nothing more than a symbol of Israel's ceaseless Torah study.<sup>1</sup> Surely it is more than only that, and must relate to the singular joy we take on *Simhat Torah* in the breadth and meaning of the Torah itself: it must attest to our sense of the oneness of the Torah's vision. *Simhat Torah* and *Shabbat Bereishit* is the perfect time to search for the clarity and consistency of that oneness. We need to perceive that not only does the Torah's beginning contain its end, but that even “In My End is My Beginning,”<sup>2</sup> so that turning from *Zot haBeracha* directly to *Bereishit* makes as much sense as growing from *Bereishit* to *Zot haBeracha*.

The problem is that *Zot haBeracha* appears to be focused on something unrelated to the Creation narrative: the death of Moshe. The parasha begins with Moshe's last words of *berachot*, the visionary blessings he bequeaths to the varied facets of the nation, uniquely defining each *shevet* and its future. It ends with the rise of Joshua, and the poignancy of a death that interrupts a special life just on the verge of final fulfillment:

*Moshe climbed from the western plains of Mo'ab to Mount Nebo, to the top of the cliff facing Jericho. God showed him all the land of the Gile'ad as far as*

*Dan, all of Naftali, the land of Efra'im and Menashe, the land of Yehuda all the way to the Last Sea, the Negev, the plain. . . .*

*God said to him: This is the land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, to say, “I will give it to your descendants.” I have shown it to you—but you will not cross into it.*

*And there, in the Land of Mo'ab, died Moshe, the servant of God. . . .(34:1-6)*

The movingly personal nature of this portrayal makes sense only if the focus of the parasha is on the death of Moshe as an individual – his last words, his parting vision, and his disappointment. How do get from here back to *Bereishit*?

There is something we have missed here. The two sections of *Zot haBeracha* are drawn together by more than the death of Moshe, for the *berachot* and the last moments of Moshe share a common focus: the Land of Israel. In fact, it is baffling to behold Moshe's apparent confusion of a *shevet's* territory with its characterization and history in these blessings, as if a description of soil characteristics or climate or topography of the Land of Israel could specify a prophetically definitive *beracha* for a future:

*Dan is a young lion, springing from the Bashan.  
(33:22)*

(The Jordan river issues from his territory...or it may teach that his territory sprang forward into two non-contiguous sections. –Rashi<sup>3</sup>)

*Naftali, satisfied and filled with God's blessing—he shall inherit sea and south. (33:23)*

(The Kinneret Sea with a strip of territory along the south for spreading nets and traps. –Rashi<sup>4</sup>)

*To Asher he said...he dips his feet in oil. (33:25)  
(His territory produced oil like a wellhead. . . .–Rashi<sup>5</sup>)*

Even the history of a parcel, or for that matter its *shape*! is somehow a *beracha*:

*The summit of the ancient mountains,  
The sweetness of the everlasting hills. (33:15)*  
(This teaches that they were created before  
other mountains. –Rashi<sup>6</sup>)

*To Gad he said: Blessed is He who elongates  
Gad. . . .*

(This teaches that Gad's territory expands  
towards the east. –Rashi<sup>7</sup>)

*He saw the first portion for himself. . . .*

(He took a portion in the land of Sihon and  
'Og which was the beginning of the  
domination over the land. –Rashi)

And at this point, Moshe links the themes more tightly by inserting his own death into the context of Gad's land and *beracha*:

*...for there the portion of the lawgiver is  
hidden. . . .(33:20-21)*

(Gad knew that the burial plot of the  
lawgiver, Moshe, would be there, forever  
hidden from all. . . . –Rashi<sup>8</sup>)

So there is more here than meets the eye – the parasha pertains not so much to Moshe-the-man as to Israel-the-land.

Even the piercingly personal presentation of Moshe's last moments and a dream crushed at the threshold of fulfillment turns out to be involved with the saga of the Land of Israel. For losing the opportunity to bring the nation into the Land of Israel was not only Moshe's chief regret, it was God's disappointment, too. He needed to make good on a promise made long before:

*God showed him all the land...and said to him: This  
is the land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak and  
Ya'akov, to say, "I will give it to your descendants."*

What is the meaning of the "to say"? The Holy One said to Moshe: I want you to go to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov and to say to them, "He kept the promise He made to you!"

