**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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**Why Does the Torah Begin with *Bereishit*?**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

### I. Introduction – Rashi's Comment and the Questions Arising From It

"In the beginning" – R. Yitzchak said: The Torah should have commenced with [the command]: "This month shall be unto you the first month" (*Shemot* 12:1), which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation? Because [of the thought expressed in the verse]: "He declared to His people the strength of His works [i.e., He gave an account of the work of Creation] in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations" (*Tehillim* 111:6). For should the people of the world say to Israel: "You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan," Israel may reply to them: "All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed is He. He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:1)

Rashi's *midrash* gives rise to three questions:

1) Why is it strange that the Torah opens with *Bereishit*? Surely the creation of the world is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism, if not the most fundamental of them![[1]](#footnote-1)

2) Is there a really a connection between the story of the creation of the world and the dispute with the nations of the world about our rights to *Eretz* *Yisrael*?

3) Is our moral right to *Eretz Yisrael* based exclusively on the Creator's arbitrary decision to give it to us? Are there no other factors that bestow that right upon us?

We will not deal here with the first question, since the Ramban already dealt with at length:

The question may be raised: There was indeed a great need to start the Torah with "In the beginning God created," because this is the root of our faith, and he who does not believe this but says that the world is without a beginning is a heretic and has no Torah at all! The answer is that the story of Creation is a profound mystery that cannot be understood based on the verses and can only be fully understood based on a tradition going back to Moshe our Master from the Almighty Himself… And this knowledge is limited to individuals based on a tradition going back to Moshe at Sinai together with the Oral Law. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 1:1)

We will therefore begin with a discussion of the second question.

### II. The creation of the World and the Inheritance of *Eretz* *Yisrael*

The *midrash* appears to have understood the first verse in the Torah, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth [*v*e-*ha-aretz*]," in the sense of "the heavens and *Eretz* *Yisrael*."[[2]](#footnote-2) This interpretation is not unfounded, as this is the meaning of the word *aretz* in almost all of the Bible. Numerous verses express this. One example:

Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the hill-country of the Amorites and unto all the places near it, in the Arava, in the hill-county, and in the Lowland, and in the South, and by the sea-shore; the land of the Canaanites and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Perat. Behold, I have set **the land [*ha-aretz*]** before you; go in and possess **the land [*ha-aretz*]**which the Lord swore unto your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, to give unto them and to their seed after them. (*Devarim* 1:7-8)

In other *midrashim* as well, we learn that unless it is otherwise qualified, the word *ha-aretz* refers to *Eretz Yisrael*:

*Eretz* *Yisrael*, which is dearer than all other lands, was created before all other lands, as it is stated: "While as yet He had not made the earth [*eretz*] nor the fields" (*Mishlei* 8:26)… R. Shimon ben Yochai said: "*Tevel*" – this is *Eretz Yisrael*, as it is stated: "Playing in His habitable earth [*tevel*]" (*Mishlei* 8:31). (*Sifrei*, *Devarim* 37)[[3]](#footnote-3)

And in another context:

R. Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse as referring to the empires. "Now the earth was unformed" – this is Babylonia… "and void" – this is Media… "and darkness" – this is Greece, who darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees… "upon the face of the deep" – this is this evil empire [Rome]… "and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" – this is the spirit of the Messiah. (*Bereishit Rabba* 2:4)

R. Shimon ben Lakish expounds "and the earth was unformed and void" as referring to *Eretz Yisrael*, which was subjugated to the fours evil empires mentioned in the *midrash*.

While this is certainly true according to *Chazal*'sapproach in the *midrash*, there is room to base the interpretation of *ha-aretz* as referring to *Eretz* *Yisrael* even on the plain sense of the text. The first two chapters of our *parasha* deal with the story of the Creation. Chapter 1 clearly deals with the creation of the entire universe: the sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, along with the world as a whole. Chapter 2 describes the creation of the Garden of Eden, and only the Garden of Eden. Where is the Garden of Eden located?

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted and became four heads. The name of the first is Pishon; that is it which compasses the whole land of Chavila, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gichon; the same is it that compasses the whole land of Kush. And the name of the third river is Tigris; that is it which goes toward the east of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (*Bereishit* 2:10-14)

We are familiar with the Tigris and the Euphrates. According to the commentaries, the Pishon and the Gichon are two parts of the Nile – the Blue Nile and the White Nile. This implies that the Garden of Eden is the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates. This, of course, is Greater *Eretz* *Yisrael* as it is described in the Torah:

In that day the Lord made a covenant with Avram, saying: “Unto your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.” (*Bereishit* 15:18)

Thus, what we have before us are two accounts of the Creation: chapter 1, in which God creates the entire universe, and chapter 2, in which God creates the Garden of Eden – *Eretz Yisrael*.

