

OCTOBER 20, 2008

## Parashat Bereishit

### The First Lesson of the Torah

**Bereishit bara Elokim... – “In the beginning the God created...” (Genesis 1:1)**

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Rashi asks the question which underlies the entire book of Genesis. “The Torah should have only begun from ‘this month is for you,’ which is the first mitzvah in the Torah that was commanded to Israel. Why then does it begin at Genesis?” (see Rashi on 1:1) In essence, Rashi asks the question: what is the Torah? If it is simply a book of rules and commandments then why tell about creation? It is clearly more than just a book about the forefathers and the birth of the Jewish people. Rashi explains: “It is because: ‘He has declared to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.’ (Psalms 111:6) If the nations of the world say to Israel: ‘You are thieves, for you conquered the lands of the seven nations!’ [Israel] can respond to them, ‘the entire world belongs to God. He created [the world] and gave it to he who was righteous in His eyes. According to His will He gave it to them, and according to His will He took it from them and gave it to us.’”

Aside from the relevance of Rashi’s very first comment to the continued desire of many nations to deny Jewish claims to the Land of Israel, Rashi also raises our awareness about a critical aspect of Judaism that we may often overlook.

Many people consider the Torah a book of *mitzvot* – commandments. They perceive that it relates only the varied and numerous elements of our personal lives. Rashi notes that were this true the Torah would simply have excluded the history of humanity and the birth of the Jewish nation. Rather, the Torah uses the entire book of Genesis to convey the crucial lesson that Judaism is not simply a religion, but also an identity. Protecting and defending that identity is a very real religious imperative. Today, the most effective way in which we can defend that distinctiveness is by committing to making our voices heard by those who can do the most to help Israel. By building personal relationships with our Members of Congress we can help them understand the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship and that supporting Israel is the one issue that must remain sacrosanct and bipartisan.

Rashi reminds us that our actions and efforts on behalf of Israel do not run parallel to our Jewish identity but instead they form the core of our identity and our connection to the Land of Israel. Moreover, they precede every *mitzvah* in the Torah. We advance the cause Israel not in addition to our religious identity, but instead because of it. Every single word in the Torah – from the very first - compels us to action on behalf of Israel. ■

### Two Directions

**Lotesh kol choresh nechoshet u’barzel – “Forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron” (Genesis 4:22)**

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The Torah presents the children of Lemech as two diametrically opposite possibilities for human advancement. One child, Yuval, was “the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe.” (4:21) Another child, Tubal-cain, chose a different path, “forging” metal for cutting. What types of instruments did he forge? The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 23) tells us he chose to forge weapons for murderers. These two sons highlight the different choices which individuals and nations can make with regard to their development and advancement. Both Yuval and Tubal-cain use their creative energies to advance humanity. Yuval utilizes his talents for creative purposes; to build instruments and create

music to heal the world. Conversely, Tubal-cain uses his God-given faculties not to create, but to destroy. Instead of using his technical abilities for constructive purposes he directs his energy towards destruction.

These two sons represent the choices that everyone must face in how they channel their energies and how the world directs human advancement. Nowadays, the world must choose whether to allow Iran to follow in the footsteps of Tubal-Cain and use its technological abilities to build nuclear weapons or whether the world will use its influence and the power of economic sanctions to point Iran in the direction of Yuval and peaceful coexistence.

According to a recent report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran is rapidly overcoming technical obstacles and significantly increasing its uranium enrichment capabilities. If Tehran sustains its current efforts, in defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions, within six months it could stockpile enough material which could be processed into the highly enriched uranium needed for a nuclear bomb. While Iran has steadfastly claimed to be developing a nuclear program for peaceful purposes only it has repeatedly refused international requests for inspections of its nuclear facilities to verify these claims. The IAEA also has documents and photographs suggesting Iran secretly tried to modify a missile cone to fit a nuclear bomb and Iran has failed to cooperate with repeated IAEA requests for access to additional locations related to the manufacturing of centrifuges, research and development of uranium enrichment, uranium mining and milling.

The United States must lead the international community in an urgent and comprehensive economic, diplomatic and political sanctions campaign to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. Failure to do so will ensure that instead of following in Yuval's footsteps and creating technology to improve the world, Iran will follow the path of Tubal-cain and use its energies to become a, "forger of every cutting instrument," weapons of death and destruction." ■

## Our Adversaries' Keepers

### **Hashomer achi anochi... – "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9)**

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Cain's famous rhetorical question reminds us of the tenuous nature of human relations. Having just murdered his brother he not only denies any knowledge or responsibility for his brother but actually throws the inquiry about Abel's whereabouts back to God: "Is he my responsibility? Must I watch over him?" At face value, Cain's comment defies all logic. How can he possibly seek to justify his terrible act with such a cruel and insolent denial? Toldot Yitzchak (Genesis 4:9) suggests that when Cain asks *hashomer achi anochi*, he utilizes the language of *shamarim* – "sediment." Cain asks God: "Am I sediment to Abel's wine? Why did you prefer his sacrifice to mine?" In essence, Cain denies responsibility for his brother because of his hatred for Abel. In their competition for God's affection, God chose the offering of Abel over Cain. So Cain tells God, "I hated him, so why should I care for him or watch over him? Isn't that how adversaries treat each-other?"

The obvious answer is no – that's not how even rivals should treat one-another. Even when animosity overtakes a relationship and aggression ensues, Cain's sarcastic and biting question reminds us that we can never forget our own humanity. No matter how high the level of hostility we all remain keepers for our fellow human beings.

Israel recently demonstrated its capacity for this very type of humanity in the face of overwhelming hostility. Recently a 12-year-old Iranian boy suffering from brain cancer was sent to Israel for emergency surgery. After treatments in both Turkey and Iran were unsuccessful the boy was brought to Israel, whose hospitals are better equipped to treat the lethal cancer. Despite Iran's nearly 30-year refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist the Jewish state's Interior Minister, Meir Sheerit, gave the child special permission to enter the country. "We are the light upon the nations, and when a child's life is at stake, religion and origin play no part," Sheerit said.

Despite Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's repeated calls to "wipe Israel off the map," and Iran's continued efforts to build weapons capable of such an action, Israel understands that our own humanity trumps Iranian hatred. When the child of even a hostile nation suffers Israel realizes that we are nevertheless "our brothers' keepers." ■