

Shalom Rav
Insights on the Weekly *Parasha*



Rabbi Shalom Rosner

SHALOM
RAV

INSIGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARASHA

BERESHIT • SHEMOT

COMPILED AND EDITED BY

Marc Lesnick

OU Press

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Shalom Rav
Insights on the Weekly Parasha

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This book is dedicated to our dear parents

***Rabbi David and Eileen Lesnick
Shaya and Rhona Bar-Chama***

*Each of whom has served as a role model
for us and our children as individuals dedicated
to Torah, Avoda and Gemilut Hasadim.*

And to our dear children

***Ariel and Rinat, Ori and Noam
Adena
Sarit and Yonatan
Rami
Amichai***

*Each of whom has brought us tremendous nahat,
by following in the path established by their grandparents.*

Tamar and Marc Lesnick

אשר זעליג ווייס

כגן 8
פעיה"ק ירושלים ת"ו

בס"ד

ידיד נפשי הרה"ג ר' שלום רזנר שליט"א רב קהילת נופי השמש בבית שמש ידוע ומפורסם בשערי תורה בשיעוריו הנפלאים והמרתקים, ואלפים הם שומעי לקחו תמידין כסדרן. אך עד עתה ידענו רק את תורתו שבע"פ, ועתה זכה יקיר לבבי איש תורה דעת וחסד ר' שי לזניק נ"י ללקט, לכתוב, ואף לערוך לקט פנינים יקרים מפז ומפנינים מדרשותיו של הרב על פרשיות השבוע ולהגיש אותם לפני ציבור שוחרי התורה בלשון צחה ונקיה, ערוך בטוב טעם ודעת השווה לכל נפש.

בטוחני שרבים יתענגו על ספר יקר זה ויפיקו ממנו תועלת רבה.

ברכתי להרה"ג הרב רזנר שליט"א ואתו עמו ר' שי שזכות התורה תעמוד להם להתברך בכל משאלות לבם, ויזכו תמיד להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה בבריות גופא ונהורא מעליא.

באהבה יתירה

אשר ווייס



ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
RAV ASHER WEISS'S LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

My dear friend, HaRav HaGaon Rav Shalom Rosner *shlit"a*, the Rav of Kehillat Nofei HaShemesh in Beit Shemesh, is well-known in the Torah world for his wonderful and fascinating *shiurim*, with thousands of loyal followers who listen to his *shiurim*. Until now, we were familiar with his *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, and now, my dear friend Rav Shai (Marc) Lesnick, a man of Torah, wisdom and *hesed*, was privileged with writing down and editing the pearls of wisdom from the *derashot* of Rav Rosner, given weekly on *parashat hashavua*, and making them available to the Torah community in a clear and concise style, and edited in a judicious and accessible manner.

I am certain that all will enjoy this valuable book and will derive much benefit from it.

I express my best wishes to HaGaon HaRav Rosner and Rav Shai (Marc) Lesnick, that the *zekhut* of the Torah shall protect them, and may they be blessed with health and the ability to continue to spread and encourage the study and observance of Torah.

With great love,
Asher Weiss

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הרה"צ' שכתר
ראש ישיבה וראש כולל
ישיבת רבינו יצחק אלתרן

מכתב צרכה

עברתי על כמה מהמאמרים שבספרו של כב' יקירי הר"ר שלו' נ"י על
הפרשיות ונהייתי מאוד מהרעיונות וגם מאופן סידור הדברים,
וצרכתי להרצ המחבר שימנח הספר חן בעיני התלמידים וילמדו בו.
ויפה עשה ידידי הר"ר שלו' שהמתין מלהדפיס ספרו זה בעיני
השקפה עד לאחר שיצא שמו והתפרסם בעולם התורה כבעל הלכה,
ואשר ממילא דבריו בעיני השקפה יתקבלו ביותר.