We may add that the act of creation in chapter 1 is described beginning in verse 3: "And God said: ‘Let there be light…’" The first two verses serve as an introduction, as is evident from their style:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. (*Bereishit* 1:1-2)

It stands to reason that this is an introduction to the two chapters of Creation, and not just the first chapter. Thus, the word "*ha-aretz*" in the first verse should be interpreted in two ways – one in relation to chapter 1, according to which "*ha-aretz*" is the entire universe, and the second in relation to chapter 2, according to which "*ha-aretz*" is comprised of the Garden of Eden and all of *Eretz Yisrael*.

The *midrash* cited by Rashi accords with the interpretation of the verse as an introduction to chapter 2. God created the entire world and apportioned it to all of mankind. At the same time, He created *Eretz Yisrael* and kept it for Himself, and He then gave it to whomever He pleased. When Israel acted righteously, He took it from the Canaanites and gave it to Israel. When they were wicked, He took it from them and handed it over to Nevuchadnetzar. God will one day give it back to us in its entirety, for we are His children, and we will eventually return to Him with full repentance.

### III. Our Moral Right to Take Possession of *Eretz Yisrael*

Let us return to the third question raised with regard to Rashi's comment, the question regarding our moral right to *Eretz Yisrael*. Rashi's answer presents us with a problem. Such an answer a person can justify any act of stealing, or even bloodshed, with the argument that his success is a sign from God that his conduct was legitimate and everything was done in accordance with God's will.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In order to answer this question, let us examine the prophecy upon which Rashi bases his comment:

Thus says the Lord to me: Make you bands and bars, and put them upon your neck; and send them to the king of Edom, and to the king of Moav, and to the king of the children of Ammon, and to the king of Tzor, and to the king of Tzidon, by the hand of the messengers that come to Jerusalem unto Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda; and give them a charge unto their masters, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Thus shall you say unto your masters: I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the face of the earth, by My great power and by My outstretched arm; **and I give it unto whom it seems right unto Me.** And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nevuchadnetzar the king of Bavel, My servant; and the beasts of the field also have I given him to serve him. (*Yirmeyahu* 27:2-6)

The phrase, "unto whom it seems right unto Me," is cited by Rashi, and the content is also similar. Yirmeyahu clarifies to the nations, and especially to Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda, that the entire world belongs to God and that He decided to give it to Nevuchadnetzar. In the style of Rashi, the prophet argues: "For should Israel say to Nevuchadnetzar: You are a robber, because you took our land by force, he may open the book of *Bereishit*, show them that the entire world belongs to God, and He gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to Israel, and when He willed He took it from Israel and gave it to Nevuchadnetzar."

Of course, placing these words in the mouth of Nevuchadnetzar does not dull the question: Does ownership of *Eretz Yisrael* pass arbitrarily from one nation to the next? But the answer to this question is simple: It is clear from all the prophecies concerning the destruction that the destruction was not an arbitrary act on the part of an all-powerful God who owns the land, but rather was the result of the evil acts of Israel. The phrase "And I gave it to whom I pleased" does not mean “to whom I pleased by My arbitrary will,” but rather “to whom I pleased because of their good deeds.” When Israel sinned and their actions were weighed on the scale of righteousness and uprightness, it was decided to give the land to Nevuchadnetzar:

From the thirteenth year of Yoshiyahu the son of Amon, king of Yehuda, even unto this day, these three and twenty years, the word of the Lord has come unto me, and I have spoken unto you, speaking betimes and often; but you have not hearkened. And the Lord has sent unto you all His servants the prophets, sending them betimes and often, but you have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear, saying: Return you now everyone from his evil way, and from the evil of your doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord has given unto you and to your fathers, forever and ever; and go not after other gods to serve them, and to worship them, and provoke Me not with the work of your hands, and I will do you no hurt. Yet you have not hearkened unto Me, says the Lord, that you might provoke Me with the work of your hands to your own hurt. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, says the Lord, and I will send unto Nevuchadnetzar king of Bavel My servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:3-9)

