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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Before the Beginning

“In the beginning...” (1:1)

The Torah opens, not with an explanation, but with a mystery: “Bereshit bara Elokim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets — In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth.” The Zohar asks: why “Bereshit” — in the beginning — and not simply “Barah Elokim,” G-d created? The word reshit implies a prior point, before the beginning. The Torah begins, therefore, not at the absolute start of existence, but at the first emergence of order from the Infinite.

This verse does not describe a chronological event but a categorical transition — the moment when what had previously existed only in the Mind of the Creator became capable of being perceived by another. “Bereshit” means the inception of relationship — the possibility of something other than G-d, yet utterly dependent on Him.

Creation, then, is not about the formation of matter; it is about concealment. The Infinite withdraws, so to speak, to allow finitude to exist. Light is hidden so that darkness may have meaning. The tzimtzum, the contraction, is the first kindness: a G-d Who makes space for man.

Yet the Torah does not end its first pasuk with “Bereshit bara Elokim.” It adds “et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets.” Heaven and earth represent two poles — the spiritual and the physical, the eternal and the temporal — and between them lies the drama of human existence. Man stands at the intersection, a being of earth who yearns for heaven. The goal of life is not to escape one for the other, but to bind them — to bring Heaven down into Earth and raise Earth up toward Heaven.

The very first word of Torah, Bereshit, can be read as bara shith — “He created six,” alluding to the six directions of space, the six dimensions of the finite world. But the Torah’s story begins only to point beyond itself — toward the seventh, the hidden center from which all meaning flows. The world of six can be measured; the world of seven can only be sanctified. That seventh dimension is Shabbat, when creation ceases to conceal and once again reveals its Source.

And so, when man is created — “b’tzelem Elokim” — in the image of G-d, it is not that he resembles his Creator physically or even intellectually, but that he possesses the capacity to ‘make space’, to create within himself a void for the Other — for another human being, and ultimately, for G-d Himself. To be in the image of G-d is to live in imitation of His withdrawal: to step back so that something else may live.

The tragedy of Adam’s sin was not mere disobedience but the collapse of this balance. He sought to seize knowledge rather than receive it. The tree of knowledge was forbidden not because its content was evil, but because timing was everything. Da’at—knowledge—must be preceded by emunah—faith. When man consumes the fruit before he learns reverence, knowledge becomes poison.

Thus the exile from Eden is not punishment but mercy. Man is sent into a world of concealment to rediscover G-d not as an abstract truth but as a Presence veiled within creation. Every act of kindness, every word of Torah, every Shabbat entered, is a step back toward that lost garden — not by reversing time, but by sanctifying it.

“Bereshit” — the point before beginning — remains the key to all beginnings. The world’s story begins only when we recognize that behind every visible start lies the invisible One Who allows beginnings to be.

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COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Kriat Shema al Hamitah (Part 26)

“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.”

Wilson Mizener – American Playwright

Kriat Shema al Hamitah continues: **Tremble and sin not. Reflect in your hearts while on your beds, and be utterly silent. Selah.** (Tehillim 4:5)

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (Brachot 5a) teaches that King David composed our verse to serve as a reminder that we must do everything that we can to avoid sinning. We should “tremble and sin not” because when we tremble we remember that the Evil Inclination never rests. As the Vilna Gaon writes, when an enemy is defeated the battle comes to an end. The fight is over. Not so with the Evil Inclination. The Evil Inclination is not intimidated by defeat. Quite the opposite. When the Evil Inclination suffers a setback it simply regroups and attacks again, always targeting each person’s weakest spot. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish expounds that “reflect in your hearts” teaches us that if the Evil Inclination overpowers someone, they should learn Torah. Torah is a perfect antidote because it fills a person’s mind with goodness and purity and leaves no room for unwanted thoughts. And if learning Torah is not a strong enough deterrent to stop a person from sinning, they should recite Kriat Shema, as the verse states, “while on your beds”. And finally, the verse teaches us that if all else fails a person should think about the day of their passing from this world – the day that they will be “utterly silent”. Nothing puts things into perspective and gives us the motivation needed to overcome the Evil Inclination like thinking of the moment when each of us will be judged for all of our actions in this world.