בכבוד,
צבי שכתר

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF RAV HERSHEL SCHACHTER'S LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

I reviewed several of the *divrei Torah* that appear in the book of my dear friend Rav Shalom Rosner on the *parshiyot*, and I very much enjoyed the thoughts and the manner of presentation. My warmest wishes to the author that the book will be enjoyed and studied by his students. My friend Rav Shalom acted wisely and waited to publish a work on *hashkafa* until after he became well known as a halakhic scholar, so that his words of *hashkafa* would be accepted more readily.

With respect,
Tzvi (Hershel) Schachter

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Preface

Sheheyanu vekiyemanu vehigyanu lazeman hazeh!

I have been listening to Rav Rosner's *parasha shiurim* for years. Each morning I would download a *shiur* and listen to it during my drive to work. It felt like Rav Rosner was sitting in my passenger seat. From these *shiurim* I would always find inspirational words that I could share at our Shabbat table. I believe that these *divrei Torah* truly inspired my family, and on several occasions, I have heard my children repeat these thoughts, which to me is the greatest testimony that their message is pertinent.

Several years ago, I was approached by a group of young adults in Beit Shemesh who had just entered the army after learning in *yeshivot hesder* and *mekhinot*, and they requested a Shabbat *shiur*. I began delivering a weekly class on the *parasha*, and many of the sources that I used were from Rav Rosner's *shiurim*. After witnessing how people were so inspired by these *divrei Torah*, I decided that these pearls of wisdom had to be written and shared with Klal Yisrael. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the amazing boys and girls in that weekly *shiur* that continues even after many of the participants have completed their army service and some have even married. They were one of the main catalysts for this *sefer*.

Rav Rosner's style is unique. He usually references ten to fifteen thoughts on each *parasha* cited from a wide spectrum of *hashkafot*, including Hassidic Rebbes, Rav Yosef Soloveitchik, Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch, Nechama Leibowitz, classic *Rishonim* like the Ramban and Rambam, and modern commentaries such as Rav Asher Weiss and Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl.¹ Rav Rosner provides a clear and concise synopsis of various commentaries highlighting inspirational messages throughout each *parasha*. His classes are given each Wednesday night. They began in his community in Woodmere, and after Rav Rosner moved to Beit Shemesh they were given at his home until the shul for his *kehilla* was completed, where the weekly *shiur* is currently held.

In preparing this *sefer*, I reviewed every *shiur* that Rav Rosner gave in his weekly *parasha* series from 5769 through 5778 (ten years). In total there are approximately 150 *divrei Torah* per *parasha*. First, I would listen to each recording and then review the actual written sources.² I then selected what I felt were the most inspirational *divrei Torah* from each *shiur*, seeking to incorporate only a few *divrei Torah* from each *parasha*. There is much material that is included in Rav Rosner's *shiurim* that do not appear in this book. I apologize if I left out material that others feel should have been included, and I welcome constructive criticism so that we can improve future volumes and publications. Rav Rosner reviewed all of the *divrei Torah* included in this *sefer*.

I considered publishing Rav Rosner's *shiurim* for many years, and I can't express the feeling of gratitude that I have to HaKadosh Barukh Hu now that the first volume is finally going to print. Rav Rosner's inspirational thoughts have had a tremendous impact on my life and my family and I hope that we are able to properly relay these messages in this *sefer* so that its readers can be inspired as well. Our hope is that these *divrei Torah* can be shared at the Shabbat table and at *semahot* so they can enlighten our children, family, and community.

-
1. A bibliography is included at the end of the book so that the reader can identify each source quoted.
 2. These *shiurim* are available on www.ou Torah.org. Some of the earlier *shiurim* (5769 and 5770) also appear on www.yutorah.org, and if a recording from one of those years is not downloadable on the OU site it can be retrieved at the YU site.

Preface

I want to take this opportunity to thank Rav Rosner for serving as a tremendous role model for my family and many families in the Beit Shemesh community and in the diaspora. May Hashem grant Rav Rosner many healthy years so he can continue to be *marbitz Torah!*

I also want to thank my father, from whom I learned and continue to learn not only *divrei Torah* but love and appreciation of Torah. As I mentioned above, on my way to work I listen to Rav Rosner's *shiurim*. However, on my way home from work, I speak with my father and we share *divrei Torah*. I now understand the meaning of *uvelekh tekha baderekh* – to try to be involved in Torah while on the road. My father is a true role model. He received *semiha* from Rav Gustman, and although he runs a business during the day, he learns each night and teaches several classes on Shabbat and during the week. My father taught me the meaning of *Torah veAvoda*. May Hashem grant my parents many healthy years so that they can continue to share their thoughts and insights with the family and with their community.