Berachot, 18b

*I have shown it to you – but you will not cross into it.  
(34:4) – This implies that if not for the decree I  
would have kept you alive until you could see Israel  
permanently settled there, and then you would go tell  
them!*

Rashi<sup>9</sup>

It is the *mission* of Moshe, the servant of God, that suffers here and *that* is the fundamental problem in his death: he *should* have completed the report of full delivery on a promise.

The closing words of the Torah, though, seem to speak here also of a very different mission: *All the signs and miracles that God sent him to perform in the Land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and all his nation. . . .(34:11)*. But a closer look makes it clear that even this was driven entirely by the need to make good on the promise of the Land of Israel. That promise completely defined Moshe's objective in Egypt in the first place:

*God spoke to Moshe and said to him: I am YHVH  
(The name denoting Being). I revealed Myself to  
Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov as God Almighty, but  
never made My name of Being known to them. And I  
made My covenant with them to give them the land of  
Cana'an...and I have remembered My covenant.*

*Therefore say to the children of Israel...I will bring  
you to the land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak and  
Ya'akov... (Shemot, 6:2-8)*

*God spoke to Moshe, i.e. harshly..., "I did not send  
you with no purpose in mind, but to keep the  
promise I made to the early fathers...in all My  
promises I used the name 'God Almighty':*

*to Avraham–I am God Almighty...I will give you  
and your children the land... (Bereishit 17:1,8);*

*to Yitzchak–I will give you and your children all  
these lands and keep the promise I made to  
Avraham... (Bereishit 26:3);*

*to Ya'akov–I am God Almighty...and the Land  
which I gave to Avraham... (Bereishit 35:11,12).*

I never let them know Me as the One who is  
truthful, for I made them promises I never  
kept...Now just as I made this covenant it is  
incumbent upon Me to keep it!"

Rashi<sup>10</sup>

All of the events from the Exodus until the close of the Torah need to be understood in the context of a surprising but straightforward theme: fulfillment of the covenant for the Land of Israel. But what about the Torah from the beginning until *Shemot*?

It is here that indeed we come full circle, and the transition from *Zot haBeracha* to *Bereishit* within one week begins to make sense:

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the  
earth. . . .*

Now, the Torah should actually begin with *This month is to you the head of all months. . . . (Shemot 12:2)*... Why then did it begin with *Bereishit*? In order to accomplish "The power of His works He declared to His people, to grant them the heritage of nations (*Tehillim 111:6*).” If the nations of the world should tell Yisrael, "You are imperialists, usurping the territory of the Seven States (of

Cana'an)!" they can answer, "All the earth belongs to the Holy One – He created it and gives it to whomever He sees fit. . . ."

Rashi<sup>11</sup>

The one theme, then, that binds the end to the beginning and the beginning to the end is Torah as the *Sefer haBrit*,<sup>12</sup> the "Book of the Covenant," establishing, authenticating, and documenting the right to the Land of Israel!

If not for the fact that Yisrael sinned, they would have needed to receive no more than the Five Books of the Torah and *Sefer Yehoshua* (*Book of Joshua*) which defines the boundaries of [the tribes within<sup>13</sup>] the Land of Israel. . . .

Nedarim, 22b

The *haftara* read on *Simhat Torah* is taken from that *Book of Joshua*, and continues the theme:

*My servant Moshe is dead – now arise and cross this Jordan...every place that the sole of your foot shall tread I have given to you, as I spoke to Moshe. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the Euphrates River, all the land of the Hitti, to the Great Sea to the West, will your borders extend. . . .(Yehoshua, 1:2-4)*

The Land of Israel is not only the thematic beginning, middle, and end of the five *chumashim*, but also their extension into *Sefer Yehoshua*!

You are probably feeling (along with me) a certain dissatisfaction with this solution. After all, it is all very fine that the Torah documents the rights to the Land of Israel, but surely it is a *religious* document as well – full of theology and mitzvot and mystical insights and everything one would expect in a religious book. Thousands of years of dynamic and vibrant Jewish life *without* the Land of Israel is proof enough that the fundamental theme of the Torah cannot be a piece of territory.