This verse is a part of Kriat Shema al Hamitah because, as has been mentioned previously, going to sleep at night is an opportune time to take stock and to realize that every physical action that we do in this world has an unavoidable spiritual repercussion to it.

Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848-1932) was the spiritual leader of the religious community in Yerushalayim – known as the Old Yishuv – during the British Mandate. He was a tremendous Torah scholar and his definitive rulings in all Halachic matters were considered paramount. Towards the end of his life Rabbi Sonnenfeld took a small break from the cramped living conditions in the Old City of Yerushalayim and went to stay in the Diskin Orphanage in the Givat Shaul neighborhood. Unlike today when the Old City and Givat Shaul are nothing more than a short bus ride from each other, one hundred years ago it took the best part of a day to travel between them. One day Rabbi Sonnenfeld surprisingly asked to be taken back to the Old City. His talmidim did as he asked and they arranged for transportation to bring their frail Rebbe back to his home in the Old City. When they asked him why he had insisted on returning home earlier than planned he told them that he felt as if his time in this world was drawing to a close and that he was going to die. He then

explained that he didn't want to trouble everyone with having to bring his dead body back to the Old City to be buried. That it was a lot easier to bring him back alive than after his passing. One of his talmidim, on hearing his Rebbe's explanation, commented to Rabbi Sonnenfeld that perhaps it was a little morbid for the Rabbi to be having such thoughts. Rabbi Sonnenfeld looked at his talmid and told him that, since turning forty years old he had thought about the day of his death every single day. And then he added, "There is nothing morbid about preparing to move from this world to the next. Quite the opposite! It has done nothing but fortify me and give me the strength to battle against the Evil Inclination."

To be continued...

PARSHA OVERVIEW

In the beginning, Hashem creates the entire universe, including time itself, out of nothingness. This process of creation continues for six days. On the seventh day, Hashem rests, bringing into existence the spiritual universe of Shabbat, which returns to us every seven days. Adam and Chava — the human pair — are placed in the Garden of Eden. Chava is enticed by the serpent to eat from the forbidden fruit of the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," and in turn gives the fruit to Adam. By absorbing "sin" into themselves, Adam and Chava render themselves incapable of remaining in the spiritual paradise of Eden and are banished. Death and hard work (both physical and spiritual) now enter the world, together with pain in childbirth. Now begins the struggle to correct the sin of Adam and Chava, which will be the subject of the history of the world.

Cain and Hevel, the first two children of Adam and Chava, bring offerings to Hashem. Hevel gives the finest of his flock, and his offering is accepted, but Cain gives inferior produce and his offering is rejected. In the ensuing quarrel, Cain kills Hevel, and is condemned to wander the earth. The Torah traces the genealogy of the other children of Adam and Chava, and the descendants of Cain until the birth of Noach. After the death of Sheit, mankind descends into evil, and Hashem decides that He will blot out man in a flood which will deluge the world. However, one person, Noach, finds favor with Hashem.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a Mitzvah is more beautiful when performed by someone who understands its significance” (Meiri, Bava Kamma 17a).

SHAATNEZ

Mitzvah #551; *Devarim* 22:11

The Torah prohibits wearing *shaatnez*, which means any type of garment that is made of a mixture of wool and linen. *Sefer HaChinuch* (§62) likens this to the prohibition against interbreeding, and he explains that the reason for both is that we are not allowed to tamper with the nature of the world that Hashem created.

According to *Rambam* (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:37), *shaatnez* is prohibited because it used to be the garb of idolatrous priests, and wearing it may attract a person toward idolatry. He notes that this was the practice of priests in Egypt, where he lived, and *Rav Menachem HaBavli* (§320) observed the same among Greek priests.