This work would not have been possible without the assistance of several individuals who assisted with transcribing many *shiurim*. In particular, Daliya Shapiro and Miriam Schlusel, who transcribed most of the selected lessons. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Elli Fischer, who assisted with editing and did a tremendous job in helping me get the messages across in a clear and concise fashion. Yehoshua Paltiel contributed by preparing the biographies of various sources at the end of the volume so that the reader can better understand the background of each source quoted. I am grateful for the support and assistance that the entire Maggid staff has provided, in particular, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ita Olesker, Elisheva Ruffer, and Aryeh Grossman.

I want to thank each of my dear children (Ariel and Rinat; Adena; Sarit and Yonatan; Rami and Amichai) for being the initial audience with whom I shared many of these thoughts on a weekly basis and for their insights that continuously enhance the discussions at our Shabbat table. It brings me tremendous *nahat* when they share these inspirational messages with their colleagues in the army, in yeshiva, in university, at *Bnei Akiva*, and at *semahot*. May they each be *zokhe* to the *nahat* that they bring to me and *Ima* from each of their own children.

Shalom Rav

Most importantly, I want to thank my dear wife Tamar. Without her patience and support I would not have been able to publish this *sefer*. Each night after returning from work, on Friday afternoons and Saturday nights, I would be preoccupied with preparing this *sefer*, and the precious time we spend together had to be compromised. I truly appreciate her support and understanding of the importance of this project. Tamar is a true *ezer kenegdo* – always encouraging me to accomplish what I consider impossible. Tamar continuously amazes and inspires our family with the many *hesed* projects she undertakes and her tremendous contribution to the community. May Hashem grant us many more happy and healthy years together.

I am forever indebted to Rav Rosner whose inspirational thoughts and *shiurim* have had an everlasting impact on my life and provided me with fascinating material to share with and inspire others.

We decided to name the *sefer* “Shalom Rav,” which is a play on the name Rav Shalom Rosner. It is also a *pasuk* in *Tehillim* (119:165) that is quite appropriate: *Shalom rav le’ohavei Toratekha* – which means, “There is abundant peace to those who love Your Torah.” Many of the *divrei Torah* incorporated in this book highlight the importance of *shalom bayit*, Jewish unity, mutual respect, and acceptance.

For a list of the audio files on which these chapters are based, see https://www.korenpub.com/media/productattachments/files/s/h/shalom_rav_audio.pdf

My hope is that the readers enjoy these *divrei Torah* as much as I do. May we be able to internalize Rav Rosner’s meaningful messages and share them with others so that we can enhance our spiritual lives and the lives of those around us. *Hazak ve’ematz!*

Marc (Shai) Lesnick
Beit Shemesh
Tamuz 5779

Introduction

We recite in the Haggada:

ברוך שנתן תורה לעמו ישראל, ברוך הוא. כנגד ארבעה בנים דברה
...תורה

Blessed is He who gave the Torah to His people Israel, blessed is He. The Torah is parallel to (*keneged*) four sons...

The Torah is “*keneged*” the four sons. What does this word connote? How is the Torah “opposite” or “parallel” to the four sons? The Beit HaLevi suggests that there is a magic and uniqueness to Torah, unparalleled in the world of general wisdom. In biology or in mathematics, there are beginning, intermediate, and advanced textbooks. The novice child will not be studying the same material as the high school student, who in turn will not be sharing studied content with the doctoral level professor. Torah, by contrast, affords all levels of learners equal opportunity. The same Rashi that is studied by the first grader, is also studied by the *gadol hador*. Yes, each understands it on his own level, but the Torah is *keneged* all students, all types of sons and daughters, all colors of Jews. This, then, is the magical nature of Torah.