Besides, there are still *two* themes here: from *Bereishit* until the Exodus the focus is on the background, on the *right* to the Land, addressed to the nations of the world and their perennial attack on Israel in the United Nations– "if the nations of the world should tell Yisrael: You are imperialists..." But from *Shemot* until the end the focus is on the *keeping of the covenant*, addressing Yisrael and the *Avot*. It is jarring enough to move from Mount Nebo to the Security Council even if both do share an agenda!

Let's face it–this Rashi (and midrash) cannot really be serious, anyway. If the entire justification of *Bereishit* is to establish that "He created it and gives it to whomever He sees fit..." then what of everything between the Creation story and the Exodus? Besides, it is outrageous to claim that there is no justification for a Creation narrative in the Torah

except as a counter to United Nations' propaganda– what could be more fundamental to belief than Creation? Not to mention that, even granting that God as Creator has the *right* to do whatever He feels, the united (on this point, at least) nations would still cry to God for Justice: *Down with imperialism!* Most telling of all, at least 95% of the Creation narrative *itself* is unnecessary to establish that God "created it and gives it" –all that is required is the first verse: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Ironically, Ramban<sup>14</sup> sees these questions as the *solutions* to the whole problematic midrash. To him, the midrash is taking for granted the religious importance of Creation as a fact, and is bothered only by the unnecessary detail in the Creation narrative and the history that follows it.

There is no obvious meaning anyway to a Creation story that details what was created the first day, what was done the second day and so on. And the lengthy narrative about the creation of man and woman, their sin, their punishment, or the story of the Garden of Eden and the exile of humanity – none of this makes complete sense anyway from the verses as written. Not to mention things like the generations of the Flood and the Scattering which are not all that important. . . .

It should have been enough to know the Ten Commandments: *In six days God created the heaven and the earth and rested on the seventh day (Shemot 20:11).* . . .

And *these issues* are what we come to address with this midrash.

Ramban is saying that it is precisely the *details* of Creation, precisely the events *between* Creation and the Exodus, that Rashi and the midrash he quotes seek to explain. But that seems incredible – the whole point of the midrash is quite the opposite: just tell us that God created the world and then we know that he can give it to anyone He wants – forget the details.

We must be missing, then, the entire point of this declaration of the rights to Israel, missing the essence of "*The power of His works He declared to His people, to grant them the heritage of nations (Tehillim 111:6).*" Consider the further explanation of Ramban:

The Torah begins with "*In the beginning...*" and the detailed Creation until Man, and how God gave him dominion over His works, and how the Garden of Eden – most utopian place to be created in this world– became a place for his dwelling until his own sin drove him from there, and how the people of the generation of the Flood were driven from the earth entirely, only the "righteous one" saved with his children, and how the Scattering over the various

regions of the earth was caused by the deeds of his descendants. This is why it is understandable and appropriate that a nation should lose its territory and another inherit it. . . .

This begins to make a bit more sense. It is *not* that God merely seeks to establish His rights by virtue of Creation to assign territory as He pleases, but He shows that human deeds are the determining factor in His allocation.

Yet this only explains why the history *after* Creation is important, for we see in it the significance of the deeds of Man. It does not even begin to explain why we need to know the story of Creation itself. How do the *details* of the Creation story exculpate such allocation of territory as response to human morality? Yet this one point – the need for *detailed* Creation – is the essence of the midrash and of Ramban’s entire thesis, as he points out himself:

What corroborates my explanation is the language of the *Bereishit Rabba*<sup>15</sup> itself: “To what end did the Holy One spell out to Israel what was created on the first day, what was created on the second day, etc.? So that the nations could not antagonize Israel, claiming: You are an imperialistic people....”

Somehow or other the specific *details* of Creation – its progression from Day One to Day Seven – are the only grounds and justification for a world in which banishment from Eden, or a Scattering, or a loss of ancestral lands, or the acquisition of territorial rights are the consequence of the deeds of men.

Here lies the crux of the entire Torah, its one and only concern: Creation as bearing on the deeds of Man and the deeds of Man as bearing on Creation. Here is a story of God involved in a detailed process of Creation that must evolve step by step towards Man, that includes on its sixth day – *as part of Creation itself* – Man’s dwelling and choices. It is that Creation, as opposed to Creation as a single *fait accompli*, that fixes the place of Man in the universe. Only such evolving Creation allows Man to act upon Creation, to advance it or abuse it. Only detailed Creation implies that the world is *not a stage* where settings, roles and repercussions are predefined, purely arbitrary and ultimately unjustifiable. Only detailed Creation provides for a world in which the very land upon which we walk and within which we are buried can be uniquely related to us *as we are*, responding to us as we respond to it.