Rav Hirsch takes a different approach, which we will present in our own words:

There are two types of living beings other than humans: animals and plants. Plants have an inferior living spirit that enables them to feed and grow; animals have, in addition, a superior living spirit that enables them to think and act. At a glance, one would think that humans fall into the latter category; however, this is a terrible error.

Though animals have the added faculties of thought and action, they utilize these only for the purpose of feeding and growing. Ultimately, they are no more than sophisticated plants. Humans, like animals, feed, grow, think, and move, but when they live appropriately, they utilize their feeding and growing for the purpose of thinking and acting — and all this for the most elevated purpose of serving Hashem. They thereby transcend the level of animals and are more comparable to angels, who think and act, and do not feed and grow. It is up to every person to decide in which category he wishes to be.

Linen, a plant product, represents the inferior living spirit of plants that enables feeding and growth; wool, an animal product, represents the superior living spirit of animals that enables thought and action. The Torah prohibits covering one's body with wool and linen because this would imply that a person's life is nothing more than feeding, growing, thinking, and acting, like that of an animal. In truth, our purpose far transcends by far these earthly matters.

There are two exceptions where (under certain conditions) the Torah allows, and even requires, that a garment contain *shaatnez* : *tzitis* (a four-cornered garment with *techeiles* and fringes) and the garments of the kohanim. Because these garments allude to our higher purpose of serving Hashem, wearing *shaatnez* together with them symbolizes that we rise above animals.

Radvaz (Metzudas David §235) discusses Kabbalistic reasons for the prohibition of *shaatnez*. In simplified terms, he explains that wool represents the Attribute of Mercy (*Chesed*) and linen represents the Attribute of Justice (*Din*). Mixing wool and linen is like “crossing wires” in Heaven and yields power to the forces of impurity. In allusion to this idea, the Hebrew letters of *shaatnez* can be rearranged to spell *Satan Az* (or *Eiz*), which symbolize the forces of impurity. (In a Torah scroll, these letters all have crown-like tops to symbolize that whoever engages in Torah study is spared from these negative forces.) But when the Attributes of Mercy and Justice are harnessed under Hashem’s kingship, they fuse appropriately and have a positive effect; *shaatnez* is therefore permitted in *tzitzis* and in the garments of kohanim, for these garments remind the wearer of Hashem’s kingship.

The prohibition against *shaatnez* is therefore not just about clothing; it also alludes to the idea that combining opposing forces can be harmful. Such a combination occurred at the beginning of history, in *Parashas Bereishis*, when Kayin brought an offering of flaxseeds (the source of linen) and Hevel brought an offering of sheep (the source of wool), which was like mixing linen and wool; the result was that one brother killed the other.

This almost occurred again when Yitzchak and Yishmael, sons of Sarah and Hagar respectively, grew up in the same home. Sarah observed that the combination would have disastrous results and she demanded that Avraham banish Yishmael, comparing this to the commandment to separate wool and linen. As with the Mitzvah of *Shaatez*, it was difficult for Avraham to accept her view rationally; but Hashem told Avraham that Sarah was right. Upon Sarah's death, Avraham eulogized her with the paean of *Eishes Chayil*. The fourth line, “*Darshah tzemer ufishtim - She sought out wool and linen,*” alludes to her sage advice at this critical point of Jewish history.

INSIGHTS INTO HALACHA

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

5785 – The Rarest Year of Them All [and now 5786]

Part XVII

As detailed in previous installments in our series, the previous year that just ended, 5785, was not only a rare one, but calendarically speaking, actually the hands-down **rarest** of them all. 5785 was classified as a *HaSh”A* year in our calendars. This abbreviation refers to Rosh Hashana falling out on Thursday (**hei**), both months of Cheshvan and Kislev being *shalem* (**shin** - 30 day months instead of possibly 29; these are the only months that can switch off in our set calendar), and Pesach falling out on Sunday (**aleph**).