We also believe that each and every Jew has his or her special, unique connection to the Torah. *Tosafot* (Berakhot 11b) ask why is it that with mitzvot a *hefsek* breaks the effect of the *berakha*, with the exception of learning Torah, where it does not? For example, entering a *sukka* after an extended break demands a new *berakha*, while learning Torah on the same day, after a break, does not require another *berakha*. *Tosafot* answer: A Jew is always connected to Torah, even when he is not actively learning at that moment. Hashem places within each one of us a spark of holiness (Nidda 30b) that is in constant connection with Him and His Torah.

Thus, not only does Torah have a magical mystique and relevance to it, but each Jew has that “*pintele yid*” that is yearning and thirsting for that connection with the Torah, the world of the Infinite.

This volume is a reflection of this ideal and thirst. It tries to cull inspirational nuggets from the vast world of Torah commentaries, from the *Rishonim* to the *Aharonim*, from the *pashtanim* to the *darshanim*, from the esoteric to the down-to-earth. Just as I tried to accomplish during the live *shiurim* themselves, I attempted to glean from the sources something for us to take with us into our lives, some *lemaase* spark that we can put into practice. The oral and written word are very different worlds, and committing ideas to writing runs the risk of losing the excitement, vitality, and energy of each of these offerings. My prayer, though, is that the reader allow themselves to be drawn into the source, as if the respective authors were orally transmitting their ideas in person, with all the vigor and excitement that each source engenders.

As I write these words of introduction, I am overcome by feelings of gratitude and the inability to properly express those feelings. Hashem has afforded me the opportunity to present the ideas of His holy Torah, through *shiurim* both to live audiences as well as to many virtual *talmidim* throughout the world. Be it through the *parasha shiur*, *daf yomi*, or the mitzva and *navi shiurim*, He has constantly given *siyata dishmaya* every step of the way. All I can pray for is the continued opportunity for spreading His Torah to so many of our thirsty brethren.

This *sefer* would not have become a reality had it not been for the diligence and superhuman effort of my friend Marc Lesnick. He single-handedly arranged all of the conversion from the oral to the

written word, spent days and nights editing and rearranging the various thoughts, as well as keeping me up with all the deadlines. I am indebted to him for his help in this partnership to spread the *devar Hashem* to an even wider audience.

Rabbi Ziegler and Maggid Books have been a pleasure to work with, and I hope that our teamwork can continue for a very long time, in both the English and Hebrew realms.

To Rabbi Steven Weil and all the staff at the OU, I feel a deep sense of respect and gratitude for the opportunity to partner with you, in helping spread Torah to the four corners of the globe. You have created a platform for eager *lomdim* to access *shiurim* and elevate themselves in their *avodat Hashem*. May Hashem grant the entire organization great success in all of its endeavors on behalf of the Jewish people.

Hashem has allowed me to learn and teach in various illustrious rabbinic institutions, and I can truly state that all that I have gained is a tribute to my rebbeim and yeshivot. Mori VeRabi HaRav Michael Rosensweig, HaRav Herschel Schacter, HaRav Mordechai Willig, HaRav Yonasan Sacks, HaRav Asher Weiss, and HaRav Yechezkel Yacovsen have all shaped the Jew that I am, and I am merely a branch from their illustrious roots. May Hashem give them all many more years of spreading Torah throughout Am Yisrael.

My in-laws, Drs. Robert and Susan Schulman, have been a constant inspiration to me, both in deed and by example. They are known as pillars of Torah and hesed in their community, and we wish them many more years of tremendous contributions to Klal Yisrael, as well as to their family.

My father, Dr. Fred Rosner, was my first rebbi, learning Rambam with me on Friday nights at a very young age, as well as modeling what it means to be a public spreader of Torah, with the awesome opportunity of *kiddush Hashem* that that entails. He, along with my mother, have inculcated in me a love of Torah, a love of all Jews, and a love for the Land of Israel. May Hashem grant them many more years of health, nachas, and fulfillment in all their endeavors.

