



Carnegie Shul Chatter

December 16, 2021



Let's Hear it for Teachers

The very first definition of Rabbi in Webster's dictionary is *teacher*. And aren't teachers so incredibly important?

Did you ever have a teacher whose guidance and wisdom helped you become the person you are today? And that teacher may have been someone who taught you in school, or someone who mentored you at work, or even a parent, relative or friend.

Or maybe that teacher was actually an ordained Rabbi who you encountered in Hebrew school or in a Shul somewhere along the way.

Recently, as I write these Chatters, I rely more and more on the wisdom of the late Chief Rabbi of the UK, Jonathan Sacks, who is certainly a great teacher of Torah, as we see yet again in his comments about Genesis in our feature article today. And who first turned me on to Dr. Sacks? Our own teacher, not an ordained Rabbi, but still a Rabbi in that he is such an excellent teacher, Dr. Larry Block, who shares his knowledge of Torah with us every Shabbos.

We all have the opportunity to be teachers at some point in our lives. It might not be in a classroom or in Shul, but when the opportunity arises we should make the absolute most of it. You never know whose life you will help to guide in a positive direction.

Vayechi in a Nutshell

Genesis 47:28–50:26

From Chabad.org

Jacob lives the final 17 years of his life in Egypt. Before his passing, he asks Joseph to take an oath that he will bury him in the Holy Land. He blesses Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, elevating them to the status of his own sons as progenitors of tribes within the nation of Israel.

The patriarch desires to reveal the end of days to

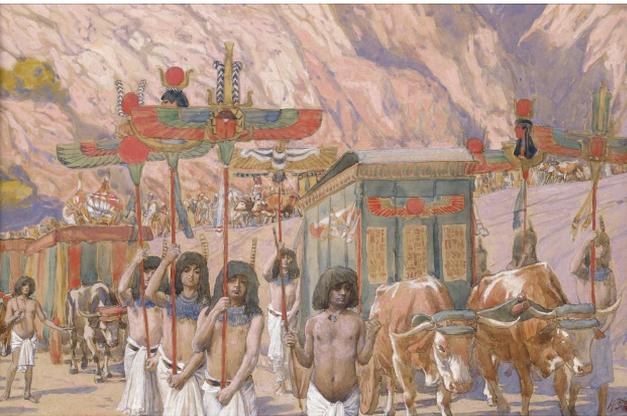
his children, but is prevented from doing so.

Jacob blesses his sons, assigning to each his role as a tribe: Judah will produce leaders, legislators and kings; priests will come from Levi, scholars from Issachar, seafarers from Zebulun, schoolteachers from Simeon, soldiers from Gad, judges from Dan, olive-growers from Asher, and so on. Reuben is rebuked for “confusing his father’s marriage bed”; Simeon and Levi, for the massacre of Shechem and the plot against Joseph. Naphtali is granted the swiftness of a deer, Benjamin the ferociousness of a wolf, and Joseph is blessed with beauty and fertility.

A large funeral procession consisting of Jacob’s descendants, Pharaoh’s ministers, the leading citizens of Egypt and the Egyptian cavalry accompanies Jacob on his final journey to the Holy Land, where he is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.



Joseph, too, dies in Egypt, at the age of 110. He, too, instructs that his bones be taken out of Egypt and buried in the Holy Land, but this would come to pass only with the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt many years later. Before his passing, Joseph conveys to the Children of Israel the testament from which they will draw their hope and faith in the difficult years to come: “G-d will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”



The Book Of Genesis

This week’s parshah, Vayechi, completes the reading of the Book of Genesis, and what a book it was.

There is so very, very much in Genesis. We learn about the creation of the universe, Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, Cain killing Abel, Noah and the Great Flood, Abraham accepting the one true God, the binding of Isaac, Jacob’s story and his conflict with Esau, Joseph and the coat of many colors and Joseph’s time in Egypt, and much, much more.

In 2016, The Jewish Chronicle (the London one, not to be confused with the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle) ran the article about Genesis that begins on the next page. I hope you enjoy it.

The Chief Rabbi on Genesis

The Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks explains the enduring relevance of the first book of the Torah in the introduction to his new book, 'Covenant & Conversation volume I', a collection of his essays on Bereshit ~ November 24, 2016 21:48

Genesis, the book of Bereshit, is as its name suggests, about beginnings: the birth of the universe, the origins of humanity, and the first chapters in the story of the people that would be known as Israel or (after the Babylonian exile) the Jews.