The novelty in the words of Rashi lies in the reversal of the speakers. The prophet relates to the argument put forward by Nevuchadnetzar, who conquered *Eretz Yisrael*, whereas Rashi relates to the argument put forward by Israel, who conquered the land from the Canaanites. Nevertheless, the fundamental idea applies to this conquest as well. The Torah explicitly states:

Defile not you yourselves in any of these things; for in all these the nations are defiled, which I cast out from before you. And the land was defiled; therefore I did visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land vomited out her inhabitants. (*Vayikra* 18:24-25)

Just as the people of Israel were exiled from their land owing to their evil deeds, so too centuries earlier the Canaanites were exiled from *Eretz Yisrael* because of their wicked conduct. This "exile" of the Canaanites was not possible until their iniquity was complete, as was told to Avraham in the Covenant of the Pieces:

And He said unto Avram: Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance. But you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And in the fourth generation they shall come back hither; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. (*Bereishit* 15:13-16)

We can summarize by saying that Rashi's comment follows directly from the rebuke of the prophets and from the verses in *Yirmeyahu*,which clarify that the creation of the world established that those who fulfill the will of God are those upon whom God will be pleased to bestow the right to *Eretz Yisrael*.

If we accept the interpretation presented above, according to which the Garden of Eden essentially describes *Eretz Yisrael*, it turns out that the moral idea about which Rashi speaks is stated clearly in our *parasha* itself. There are several differences between the two chapters of Creation, the one that deals with the universe and the other that deals with the Garden of Eden and *Eretz Yisrael*. One of the most striking differences relates to the creation of man. In chapter 1, man is created as an inseparable part of the universe as a whole. In chapter 2, however, man is created **outside** the Garden of Eden:

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; **and there He put the man whom He had formed.** (*Bereishit* 2:7-8)

And the Lord God took the man **and put him into the Garden of Eden** to tend to it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die. (*Bereishit* 2:15-17)

Since man was not created inside the Garden of Eden and the garden is not "his native landscape," and since he was placed there exclusively for his role – "to tend to it and to keep it" – if he does not fulfill the commandments imposed upon him, he will be removed from the garden, which is what in fact happened in the wake of Adam's sin.

According to Rashi, this is the essence of *Eretz Yisrael*: The people of Israel were not created within it, but rather arrived there from the outside – Avraham from Ur Kasdim, the Israelites from Egypt, and so on. The people of Israel were asked "to tend to it and to keep it," and if they fail in this mission, they will be banished from the land in the same way that Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden.

It was not by chance that Rashi reverses the speakers and relates to Israel's rights to their land, as opposed to the rights of Nevuchadnetzar. Rashi wanted to open the book of *Bereishit* with their rights and with God's love for them, as he did also in the other books of the Torah:[[5]](#footnote-5)

"Now these are the names of the children of Israel" – Although Scripture has already enumerated them by name while they were living, it again enumerates them when it tells us of their death, thus showing how dear they were to God, that they are compared to the stars which God brings out and brings in by number and name. (Rashi, *Shemot* 1:1)

"And the Lord called unto Moshe" – All of God's communications to Moshe were preceded by a call. It is a way of expressing affection… To the prophets of the nations of the world, however, God revealed Himself in a manner that Scripture describes by an expression ordinarily used for denoting events of a casual character and of uncleanness, as it is stated (*Bamidbar* 23:4): "And God happened to meet Bil'am." (Rashi, *Vayikra* 1:1)

"In the wilderness of Sinai… on the first day of the month" – Because they were dear to Him, He counts them every now and then: When they went forth from Egypt He counted them; when many of them fell in consequence of having worshipped the Golden Calf He counted them to ascertain the number of those left; when He was about to make His *Shekhina* dwell among them He again took their census. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 1:1)

"These are the words" – Because these are words of reproof and he is enumerating here all the places where they provoked God to anger, therefore he suppresses all mention of the matters in which they sinned and refers to them only by a mere allusion in the names of these places out of regard for Israel. (*Devarim* 1:1)

### IV. The Garden of Eden and the Temple

We noted earlier that the borders of the Garden of Eden correspond to the borders of *Eretz Yisrael*. If we reexamine the account of the creation of the Garden, we find that there are clear similarities not only between the Garden of Eden and *Eretz Yisrael*, but also between the Garden and the Temple. Thus it is stated after Adam's banishment from the Garden of Eden:

So He drove out the man; **and He placed** [*va-yashken*]at the east of the Garden of Eden **the *keruvim*** and the flaming sword that turned every way, to keep the way to **the tree of life.** (*Bereishit* 3:24)

This verse is very reminiscent of the description of the Holy of Holies: The verb *va-yashken* corresponds to the *Mishkan*, "the tree of life" alludes to the ark of the covenant containing the book of the law and the tablets of the covenant, and of course the *keruvim* parallel the *keruvim* that covered the ark.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is also the way we should understand the following verse:

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden… (*Bereishit* 3:8)

The Garden of Eden is the place in which God rests His *Shekhina* – where He walks about, as it were, in all His glory.