Finally, to my life-long partner, Tamar. You are behind each one of my accomplishments, and you are the greatest gift that Hashem has given me. May we be *zoche* together to continue to do His will to the

Shalom Rav

best of our abilities, and may our dear children, Yehoshua, Avigayil, Avraham, Naama, Michael, Eliyahu, and Chananya, always be excited to follow the illustrious legacy of Torah which we have tried to inculcate into our home.

Shalom Rosner
Beit Shemesh
Rosh Hodesh Tamuz 5779

Bereshit

Parashat Bereshit

Life Doesn't Always Go as Planned: Turning Plan B into Plan A

At the completion of the six days of creation, the Torah tells us:

וירא אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד. (בראשית א:לא)

And Hashem saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. (*Bereshit* 1:31)

Notwithstanding the fact that the six days of creation were characterized as “very good,” reading through the opening chapters of *Bereshit*, we are struck by the fact that it consistently seems as though various incidents didn't work out well or, at least, as planned. The first two people in the world, Adam and Chava, transgressed and were removed from the Garden of Eden. Their child, Kayin, murdered his brother Hevel. Hashem commanded the earth to bring forth trees that would taste like fruit. The trees sprouted fruit but the trees did not taste like the fruit. Hashem

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created the sun and moon relatively the same size and after the moon complained it was diminished.

Why does the Torah start in this way? Hashem could have created a perfect world. What are these stories, which seem like mistakes or surprises, supposed to teach us?

Rabbi Yisroel Reisman, in his book *Pathways of the Prophets*, cites Rav Pam,¹ who explains that the Torah begins with things that did not turn out as planned to teach us that when things do not go as planned in life, we must respond to these imperfections by creating an alternative plan. The Torah is teaching us how to move to “Plan B.” So often, we establish a plan and prepare to execute it when, for some unfortunate reason beyond our control, we are unable to achieve it. The car didn’t start. There was traffic. The store sold out of the items I needed. HaKadosh Barukh Hu is hinting to us to consider Plan B.

Man was originally supposed to dwell in the Garden of Eden. Adam sinned and was banished from the Garden of Eden. It seems as if Hashem’s original plan failed and He had to initiate an alternative plan: Plan B. Ten generations later, man’s actions brought destruction upon an immoral world and only Noach’s family survived. What did Hashem do? He started over. Again, the initial plan seemed to fail and Hashem had to make alternative accommodations, what we refer to as Plan B.

Rabbi Reisman says in the name of Rav Pam that the message here is that life rarely follows Plan A. The most successful people are those who can adjust to and work with Plan B. This is not easy. It involves disappointment and a need to reevaluate and lower expectations.

Rabbi Reisman then quotes a famous story:

Childhood polio had handicapped one of the world’s most famous violinists (Itzhak Perlman). He walks with braces and crutches. When he plays at a concert, the journey to the center of the stage is long and slow. Yet, his playing transcends his personal challenges. Once, in the middle of a challenging concerto, one of the strings of his violin snapped, with a loud popping sound.

1. Rabbi Yisroel Reisman, *Pathways of the Prophets* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2009), 83.

Life Doesn't Always Go as Planned

The orchestra stopped abruptly, and everyone waited with bated breath to see what would happen. After a brief pause, he set his violin under his chin and signaled to the conductor to begin. With great brilliance, he improvised, modulating and adjusting the melody in a way that compensated for the missing string... When he finished, there was an awed silence, followed by thunderous applause. The violinist silenced the crowd. Then he said, "Sometimes, it is the musician's job to find out how much music he can make with what he has left."²

That's Plan B. Strings break. Things don't happen as planned.

We often have expectations of ourselves, our children, and others, and our plans do not materialize. Hashem teaches us that rather than agonizing over what could have been, we need to be able to quickly adapt and make the best of Plan B. That is what the beginning of *Bereshit* teaches. We need to be agile and flexible. Life is not always a smooth ride. We need to make the best of what comes our way. Rather than fantasizing about what *could have been* and agonizing about missed opportunities, we need to make the best of what *is*. At the beginning of the Torah, we are taught that in life, you have to roll with the punches and turn Plan B into Plan A.