It tells of how this people began, first as an individual, Abraham, who heard a call to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and begin a journey, then as a family; it closes as the extended family stands on the threshold of becoming a nation.

The journey turns out to be unexpectedly complicated and fraught with set-backs. In a sense, it continues till today. This is part of what makes Genesis so vivid. We can relate to its characters and their dilemmas. We are part of their world, as they are of ours. No other ancient literature has so contemporary a feel. This is our story; this is where we came from; this is our journey.

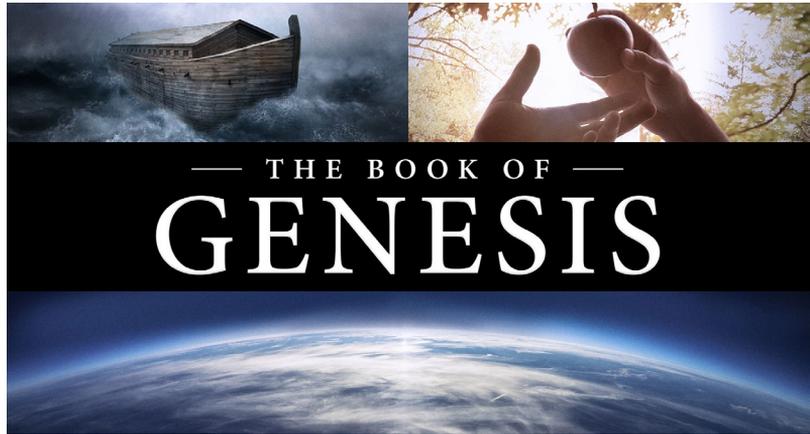
But this is not all Genesis is, and in reading it thus we risk missing its full significance. Maimonides makes the fundamental point that Reshit does not mean “beginning” in the sense of “first of a chronological sequence.”¹

For that, biblical Hebrew has other words. Reshit implies the most significant element, the part that stands for the whole, the foundation, the principle. Genesis is Judaism's foundational work, a philosophy of the human condition under the sovereignty of God.

This is a difficult point to understand, because there is no other book quite like it. It is not myth.² It is not history in the conventional sense, a mere recording of events.³

Nor is it theology: Genesis is less about God than about human beings and their relationship with God. The theology is almost always implicit rather than explicit. What Genesis is, in fact, is philosophy written in a deliberately non-philosophical way.

It deals with all the central questions of philosophy: what exists (ontology), what can we know (epistemology), are we free (philosophical psychology), and how we should behave (ethics). But it does so in a way quite unlike the philosophical classics from Plato to Wittgenstein. To put it at its simplest: philosophy is truth as system. Genesis is truth as story. It is a unique work, philosophy in the narrative mode.⁴



So we learn about what exists by way of a story about creation. We learn about knowledge through a tangled tale of the first man, the first woman, a serpent and a tree. We begin to understand human freedom and its abuse through the story of Cain. We learn how to behave through the lives of Abraham and Sarah and their children. It is this that has helped to make Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, the most widely read and influential book in the history of civilization. Only the gifted few can fully understand a philosophical classic, but everyone can relate to a story.



In Torah, form follows function. The fact that a piece of information is conveyed in a particular way is never accidental. The chosen genre, the literary medium, is there for a reason, and the reason is never merely aesthetic. Why then did the Torah adopt a story-telling mode for Genesis, its book of first principles?

Partly for the reason already stated: a story is universal.

The Torah is a book written for all. One of the great themes of Tanakh is its consistent battle against elites, especially knowledge elites. The Torah defines Israel as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) – a kingdom whose members all aspire to be, at least metaphorically, priests; a nation all of whose members are holy. Every religion has its own elites: priests, bishops, gurus, saints, mystics, shamans, holy men and women who form a distinct class set aside from society as a whole.

Judaism is about the democratization of holiness, the creation of a society in which everyone will have access to religious knowledge. Hence the importance of stories which everyone can understand.

Yet not understand at the same level: that is another feature of Genesis. Each of its stories has layer upon layer of meaning and significance, which we only grasp after repeated readings. Our understanding of the book grows as we grow. Each age adds insights, commentaries and interpretations of its own. The book’s literary style allows it to be read afresh in each generation. That too tells us something significant about the Torah’s view of human knowledge: The truths of the human condition are simply too deep to be understood at once and on the surface. Only stories have this depth, this ambiguity, this principled multiplicity of meanings.