There is also another verse relating to the Garden of Eden that alludes to the *Mishkan*:

And the gold of that land is good; there is bdellium [*ha-bedolach*]and the onyx stone [*even ha-shoham*]. (*Bereishit* 2:12)

Onyx stones were placed on the shoulders of the *efod* of the High Priest (*Shemot* 28:9-12). Bdellium was found in the ark of the covenant in the jar containing the manna, about which it is stated: "and the appearance thereof as the appearance of bdellium" (*Bamidbar* 11:7), and Moshe was commanded to leave it for safekeeping for future generations before the Testimony in the Holy of Holies (*Shemot* 16:33-34).

Further evidence that the Temple is a continuation of the Garden of Eden may be brought from the prophecy of Yechezkel:[[7]](#footnote-7)

You were in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, the carnelian, the topaz, and the emerald, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the carbuncle, and the smaragd, and gold; the workmanship of your settings and of your sockets was in you, in the day that you were created they were prepared. You were the far-covering *keruv*; and I set you, so that you were upon the holy mountain of God; you have walked up and down in the midst of stones of fire. (*Yechezkel* 28:13-14)

This prophecy relates to the Temple and the holy mountain, which is called "Eden the garden of God." The *keruv* alludes, as stated earlier, both to the *keruvim* that were above the *kaporet* and to the *keruvim* that guarded the way to the tree of life.

The conclusion that arises from all this is that the Garden of Eden never disappeared. It reveals itself over and over again wherever the *Shekhina* rests,and it is within man's power to bring about the resting of the *Shekhina*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Translated by David Strauss

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1. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodot Ha-Torah*, chap. 1. R. Yehuda Halevi, who bases Jewish belief on the exodus from Egypt (*Kuzari* I:25), agrees that belief in the creation of the world is an important element in the belief in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the relationship between "the land," "the land of Canaan," and "the land of Israel," see R. Yoel Bin-Nun, "*Ha-Aretz Ve-Eretz Kena'an Ba-Torah*," in his book, *Pirkei Avot* – *Iyyunim Be-Farshiyot He-Avot Be-Sefer Bereishit* (Alon Shevut, 2003), pp. 29ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The parallel between "*ha-aretz*" and "*tevel*" is connected to what is stated in *Tehilim* 25: "The earth [*ha-aretz*] is the Lords's, and the fullness thereof; the world [*tevel*], and they that dwell therein." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 3:22) cites this argument, and establishes that it is what permitted the people of Israel on the eve of the exodus from Egypt to borrow utensils from their neighbors with no intention of returning them. His words intensify the objection raised earlier; hopefully, we will address the difficulty when we come to the book of *Shemot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I first learned this principle from my revered teacher, R. Mordechai Breuer. He brings it in the first chapter of his book, *Pirkei Bereishit*, volume 1 (Alon Shevut, 5759), under the heading "*Lashon Zahav shel Rashi*" (see pp. 26-32). See also Rashi on *Bamidbar* 8:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I first heard of this correspondence from my revered teacher, R. Yoel Bin-Nun. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. At the beginning of that chapter, Yechezkel prophecies about the destruction of the prince of Tzor, who tries to present himself as god. It may be suggested that there is a parallel between this severe transgression and the sin of Adam and Chava, who listen to the serpent and try to fulfill in themselves the verse, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The *Shekhina* also rested in the tents of the Patriarchs, and in great measure the actions of the Patriarchs are a repair of the sin of Adam and Chava. *Chazal* pointed to a connection between the tents of the Patriarchs and the Temple. Thus, for example, in a famous *midrash* cited by Rashi (24:67): "For while Sara was living, a light had been burning in the tent from one Sabbath eve to the next [= the *menora*], there was always a blessing in the dough [= *lechem ha-panim*], and a cloud was always hanging over the tent [= the *Shekhina* in the Holy of Holies]." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)