2. Ibid., 84–85.

Create and Recreate

Many commentators seek to uncover what we are intended to learn from *maase bereshit*. We know that all of Torah is meant to teach us something. However, *maase bereshit* seems so unique and divine that it is hard to know what we can learn from it. How does the creation of the world teach me something that can impact my daily life?

Says Rav Yosef Soloveitchik in *Reflections of the Rav*:¹ Perhaps this elaborate emphasis in *Sefer Bereshit* on creation was meant to be converted into a moral challenge to man: that just as God created, so too should man create.

As we know, we are enjoined to mimic HaKadosh Barukh Hu. *Ma Hu rahum, af ata tehei rahum* – “Just as He is compassionate, so too, you must be compassionate.”² Just as He is kind, visits the sick, buries the dead, and comforts mourners, so too, we must do the same. Moreover, just as God is creative, so too, must man be creative and contribute what he can to this world.

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1. Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought Adapted from Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Alpha Press, 1979), 26.
 2. Shabbat 133b regarding *middot* and Sota 14a regarding actions; see also the Introduction of the Hafetz Hayim to *Ahavat Hesed*, where he notes that the mitzva to imitate Hashem appears eight different times in the Torah, perhaps alluding to the metaphysical character of this mitzva.

As individuals, we each have to be creative in the world around us. In the physical realm, a doctor who is faced with an ill patient should take all necessary measures to cure the patient. That is an act of creation. Any assistance we extend to others calls on us to create, whether one works in law, architecture, or any other profession. We each have to use the talents HaKadosh Barukh Hu bestowed upon us to come up with creative solutions to overcome challenges. In addition, we also have to be creators in the spiritual realm (*ruhniyut*). That is one of our major purposes in life. We must make ourselves better people spiritually. We need to constantly recreate ourselves, moving up the spiritual ladder. But that is not all. In addition, as Rav Soloveitchik explains, we must help shape the spirituality of our children. This is also an act of creation.

As Rav Soloveitchik states:

There is also a mandate to be creative in the spiritual realm... Indeed, education in fulfillment of "And you shall teach them diligently to your children" (*Devarim* 6:7) is creativity par excellence. A formless, undirected child is transformed into a refined Torah scholar. An undisciplined child, without any identity, a *tohu vavohu*, is gradually changed into a spiritual personality.³

A child starts off empty and formless (*tohu vavohu*). We have to remember that. Slowly, like the many days and stages of creation, he is then formed and refined. Parents need to facilitate their children's spiritual growth as well as their physical growth.

Along these lines, Rav Soloveitchik continues by offering a beautiful explanation of the midrash (*Bereshit Rabba* 3:9) that states that Hashem created worlds and then destroyed them, and then He created other worlds and destroyed them too. There were many different worlds created before this one (maybe that's why there are dinosaur fossils in this world). What does that midrash teach us? That He didn't get it right the first time? *Has veshalom!* What does it mean that God created worlds over and over again?

3. Besdin, 26.

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What does Rabbi Abbahu teach? Surely it makes no sense to ascribe to an omniscient God, the *En Sof* (Infinite), the need to experiment before achieving His ideal. God could immediately have created a *ki tov* (worthy of His approval) world. Only man needs experiment because of his difficulty in translating mental conceptions into physical realities. Like Edison and other scientists in their experiments, He tries various approaches before He achieves satisfactory goals. ...

Rabbi Abbahu apparently wanted to teach the concept of multiple creations: that our world came into being in various stages. His description of the process, however, of God's displeasure with previous worlds and His final satisfaction with this world was intended to provide man with a moral lesson and was not to be understood literally. As God creates and recreates (actually refashions, i.e., *yetzira* and not *beri'a*), so too, should man be ready to rebuild and reconstruct, even as previous structures collapse. Thus, even a rabbinic concept of faith may be translated into a norm of human behavior.⁴

Why does it say that God recreated? To teach us that we will create, and we will fail – many times. We will put time into a project, and it will go nowhere. This midrash is teaching us to start again. Build another world. God built another world, so you can also build another world. *Ma Hu, af ata*. God didn't have to build another world. What we learn from His act is that we can rise after we fall and start over again.