Most importantly, only stories adequately reflect what it is to be human. Tell a story, even to young children, and they become instantly attentive. They want to know what happens next. In logical systems, there are no surprises as to what happens next: All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. The conclusion is already implicit in the premises. But in a story, as in life, we never know what will happen next, because human beings are free. Will Eve eat the forbidden fruit? Will Cain disregard God’s warning? Will Esau kill Jacob when they meet after long separation? Will Joseph’s dreams come true?

More than a narrative device, the element of suspense reflects a central theme of Genesis: God's gift of freedom to humanity. God created the universe; therefore God is free. By endowing human beings with His "image and likeness," He gave them freedom as well.

We may be, like the first human, "dust of the earth," but there is within us the "breath of God." We are shaped by our environment, but we can also shape our environment as well. We are created, but also creative. To a degree shared by no other life form known to us, we can choose how to act and how to react.

That is good news, but also bad, as we rapidly discover in the Torah's narrative. We can obey but also disobey; we can create harmony or discord. The freedom to do good comes hand-in-hand with the freedom to do evil. The result is the entire human drama as Judaism understands it.

Our fate does not lie in the stars, nor in the human genome, or in any other form of determinism. We become what we choose to be. Therefore, we don't know what will happen next. If some form of determinism were true, human fate could be summarised in a system, Marxist, Freudian, Darwinian or other.

Determinism, we believe, is not true, and the best way of showing this is by way of stories, in all of which the outcome is in doubt. We don't know what will happen until it does. And, in Genesis, things never happen quite as we expect.

The story opens with the creation narrative. We discover the universe as a place of order and goodness, the result of a single creative will.

Human beings are presented as the one exception to this rule. They can do evil and create chaos. At times – as in the generation of the Flood – they can endanger the entire future of life on earth. The Torah reveals this in a series of short, sharp vignettes. With Adam and Eve comes the first sin; with Cain the first murder. By the time of Noah, the world is "filled with violence."

In the age of Babel, humanity becomes guilty of hubris. No sooner have they discovered how to make bricks and build on a monumental scale, than they attempt to "reach heaven," transgressing into God's domain.

As humanity develops, so does its capacity for evil. Having revealed the ever-expanding scope of corruption – from self, to other, to the world as a whole, and then to heaven itself – the narrative shifts its focus.

From humanity as a whole we turn to one family: Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. God, as it were, no longer expects all humanity to reach the moral heights. Instead He charges one family with the task of leading exemplary lives from which others will learn.⁵

From chapter 12 until the end, the book is a set of finely nuanced variations on the theme of





relationships within the family: between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, across four generations.

Not by accident is Genesis a book about the family. The family is where we learn emotional and spiritual intelligence. There is nothing simple or idealized about the families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. There are tensions, rivalries, setbacks and unfulfilled hopes as well as love, kinship and loyalty.

Only much later in Tanakh do we discover that the family will turn out to contain the most compelling metaphors for the relationship between human beings and God Himself. He is our father, we are His children.

He is our husband, we are His betrothed. Something, however, becomes clear in one of the most haunting passages in Genesis, in which Jacob wrestles with an angel and receives the name that ever afterward his children will bear: Israel, one who “struggles with God and with man and prevails”: The tensions within the patriarchal family are symptomatic of Israel’s later, larger battles, with God, with humanity, and with itself.⁶

There is another significance to the focus of Genesis on the family. Unlike the god of the philosophers, the God of Abraham is a personal God. He is not an abstract concept: the first cause, the force of forces, the prime mover, pure Being.

He is a God who relates to us as persons, sensing our suffering, hearing our prayers, a presence in our lives. And it is in personal relationships – first and foremost within the family – that He expects us to honour Him by honouring others, who bear His image no less than we do.

The protagonists of Genesis are astonishingly human. They are a world away from the heroes and heroines of myth. They are not mighty warriors or miracle workers. They are not rulers commanding armies and winning legendary victories. They are ordinary people made extraordinary by their willingness to follow God.

We hear their hesitations and doubts, their fears and apprehensions. In the world of myth there is no clear boundary between the gods and human beings: the gods are all-too-human, and the humans are often portrayed as demigods.

In the Torah, by contrast, it is as if the transcendence of God makes space for the humanity of humankind. By insisting on the absolute difference between heaven and earth – the distance the builders of Babel sought to abolish – the Torah allows us to see ourselves as we really are, infinitesimal, fallible and frail, yet touched by the wings of infinity.

