

# Eretz Yisrael and the First 61 Chapters of the Torah

The first Rashi in Chumash, although greatly important, is equally puzzling, at least at first glance:

אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא (שמות יב ב) מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטווה [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית, משום (תהלים קיא ו) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים, שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

Rabbi Yitzhak said "It was not necessary to start the Torah before 'HaChodesh HaZeh Lachem' (Shemot 12:2) which is the first commandment that Bnei Yisrael were commanded. And for what reason did He begin with 'Bereshit'?'<sup>1</sup> Because of 'The strength of His works He told to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations' (Tehillim 111:6). For if the nations of the world challenge Bnei Yisrael saying, 'You are thieves who conquered the lands of the seven nations (of Canaan),' they will reply, 'The entire world belongs to HaKodesh Baruch Hu; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed appropriate. When He wanted, He gave it to them, and when He wanted, He took it away from them and gave it to us.'"

There are three powerful questions begging to be asked. First, Rashi's question is strange for it assumes that the Torah should have begun with the first mitzvah, Rosh Chodesh. Why would that have been a better place



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to start? Rashi's question does not seem to suggest removing all Biblical narrative in order to leave Chumash as a book strictly of laws.<sup>2</sup> Many stories appear after the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh; for example, the golden calf, the spies and Korach. These stories are considered an integral part of the Torah. What then was the idea behind Rashi's question?

Second, Rashi's answer does not seem to substantially address the question. Rashi wonders why the first 61 chapters (50 in Bereshit and 11 in Shemot) are found in the Chumash, yet only answers why the first verse (or first few verses) is necessary. Understandably, the Torah wanted to inform us that Hashem created the world and can therefore justifiably give different lands to different nations. However, on this account, there seems to be a significant amount of unnecessary information included in the first 61 chapters of Chumash.

The Ramban (Bereshit 1:1) explains that the first 11 chapters — everything until Avraham — establish the concept of sin and exile. After each sin there was exile. Adam and Chava were expelled from Gan Eden, Cain was sent to "be a wanderer" (Bereshit

4:14), all of Noach's generation was removed from the world and the Dor HaHaflaga were scattered, also a form of relocating them. Still, what about the other 50 chapters?

Third, did the Chumash accomplish its goal? Does the world recognize that Israel belongs to the Jews because of the Chumash's testimony? Can we expect them to accept the Torah's claim?<sup>3</sup>

An insight into the selection process of what stories and laws, in general, were included in Chumash is of paramount importance. Presumably it depends on the answer to a fundamental question. What is the goal of Chumash? Only after answering that can one begin to hypothesize as to why certain stories were selected.

Perhaps Chumash is a book for the Chosen People designed to instruct and educate them in how to act as a chosen nation. Based on this hypothesis, Rashi's opening question can now be readdressed. If the Torah is designed to teach the Chosen Nation how to act chosen, then perhaps it should begin with the first mitzvah given to the Chosen Nation as a nation.

In attempting to deal with Rashi's question, it pays to first ask, what would have been missing from Chumash if it had begun with the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh? Seemingly the answer to two significant questions would be missing. First, why would Hashem choose one nation as a chosen nation? Does that not seem unfair? Second, why choose this particular nation? Even if one can develop reasons for choosing a nation, why did Hashem select Bnei Yisrael? What did they do to deserve it?

Perhaps these questions are exactly what the first 61 chapters of Chumash come to answer. The first 11 chapters of Bereshit include four stories of failure, sin, and exile, and the subsequent storyline, the rest of Bereshit, is a response. After the world repeatedly fails, Avraham emerges<sup>4</sup> as a teacher and preacher who successfully begins to enlighten the world with the values of Hashem.

Chumash illustrates Avraham's immense affection for people and his passion to help by welcoming guests on a hot day<sup>5</sup> immediately after his brit milah (Bereshit 18). Chumash also depicts Avraham's unwavering dedication to Hashem's word with the story of the Akeida. This synthesis of love and commitment are the proper building blocks of our religion and the character traits Avraham had, which made him the right man to start and represent Bnei Yisrael.

Yitzhak, Yaakov, and the twelve brothers follow along these lines as the Chumash records their transformation from individuals into a family and ultimately a nation dedicated to this important mission.

These 61 chapters capture both why a specific nation was needed to lead as

well as why Bnei Yisrael were selected as that nation. Without a role-model nation, the world was doomed for failure as seen in the first 11 chapters of the Chumash. Bnei Yisrael, led by the Avot, embody the ideals and values Hashem needed to accomplish His purpose for this world.

Even if this hypothesis is correct, one can ask, is it what Rashi meant? Perhaps. Perhaps saying that Hashem can give the Land of Israel to anyone He chooses captures more than a justification of giving the land to any random nation He decided to. Perhaps Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael the Holy Land because they are the Chosen Nation. The first 61 chapters explain why Hashem chose them and removed the other nations from Israel in order to make room for them.<sup>6</sup>

Last, perhaps, at least on some level, the world did and does recognize that Israel is the homeland for the Jewish People. In 1948 the UN voted to recognize Israel, not Uganda, as the home of the Jewish People. Perhaps that decision reflects the recognition, dating back to Chumash, that the Jews do belong in Israel because Hashem desired it so.

Yom Ha'atzmaut is the day we celebrate our independence in our national homeland, the land Hashem gave us to serve as the Chosen People following the guidelines of the Torah. Beyond our historical connection to Israel is a theologically greater connection. Bnei Yisrael living and inhabiting Israel is part of Hashem's Divine plan.

### Notes

1. The Ramban (Bereshit 1:1) explains that the Torah did not start with Bereshit in order to reveal a deep philosophy about Hashem's creation, because the Chumash does not reveal such information. Those

secrets are found in Kabbalah. Accordingly, Chumash is not a philosophy book. After all, very little of the Chumash deals with philosophical issues, and the small sections that do are often philosophically misleading (See Raavad, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:7), including anthropomorphism of Hashem, for example, which we assume is categorically rejected (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:7).

2. Although the *Gur Aryeh* (Bereshit 1:1) seems to interpret the question as such. Interestingly, some assume that the first 61 chapters would not have been left out, but would have made up a separate sefer (*Mizrachi* and *Siftai Chachamim* both on Bereshit 1:1) or would have been relocated elsewhere in Chumash (*Be'er HaTorah*, Bereshit 1:1).

3. One may suggest that the Chumash's message is designed for Bnei Yisrael and it is irrelevant whether the world accepts it. This is further implied by the verse that Rashi quotes focusing on "He told to His people." Still, we will suggest an additional answer.

4. We are assuming that Avraham was not born destined to lead but rather developed himself into someone capable of doing so. This is implied by the Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 39:1), which describes Avraham as the only one to stop and notice the *bira doleket* (fortress burning) and by the Rambam (*Avodat Kochavim* 1:3) and Rav Hirsch (*Nineteen Letters*, letter 8), where they describe how Avraham, alone, searched and discovered monotheism in a polytheistic world.

Alternatively, one may suggest (See *Kuzari* 1:95) that Avraham was born with an inherent advantage and was therefore selected.

5. It is uncommon for the Chumash to record the weather as it does here (Bereshit 18:1). Perhaps including the extreme heat highlights Avraham's commitment to his work even when he has justified reason to rest.

6. Hashem waited to bring back Bnei Yisrael to Eretz Yisrael until Emori sinned to the point where they deserved to be exiled (Bereshit 15:16).