Jewish Tribune – Bereishis

**Bereishis and The Purpose of Torah**

Rashi begins his classic commentary to Chumash with the question of R’ Yitzchak. Why does the Torah begin with Bereishis? Would it not be more appropriate to begin with “Hachodesh hazeh lochem”, Rosh Chodesh and sanctifying the new moon, the very first mitzvah commanded to the Jewish people?

Rabbi Zev Leff notes that R’ Yitzchak’s question is difficult to understand. The Torah is not, after all, a compendium of mitzvos. Even after the giving of the first mitzvah, many entire parshiyos are primarily narratives of the events in Mitzrayim and the midbar. And are we really suggesting that we remove all the narratives of sefer Bereishis? No Avrohom, Yitzchok or Yaakov? No Yosef and the brothers?

Rabbi Leff offers a fascinating and important answer. To fully appreciate R’ Yitzchak’s question requires an understanding of the purpose of the Torah.

The Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 12:2) observes that the Torah gives few hints concerning the coming of Mashiach. Moreover, the Rambam cautions us not to spend too much time investigating the entire topic.

**ולעולם לא יתעסק אדם ... בענינים אלו ... ולא ישימם עיקר, שאין מביאין לא לידי יראה ולא לידי אהבה.**

A person should not busy himself with these matters or make them essential, because they do not bring a person to love or fear Hashem.

The Rambam is saying something astounding. Learning about what life will be like when Moshiach comes should not form the focus of one’s learning because they do not bring one to love or fear G-d.

In other words, the purpose of Torah is to bring one to the love or fear of G-d. Only that which furthers this goal is contained in the Torah. Everything else is excluded. Matters of only historic or scientific interest have no place.

Rabbi Leff quotes Rav Yechezkel Abramsky zt”l who makes this very point. The penultimate possuk of Megillas Esther reads:

"וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂה תָקְפּוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ וּפָרָשַׁת גְּדֻלַּת מָרְדֳּכַי ... הֲלוֹא הֵם כְּתוּבִים עַל סֵפֶר דִּבְרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי מָדַי וּפָרָס."

“All the great deeds of Mordechai … are recorded in the history books of the royalty of Persia and Medea.”

Why did the Megillah refer us to the history books of Persia and Medea for further information concerning Mordechai? Did anyone ever read them? Were they ever available for our perusal? The intent of this verse, says Rav Abramsky, is to put Megillas Esther into perspective. If you seek historical information, the Megillah tells us, then read the royal histories of Persia and Medea. Megillas Esther, however, is not the source of such information, but rather a source of fear of Heaven.

This, says Rabbi Leff, is an essential difference between Torah and chochmah (wisdom). Wisdom, Chazal tell us, is found among the nations; Torah is not. Wisdom need not influence the behavior of the one who possesses it. To quote Rabbi Leff: There have been great geniuses in the arts, humanities and sciences, whose personal characters were nevertheless reprehensible. Their lack of integrity did not detract from their wisdom, and their wisdom added nothing to their character. When Bertrand Russell, then a professor of ethics at City College in New York, was accused of leading a singularly immoral life, he responded that just as he did not need to be triangle to teach geometry, neither did he have to be a moral person to teach ethics.

Torah, on the other hand, must influence the behavior and character of the one who studies it to qualify as Torah. A person possesses wisdom; Torah possesses the person. Torah is compared to fire, for like fire it must leave an imprint. Where study of the Torah does not transform the student, whatever knowledge he obtains is not Torah but secular wisdom.

A talmid chacham is the embodiment of Torah by virtue of having made its lessons part of himself.

Rav Mordechai Gifter observed that our Sages are not called chachamim (wise) but talmidei chachamim (students of the wise). They do not merely possess wisdom but are guided by it; they are its students.

Explains Rabbi Leff, now R’ Yitzchak’s question can be understood. Since the purpose of every word of the Torah is to guide those to whom it was given, its very essence is mitzvos, commandments. As the Zohar says, the narratives of the Torah are merely mitzvos disguised in the garb of narrative.

When one writes a book, it is normal to begin by acquainting the reader with the nature of the material contained within. Since all of the Torah is mitzvos, it would have been logical to start with the first clear-cut mitzvah to establish the pattern for all that would follow, and thereby make clear that even the narratives are included only for their eternal message of ahavas Hashem and yiras Hashem. By starting with the narrative of Creation there was a risk that the true function of the Torah as a source of guidance would be insufficiently understood. That is what provoked R’ Yitzchak’s question.

Every time we begin the Torah again, we must constantly keep in mind that every letter of Torah is an eternal lesson in ahavas Hashem and yiras Hashem and must be learned with that goal.

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