The Torah presents us not with a statement of the *fact* of Creation, but with a *story*, a narrative that develops, implying a world that is unfolding. The story of universal Creation flows directly into the story of Man’s choices within Creation and continues seamlessly into Man’s

history and his effect upon the world, and this significance is what makes the acts of men meaningful:

The world was created in ten utterances. But why would the Torah say this – could it not have been created with a single statement? Rather, it is to condemn the evildoers who destroy a world built of ten separate utterances and reward the just who sustain a world built of ten separate utterances.

Avot, 5:1

The midrash, then, is not saying, “God created a world, so He can do with it whatever He pleases!” Instead, it is saying, “God created a world in which Man makes all the difference, and has found that this land is no longer suitable for those such as Canaan but is perfect for us!”

It is only *Bereishit* that allows us to love the very stuff of Earth, the dirt we sift between our fingers and walk upon with our feet, the land we live and die for. It is *Bereishit* that links Man and universe so deeply that every act forges another link in ongoing creation, every choice achieves change, consequential and real. The covenant with Man is meaningful only as an expression of this relationship *within* evolving Creation. This is why the World to Come is not mentioned as an entity in the *Book of the Covenant*: a non-evolving world can play no role in covenant, can only be the *outgrowth* of covenant.<sup>16</sup>

All the mitzvot of the Torah, all the ethical considerations of the Torah, are justified not by religious morality but by covenant: by their effect on reality, their impact on the relationship of Man and Creation. Covenant is not static, it is the commitment to perfecting Creation. It is a dream of a society that has perfected itself in close relationship with a place profoundly connected and uniquely suited to the purity and intensity of the Creator’s original vision and presence. The covenant exists *because* Yisrael in the Land of Yisrael will one day come to live and achieve that dream. It is literally true then that the Torah in its entirety, its history and its mitzvot, exists only to achieve the fulfillment of the promise of the Land of Israel.

The history, topography, soil, climate, hydrology, and very shape of the territory of each *shevet* is its own personality and history, its place in Creation. Moshe perceived that relationship and bequeathed it to the *shevatim* in his last words. So it was that when Moshe was given a last vision of the Land of Israel, he saw in it not only landmarks and waterways, but a vision of all history.

*Moshe climbed from the western plains of Mo’ab to Mount Nebo, to the top of the cliff facing Jericho. God showed him all the land of the Gile’ad as far as Dan, all of Naftali, the land of Efra’im and Menashe, the land of Yehuda all the way to the Last Sea (hayam ha’acharon). . . .*

Read that not “*the Last Sea*” (*hayam ha’acharon*, הַיָּם הָאַחֲרוֹן) but *the Last Day* (*hayom ha’acharon*, הַיּוֹם הָאַחֲרוֹן). The Holy One showed Moshe all the history of Israel until the Resurrection. . . .

*Sifrei*, 357



### endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. variant quoted by E. Ki Tov, *Sefer haToda’ah*, 131
- <sup>2</sup> Motto of Mary, Queen of Scots
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Bechorot 55a and *Targum Onkelus*. Second explanation is based on *Sifrei* 355.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Bava Kama, 81b
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Menahot, 85b
- <sup>6</sup> *Sifrei*, 353
- <sup>7</sup> *Sifrei*, 355
- <sup>8</sup> *Sifrei*, *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> S.v. *leimor*, ד"ה לאמור
- <sup>10</sup> Selections from Rashi 6:4,5, s.v. *ushmi*; *vegam*; *latet*; *vegam ani*. ד"ה ושמי; וגם; לתת; וגם אני
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. *Bereishit Rabba*, 1:3; *Tanhuma Yashan*, *Bereishit* 11; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bo*, 187
- <sup>12</sup> *Shemot*, 24:7
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Rashi, s.v. *she'erka*, ד"ה שערכה
- <sup>14</sup> 1:1 s.v. *Bereishit*, ד"ה בראשית
- <sup>15</sup> *Bereishit Rabba*, 1:3
- <sup>16</sup> This is why focusing life on attaining the World to Come is so damaging, cf. *Mishne Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuva*, 10:1-5