

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PARSHAS BEREISHIS

### Concerning Chumash Bereishis

#### INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST RASHI

Rashi's comments on the Torah are generally devoted to a word, or group of words, in the verse before him. His opening comment to our parsha, however, addresses the entire Chumash Bereishis and some of Chumash Shemos as well. Rashi asks:

*Why did the Torah not start with the first mitzvah, sanctifying the new moon, that was given to Bnei Yisrael when they were about to leave Egypt?*

He answers that the Torah starts with the account of creation in order to establish our people's claim to the Land of Israel. Should the nations of the world charge that we are bandits in taking possession of the land, we can respond that the entire world was created by and belongs to Hashem, Who is thus entitled to apportion it as He sees fit, and He gave us the land of Israel.

#### FURTHER RESPONSES: DERECH ERETZ KADMA LA'TORAH

As later commentators point out, Rashi's answer would seem to explain why the Torah began with the account Hashem creating the world, but not why Chumash Bereishis describes the life of the patriarchs and matriarchs in such great detail.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the question itself seems to be based on the premise that the purpose of the Torah is purely to communicate the mitzvos. In this regard, others take a different approach.

R'Yaakov Kamenetzky explains<sup>2</sup> that the role of Chumash Bereishis preceding the presentation of the mitzvos is reflected in the statement of the Sages in the Midrash, "דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה – *Correct behavior precedes the Torah.*"<sup>3</sup> The foundation of the laws of the Torah is an ethical outlovok and moral disposition. It is to this foundation that the Torah's account of the events prior to Matan Torah is dedicated. Indeed, the Gemara<sup>4</sup> informs us that the reference found later in Tanach to "ספר הישר – the Book of the Upright,"<sup>5</sup> is to Sefer Bereishis, which details the lives of the Avos and Imahos who were upright. To read of the kindness

1 It is also in place to consider how many of the nations of the world who claim that we are bandits have been convinced otherwise based on the Torah's account of Creation. In this regard, there is room to say that Rashi's explanation is more for us, the people of the Torah, to be confident in our claim to the Land.

2 *Emes le'Yaakov*, Bereishis 14:14.

3 See Vayikra Rabbah 9:3 "עשרים וששה דורות קדמה דרך ארץ את התורה" – Derech erez preceded Torah by twenty-six generations."

4 Avodah Zarah 25a.

5 See Yehoshua 10:13 and Shmuel II, 1:18.

and respect that Avraham showed all wayfarers, praying even for the wicked people of Sodom in the hope that they may ultimately renounce their evil ways and attain goodness, the grace and patience with which he conducted negotiations with the conniving Efron when seeking a place to bury Sarah. Yitzchak, too, exhibits great forbearance as the Plishtim repeatedly lay claim to his wells and then banish him from the region, being prepared to reconcile with them shortly thereafter. So, too, Yaakov's dedicated service to Lavan, even as the latter is repeatedly trying to swindle him and change the terms of their working agreement.<sup>6</sup> All of these are lessons in *derech eretz* and are a necessary prerequisite to receiving the Torah, where they then attain higher form and definition through the mitzvos.

The extent to which the Avos were immersed in *derech eretz* is demonstrated by the fact that some of their moral and ethical decisions exceeded that which the halachah sanctions. For example, Avraham going to war against four massive armies with only a handful of his disciples in order to rescue Lot would probably be considered a risk that he as halachically forbidden to take. However, in the formative *derech eretz* era, primacy was given to the moral sense of responsibility he felt towards his nephew.

Indeed, it is arguably for this reason the Torah was not given in that early stage, in order to allow *derech eretz* to establish itself firmly and soundly in the spiritual make-up of the Jewish people, giving them the foundation upon which to receive the Torah. Thus, even though we have a tradition that the Avos kept the mitzvos of the Torah even without being commanded to do so, nevertheless, the voluntary nature of that fulfilment meant that should there be a clash between the future mitzvos and current *derech Eretz* concerns, the former would need to make way for the latter. This is probably the most straightforward answer to the well-known question of how Yaakov could marry two sisters, something that the Torah would forbid in the future. He was not prepared to allow his voluntary fulfillment of the mitzvos to cause him to go back on his commitment toward marrying Rachel.<sup>7</sup>

#### “THE TORAH AND THE MITZVAH”

R' Kamenetzky explains and it is with this in mind Hashem later told Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai where He would give him “הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת – The Torah and the Commandments.”<sup>8</sup> What is the meaning of these two terms? Are the Torah and its commandments not one and the same? Rather, the first term, Torah, which means instruction, refers to the moral instruction in the realm of *derech eretz*, which is then followed by the commandments themselves.

Indeed, the lessons from the avos are crucial in terms how to how to keep the mitzvos themselves. For while we may not learn many mitzvos from the avos, we learn how to perform them. Hashem's command to Avraham to offer up his son Yitzchak is not a mitzvah that applies to the Jewish people on an ongoing basis, but there is no better guide for the devotion, alacrity and commitment with which one should perform a mitzvah.

Thus we find that there is a Tractate of Mishnah dealing with matters of piety that is called “Pirkei Avos – The Chapters of the Fathers,” for the purpose of this tractate is to enlighten and inspire us to emulate the ways of the Avos – their devotion both to Hashem and His mitzvos as well as to other people – as related in Chumash Bereishis.<sup>9</sup>

All this should hopefully serve to give both our appreciation and study of Chumash Bereishis an added dimension. It is not just there to inform us about our past, but also to elevate our present – and provide horizons for our future.

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6 See *Haamek Davar*, Preface to Chumash Bereishis.

7 Heard from R' Yehuda Copperman zt"l.

8 Shemos 24:12.

9 Maharam Schick, Introduction to Commentary on Pirkei Avos.