A *HaSh”A* year is the rarest of years, and out of the 14 possibilities in *Tur*’s 247-year calendar cycle, this year type occurs on average only once in about 30.19 years (approximately 3.3 percent of the time). Indeed, at times there are 71 years (!) in between *HaSh”A* years. The last time this year type occurred was 31 years ago in 5754/1994. The next time will be 20 years hence in 5805/2044. The next several times after that are slated to be 27 years further, in 5832/2071 and then a 51 year gap in 5883/2122.

In comparison, our current year, 5786, is classified as a ***GaCh”aH*** year. This abbreviation is referring to Rosh Hashana falling out on Tuesday (***gimmel***), the months of Cheshvan and Kislev being ***K’sidran*** (***kaf*** – meaning ‘in order’; that Cheshvan has 29 days and Kislev thirty days), and Pesach falling out on Thursday (**hei**). Not such an uncommon year, a ***GaCh”aH*** year occurs 6.2484% of the time.

The reasons and rules governing the whys and whens this transpires are too complicated for this discussion; suffice to say that when the *Mishnah Berurah* discusses these issues he writes “*ain kan makom l’ha’arich*,” that this is not the place to expound in detail, which is certainly good enough for this author.

Obviously, such a rare calendar year contains many rare occurrences. This series has been detailing many of them over the course of the previous year. Let’s continue on our journey closing off the unique year and starting on our current one.

Full *Selichos*

An interesting aspect that closed out our unique year is that for Ashkenazim, all of pre-Rosh Hashana days of *Selichos* (which technically were still recited in 5785) were recited. This is due to 5786's (our current year's) Rosh Hashana falling out on a Tuesday. As the Ashkenazic *minhag* is to always commence *Selichos* on a Motza'ei Shabbos/Sunday that is at least four days before Rosh Hashana, it is only when the following year's Rosh Hashana falls out on a Tuesday, when it is possible for the "full count" of all of the 100 *Selichos* to be recited. Actually not so common, the next time this will occur will be 20 years hence, in 5805 (just prior to 5806). Just another noteworthy feature that brought our calendar year to a close.

White-Garbed

There actually is one last interesting side point, but it is related to the secular (U.S.) calendar – that Yom Kippur 5786 fell out in the beginning of October this year, a full month after Labor Day. However, this detail was not be too relevant to us. Since the only "observance" (that this author is familiar with) is not to wear white past Labor Day, Ashkenazim disregarded this unspoken maxim, and rather followed the great *Rema's* directive to specifically wear white on the *Yomim Noraim* (and certainly on Yom Kippur) to be akin to angels on the holiest day(s) of the year.

Eleven Days of *Leining*

As we already broached our current year – 5786 – I will point out a noteworthy feature that "kicked off" the New Year. In *Chutz La'aretz*, from Monday, Erev Sukkos, through Thursday, *Isru Chag* Sukkos/Simchas Torah, there was *leining* for 11 consecutive days, which is the maximum amount possible in our calendar. The next time that this will occur will be in 20 years in 5806. [In Eretz Yisrael the most consecutive days of *leining* is 10; this occurs when the first day of Chanukah is Friday or Sunday.] This serves as a prime example of the dictum of "*Anu Ratzim V'hemi Ratzim*" [meaning, "They," i.e. the secular world, 'run,' as do we] – but for very different sets of priorities. "They" "kick off" their New Year with parties and drunken revelries, while we do it by discussing the maximum amount of consecutive days calendarically possible to have *Kriyas HaTorah*. *Mi Ke'amcha Yisrael!*

The Longest *Bentching*

One final noteworthy feature of our New Year that I will discuss, is that Rosh Chodesh Teves will be on Shabbos. This creates 'The Longest Possible *Bentching*,' with the additions of not only 'Retzei' (due to it being Shabbos) and 'Yaaleh V'Yavo' (due to it being Rosh Chodesh), but also 'Al Hanissim' with 'B'yimei Matisyahu,' in *Birkas Hamazon*, due to it being Chanuka as well. According to calendar expert R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of '*Understanding the Jewish Calendar*,' this concurrence is actually not so uncommon, but occurs 28.03% of the time, which is an average of once every 3.57 years, although

sometimes there is a 14-year gap in between one Shabbos Rosh Chodesh Teves and the next. Either way, *B'ezras Hashem*, we will merit this 'Longest *Bentching*' this year.