As the Rav so beautifully explains:⁵

To build is initially difficult, but to rebuild is even more challenging. One can erect structures if one has the basic talent, commitment, and raw materials, but to reconstruct after the destruction of previous achievements is most difficult. Energies, resources, sleepless nights, and endless devotion, painstakingly expended, are all wasted.

4. Ibid., 27–28.

5. Ibid., 28.

In the prayer of *Uva LeTziyon*, we pray that we won't have to toil for naught: *lemaan lo niga larik*. But sometimes, it happens, and building a business after bankruptcy is much harder than building it initially. This is the history of the Jewish people, on an individual level as well as a national level. For the past 2,000 years, we have been in a constant state of destruction and of rebuilding, of falling and of reviving. Even in the last generation, the return of Jews en masse to our homeland and the massive growth in Torah learning worldwide following the tragedy of World War II are a testament to our nation's ability to rebuild.

Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 disciples were taken away from him,⁶ and what did he do? He said, "I'm going to start again, with another five students." And that's why we're here today. The Oral Torah survived because Rabbi Akiva learned *Parashat Bereshit*: God created, destroyed, and started again, and so did Rabbi Akiva.

The lesson, then, of the first chapter of *Bereshit* is twofold. First, we need to be creative and contribute to the world, both physically and spiritually, starting with ourselves and our families and extending to the wider community. Second, *ma Hu, af ata*. Just like God creates and recreates, so too, we must not be afraid of recreating after setbacks. Human beings make mistakes and experience failures. We must create, not fear failure, and then be ready and able to successfully recreate.

6. Yevamot 62b.

Torah Begins with a *Beit*: Learning Is Step Two

The Torah begins with the letter ב of בראשית, *bereshit* – “in the beginning,” which prompts a well-known question that is addressed in many midrashim. The Hebrew alphabet begins with א, and yet the Torah starts with a ב. Why?¹

One suggestion is that the Torah begins with a ב and ends with a ל (combining the two letters forms the word לב – heart). The Lubavitcher Rebbe² takes this concept a step further and explains the significance of the Torah beginning with a ב and the specific message to each of us: “The fact that the Torah begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beit*, indicates that reading the text is actually the second phase of Torah study.”

When we open up the Torah to learn, we have to realize that it’s step two. Step two is learning. What’s step one? Recognizing God’s existence and the fact that the Torah is God’s gift to us.

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1. Perhaps this is the real reason why there’s no *daf* (page) *alef* in the Babylonian Talmud. If it’s good enough for the Written Torah, then it’s good enough for the Oral Torah as well. There are other homiletic answers, but perhaps this is the simplest.
 2. *Chumash: The Gutnick Edition, Parashat Bereshit.*

If I don't realize that I'm connecting to Hashem, then I'm not going to connect to Him fully. On the other hand, if I spend the time that I am devoting to learning thinking about Hashem, I'm not going to understand anything or be able to focus on my learning, because I'm going to be focusing on "ah, I'm connected to God." I'm not going to understand the *Tosafot*. *Talmud Torah* is supposed to bring us close to Hashem, but we are not supposed to be focusing on the experience of connecting to Hashem while we are learning.

So how do we address this challenge? *Before* we begin, we focus on God. We're supposed to realize the experience we're about to be involved in, before we open the Humash, before we open the Gemara. The Gemara even has a special prayer to say before one begins learning. We have to appreciate what we're about to do. A person should take a few moments before he begins learning to reflect that he is about to study God's wisdom that has been condensed into a form that is intelligible by humans. He is about to bind his mind into a total union with God. While he's learning, though, he should try to figure out what Rashi is saying. That's not the time to focus on how his learning is actively bringing him closer to HaKadosh Barukh Hu.