By placing the stories of Genesis before the book of Exodus, with its story of the birth of the Israelites as a nation, the Torah is implicitly telling us of the primacy of the personal over the political. Exodus is about the big themes – slavery and freedom, miracles and deliverances, the rescue of an entire people from oppression and their wondrous journey through the sea and across the wilderness.

It is about law and liberty and justice, and the nature of Israel as a nation under the sovereignty of God. But by focusing first on individuals and their relationships, Genesis reminds us of the complexity of the human heart, which no political order in and of itself can resolve: “How small, of all that human hearts endure / That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!” (Oliver Goldsmith).

If we cannot create peace or justice or compassion within the family we will be unable to do so within the nation or the world. Not until Joseph forgives his brothers and is reconciled with them can the story move on to the larger canvas of history.

Framing the story of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants are three promises: children, a land, and an influence on humanity as a whole. Repeatedly Abraham is promised children – as many as the stars of the sky, the sand of the seashore, and the dust of the earth. Seven times he is promised the land. Five times in Genesis as a whole, with slight variations of terminology, the patriarchs are told that “through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

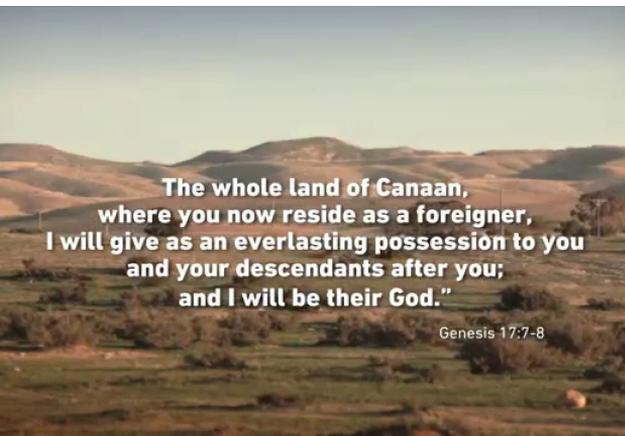


Yet the more we read, the more we realise that these promises are not about to be fulfilled immediately. Three of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, find it hard to have children.

Ownership of the land remains a distant prospect. The relationship between Abraham’s family and their neighbours is often fraught. There is no easy route from starting-point to destination. The way is long and hard. None of Genesis’s stories ends with a simple, “and they all lived happily ever after.” For these are not children’s stories. They are profoundly adult. They tell us that the journey is worth making – none more so – but it did not begin with us, and it will not end with us. “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it.”⁷

So, almost astonishingly, thousands of years later the three promises of Genesis remain the most pressing items on the Jewish agenda: children (Jewish continuity), the land (the State of Israel and its neighbours), and the relationship of Israel and the world (philo- and anti-Semitism). Genesis continues to be what it was at the outset, a book of first principles, the words in which, if we are truly open to them, we discover not only our ancestors but also ourselves.

Torah is God’s book of humanity, and each of us is a chapter in its unfinished story. Its words form our covenant with heaven. And as we listen and respond, we add our voice to the unbroken conversation between the Jewish people and its destiny.



Genesis 17:7-8

¹ Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, (Moreh Nevukhim) book ii, chapter 30. See also Ramban, commentary to Genesis, Introduction, who says that the Torah begins with the stories of Genesis "because it teaches people the ways of faith."

² See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 119–20, 240, for the difference between mythic and historical consciousness. Myth deals primarily with the origins of the things that are timeless features of nature. It is a kind of primitive science. It does not deal, as does the Torah, with time as an arena of change. See also Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

³ "The concept that within the history of mankind itself a process was at work which would mould his future, and lead men to situations totally different from his past, seems to have found its first ex-pression amongst the Jews... So, with the Jews, the past became more than a collection of tales, a projection of human experience, or a system of moral examples." J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 56–57. The idea of history as the unfolding of the relationship between God and humankind finds its classic expression not in Herodotus or Thucydides but in Ta-nakh.

⁴ To be sure, other great literature deals with philosophical issues: on this, see the work of Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell. On the difference between the two modes, system and story, see Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁵ Only in the book of Exodus do Abraham's children become a nation. Throughout Genesis, they remain, first a nuclear, then an extended family.

⁶ The sages recognized the principle 'What happened to the fathers was a portent of what would happen to the children.' See Bereshit Raba 40:6 for the parallels between the fate of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Genesis 12:10–20) and what would later happen to their descendants in the book of Exodus.

⁷ Mishna, Avot 2:16.

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The Carnegie Shul is most grateful for the following recent donations:

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Dr. Samuel Sherman

May their memories be for a blessing.