

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
 with Reb Yoel Kahn



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WHAT IS TORAH?

On the Shabbos before Rosh Chodesh Nissan we read *Parshas Hachodesh*.

In a sense, the Torah really begins with *ha'chodesh*, "this month should be the first of your months." This is evident from the very first paragraph in Rashi's commentary, where he cites the question of why in fact the Torah doesn't begin here, considering that this is where the Jews received their first *mitzvah*. His answer deals with a separate issue, implying that otherwise the Torah really should have begun here.

The Ramban counters this question with a stronger question: How could Rashi possibly suggest that the story of creation be omitted, when it is this account which is the foundation of our belief? How could the Torah just begin here, leaving us unaware of such fundamental information?!

Others expand this counter-question even further, making the point that the book of *Bereishis* also contains a number of *mitzvos* which have no other source! In fact, we would also lose so many valuable lessons if we just skipped all of the Torah's stories! Moreover, if Rashi truly believed that Torah's stories didn't possess value, then the stories that follow *ha'chodesh* should have been omitted as well; and if those are important, then so are the ones that appear prior to *ha'chodesh*! *Breishis* then does in fact contain the foundation of our belief, *mitzvos*, and stories with crucial lessons, not available from any other source!

JEWES ARE NOT "BETTER"

The answer given is that Rashi wasn't weighing in against the information itself; he was just arguing that it didn't belong in Torah, and should therefore have been transmitted through alternate channels, such as a separate work, or an oral tradition.

But what actually does belong in Torah?

Consider humanity, which is divided between descendents of Shem, Cham and Yeffes; while some groups are more refined than others, they are all equally human, distinguished from lower life forms. Specifically among the descendents of Shem, Avraham's descendants stand out; in fact, according to the Rambam, the descendents of Avraham through Ketura are obligated to circumcise themselves, setting them apart in particular. The descendents of Edom, Amon and Moav are also subject to special laws, both to their advantage and otherwise,

indicating that's they're different from other group within humanity.

Now, no matter how great the other descendents of the *avos* are, they're still humans, not Jews; Jews only came into existence when the Torah was given, when "the Jews received their first *mitzvah*" as Jews. While *Mila* was given to Avraham, and *gid ha'nasheh* to Yaakov's descendants, something significant was still lacking. "The Jews received their first *mitzvah*" as Jews when the Torah was given, which can be traced back through the exodus to the *mitzvah* of *ha'chodesh* which heralded *yetzias Mitzrayim*.

WHERE THE KING REMOVES HIS ATTIRE

We're all aware that Hashem created the world for the purpose of making a *dira b'tachtonim*, that a lowly, physical world such as our be transformed into Hashem's living space. When a king attends a function, he must appear looking magnificent; what exactly that means varies from group to group, and so he may appear differently depending on the particular audience. But in his own living space, the king doesn't need to suit anyone; that's where he can be himself. Hashem's revelation similarly differs, depending on the world He's interacting with. Our task is to turn

this world, through our Torah and *mitzvos*, into a place where Hashem can reveal Himself completely, as is.

The children of Noach, of Shem, and even descendants of the *avos* before the Torah was given, were instructed on how to keep the world in good condition. The *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach* (Seven Noahide laws) address maintaining a civilized society, where things like theft and murder are forbidden. Idolatry too is prohibited; Hashem must be acknowledged as the creator of the world. But this is not about Hashem as He is, on His very own.

“The Jews received their first *mitzvah*”, transcending the world, when the Torah was given. At the time, Hashem introduced Himself as He who had taken us out of *Mitzrayim*, and commentators ask why this is mentioned instead of the creation

of Heaven and earth; the former only concerns manipulating existing elements, like turning existing water into blood, or an making an ocean stand like a wall, while creating heaven and earth from nothing is far more amazing!

Chassidus answers that while creating heaven and earth is in fact a greater feat, and we must certainly be aware that they are Hashem’s creation, it doesn’t match the theme of Jews at *matan Torah*. The giving of the Torah was a revelation of Hashem, while creating the world was an act of constriction and descent on His part; the point in giving the Torah is that this world becomes a place where Hashem Himself

comfortable. The words “who took you out of *Mitzrayim*” are to be understood to be in reference to *meitzarim*, boundaries; at *matan Torah*, Jews experienced a departure from this world’s limitations, and the exodus from Egypt was for the purpose of receiving the Torah. The two share the same theme. And the exodus began with *ha’chodesh*, which discusses the *korbon Pesach*, a prominent feature of leaving *Mitzrayim* and *meitzarim*.

And thus while Rashi acknowledges how many important things *Breishis* contains, he argues that these should have been taught separately, while the Torah should have begun “where the Jews received their first *mitzvah*” as Jews.

NISSAN VS. TISHREI

In order to understand the deeper ties of *matan Torah* to *ha’chodesh*, let’s examine the *Targum Yonasan* on a verse describing the month of Tishrei. *Yonasan* states that Tishrei was once the first month, but ever since the exodus and the giving of the Torah, Nissan became the first while Tishrei is the seventh. The world was created in Tishrei, and that’s when the rules of nature were established; while Nissan signifies *nissim*, miracles, beyond the existence of creation.

While serving Hashem according to the perspective of Tishrei is important, namely acknowledging that Hashem runs the world, that there’s an eye that sees and an ear that hears, and that things like theft and murder are forbidden, it remains an

interaction with Hashem within the parameters of this world. But Nissan is when Hashem appears beyond the world, without limitations, and the exodus which occurred then was similarly an act of breaking beyond the boundaries.

“*Lachem Rosh Chadashim*”, the first of “your months”, specifically leap months and years, fits with the model of Nissan, *ha’chodesh*. The *Yerushalmi* observes that while there are certain bodily changes that occur when a girl turns three, should the sages add a month in order for Pesach to occur during spring, the changes that

occurred in the girl reverse themselves, because she is no longer three. Externally she might be three; three years have elapsed between birth and now, and physical changes have occurred in her body. But Torah declares that three years haven’t passed, and therefore her body shouldn’t change yet, and the physical world complies with time and space as decided by Torah.

At the giving of the Torah, when Hashem was revealed as the One “who took you out of *Mitzrayim*”, it was in reference to the modality of Nissan, to the extent that nature itself adjusts itself to fit with Torah. It is Nissan which breaks the world’s boundaries, and “*ha’chodesh hazeh rosh chadashim*”, this first month affects all the rest; we, as Jews, reveal G-dliness within the world, making it a *dira* for Hashem.

“The giving of the Torah was a revelation of Hashem, while creating the world was an act of constriction and descent on His part; the point in giving the Torah is that this world becomes a place where Hashem Himself comfortable.”