The Torah starts with a ב – *bereshit* – because it's step two. א is *Hashem ehad*; א is thinking about Hashem and His oneness.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe doesn't quote it, but this idea can help explain a perplexing Gemara found in Nedarim 81a. The Gemara asks why the *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed. There is a well-known Gemara (Yoma 9b) that tells us that the first *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed because of the "big three" sins (idolatry, murder, and illicit sexual unions), and the second *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed because of baseless hatred (*sinat hinam*).³

The Gemara in Nedarim, however, offers a different explanation for the *Hurban*: *Shelo birkhu baTorah tehila* – "They didn't say the blessings over the Torah prior to studying Torah." Many commentators are puzzled by the Gemara's statement and ask (a) Why didn't they recite

3. Bava Metzria 30b provides another reason for the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*: that the people followed the letter of the law rather than acting *lifnim mishurat hadin* – "beyond the letter of the law."

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the blessings over the Torah? and (b) Even if they didn't recite the blessings over the Torah, is that so terrible? They still learned! They just didn't articulate the blessings over the Torah. Maybe they were in a rush.

Perhaps we can suggest, based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's insights, that *shelo birkhu baTorah tehila* means that they didn't do step א. They only started at ב. They started with *bereshit bara Elokim*, "In the beginning God created." The fact that the Torah is not just an intellectual pursuit but that it connects me to HaKadosh Barukh Hu, who is א, is not even written in the Torah. Knowing it is a prerequisite for learning. Prior to opening a Humash, we have to have an appreciation of what we are about to read and experience.⁴

On a similar note, the Bahag (*Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*), from the period of the *Geonim*, does not count belief in Hashem as one of the 613 commandments. Asks the Rambam: How could one not count belief in Hashem as a commandment?⁵ It's the most important commandment in the world! The *Rishonim* defend the Bahag and explain that belief in Hashem is a prerequisite for everything else.⁶ You don't come to the concept of a commandment, which implies a Commander, unless you already believe in God.

Likewise, appreciating Torah and its magical ability to connect us to Hashem is a prerequisite for studying Torah.⁷ And that's why the

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4. See Ran on Nedarim 81a in the name of Rabbenu Yona. Rabbi Asher Weiss, in *Minhat Asher: Sihot al HaMo'adim*, vol. 2, ch. 44, provides a similar explanation of what was so terrible about not making a blessing prior to learning Torah. Rabbi Weiss asserts that the fault was that they did not make a blessing on the Torah *prior* to learning; however, they may have made a blessing *after* having learnt Torah. If they were satisfied with what they had learnt, they made a blessing of praise, as one would recite a blessing after a meal. This was their grave error. We need to make a blessing *prior* to learning, similar to the blessing we recite prior to eating. By reciting a blessing prior to learning, we express our appreciation and understanding that we are about to study something holy, whether or not it is enjoyable. We study for the purpose of studying itself.
 5. See Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, 1.
 6. See Ramban, *HaSagot LeSefer HaMitzvot*, 1.
 7. There is a story told about Rabbi Yehezkel Levenstein that highlights the significance of appreciating the Torah. Years ago, in order to attract customers, banks gave out gifts for opening accounts. One of his *talmidim* told him that he had received a toaster from a bank as a gift, and he demonstrated how it works. You insert the bread here,

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Hurban occurred, because the people of that generation did not appreciate the opportunity they had: *Shelo birkhu baTorah tehila*.

May we preface our learning with a clear declaration of appreciation to Hashem for granting us the Torah and for selecting us as his chosen nation.

push this button, and after a few minutes, the toasted bread pops up. The rabbi nodded, indicating that he understood how to operate the new electronic device. The rabbi then noticed a large booklet that was in the box with the toaster and inquired about it. His *talmid* explained that it was the users' manual, which described how to use the toaster, provided warnings about misusing the toaster, and gave suggestions about what could be wrong if the toaster was not working properly. These instructions, moreover, appeared in several different languages. The rabbi began dancing in joy and explained that if this simple toaster, which just requires one to push a button, comes with a detailed instruction manual, then certainly HaKadosh Barukh Hu had to provide us with an instruction manual on how to act in this world, which is infinitely more complicated. If only we really understood that the Torah is that manual and that we follow its instructions, what a perfect world this would be! Understanding the importance and significance of the Torah before we study it provides us with the necessary perspective to carefully understand all its intricacies and treasures.