I will conclude our year-long journey of highlighting many of the fascinating facets of 5785, the 'Rarest Year of Them All,' with the famous blessing for the New Year that many customarily recite on Rosh Hashana eve (in the '*Achos Ketana*' *Piyut*; composed by the noted *Mekubal* Rav Avraham Chazan of Gerona, Spain): "*Tachel Shana U'Birchoseha*" - May the New Year and its blessings be ushered in." Quite an apropos *brachah*, as shortly before Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah we received the wonderful news and welcomed the remaining living hostages home! *Baruch Mattir Issurim*!! May Hashem's blessings increase and be fulfilled exponentially this year!!

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch famously wrote that "the Jew's catechism is his calendar." It is this author's wish that by showcasing the uniqueness of our calendar year and its rare *minhagim*, this article will help raise appreciation of them and our fascinating calendarical customs.

This author wishes to thank R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of 'Understanding the Jewish Calendar,' for being a fount of calendarical knowledge and for his assistance with this series.

Q & A – Bereishet

Questions

1. Why does the Torah start with the account of Creation
2. What happened to the light that was created on the first day?
3. Why isn't the word "good" associated with the second day?
4. How were the trees supposed to taste?
5. On which day were the sun and moon created?.
6. Hashem blessed the birds to be fruitful and to multiply. Why did He not do so with the beasts?
7. In whose likeness was man fashioned?
8. What kind of food did Adam eat?
9. Why is "the sixth day" written with the definite article?.
10. At the end of the sixth day what was the world still lacking?
11. Why was man made from dust gathered from the entire earth?
12. How is man superior to the animals?
13. Why was it not good that man be alone?
14. Where do we learn that one must not add to a commandment from Hashem?
15. What does it mean that Adam and Chava "knew that they were naked"?
16. Why did Hevel choose to be a shepherd?
17. What was the marital practice of the generation who lived before the flood?
18. What did Tuval-Cain invent?
19. Why did Chanoch die at a young age?
20. What was the sign that Shem was born with great propensity for righteousness?

Answers

1. 1:1 - So that when the nations accuse us of stealing Eretz Canaan from the Canaanites, we can respond that Hashem, as Creator, has the right to give the land to whomever He sees fit, and He gave Eretz Canaan to us.
2. 1:4 - Hashem saw that the wicked would be unworthy of it so He hid it for the righteous.
3. 1:7 - Because the work with the water wasn't completed until the third day. Anything that is incomplete is not "good."
4. 1:11 - The wood was to have the taste of the fruit.
5. 1:14 - They were created on the first day and suspended in the firmament on the fourth day.
6. 1:22 - He did not want the serpent, who was to be cursed, to receive a blessing.
7. 1:26 - In the likeness of the angels.
8. 1:30 - Vegetation.
9. 1:31 "The" in Hebrew is the letter hey, which has a numerical value of five. Hashem created the world on the condition that it will endure only if the Jewish People accept the Five Books of the Torah.
- 10.2:2 - Rest.
- 11.2:7 - So that wherever he might die, the earth would receive his body.
- 12.2:7 - He was given understanding and speech.
- 13.2:18 - If he were alone, he would appear to be a god. The creation of woman emphasized man's dependence.
- 14.3:3 - From Chava. Hashem commanded not to eat from the tree but she added not to touch it. Because she added to the command she eventually came to transgress it.
15. 3:7 - They had been given one commandment and they had stripped themselves of it.
16. 4:2 - Since the ground had been cursed he refrained from cultivating it.
17. 4:19 - They married two wives, one with whom to have children. The other one was given a potion which prevented her from bearing children.
18. 4:22 - Murder weapons.
19. 5:22 - Though he was righteous, he was easily influenced; therefore Hashem took him before his time to protect him from sinning.
20. 5:32 - He was born already circumcised.