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How to Read the Torah

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm ז"ל (Originally delivered October 16, 1971)

These comments on "How to Read the Torah," are not meant to be a demonstration of cantillations or a means of training formal Torah readers. Rather, they are an attempt to set some guidelines as we begin again the cycle of portions of the Torah. They are intended as well as an introduction to our various adult classes, as all Jews begin their annual renewal of the study of Torah.

At one point in today's Sidra, we read *זה ספר תולדות האדם*, "This is the book of the generations of man." Most commentators take that to mean not "book" in the formal sense of a volume, but as a listing of the generations that derived from Adam. Ramban, however, takes the word *ספר* literally, and tells us that *ספר תולדות האדם* -- it refers to the entire Torah, which is the "book of the generations of man." Torah is the story of mankind. The Book is apposite to Man.

The Kabbalah affirmed this idea in many ways. For instance, the Holy Ari maintained that, by mystical permutations, the number of souls of Israel present at Sinai is equal to the number of letters in the Torah. Again, we find the equivalence between Book and Man.

Hence, the approach to know the Book is akin to that of knowing Man. You learn how to understand *ספר* from how you understand *אדם*. Books may teach us much about people; but people can tell us more about books. And this is so especially concerning the Book of Books, the Torah. *זה ספר תולדות האדם*.

The first thing that we must learn is: respect. In order genuinely to know a man, you must consider him worthy of your study and friendship and concern. If he is not worthy, then your knowledge of him is superficial and unimportant. And what is true of man, is true of text, of Torah. At the very least, respect means not to ignore it. To sit in the presence of Torah and not consider it, is like staying in the presence of an

other human being and acting as if he does not exist -- and few insults are more humiliating than that. To read Torah, you must be serious, and that means high minded, truly religious. A real student of Torah may never be flippant. You may be puzzled by a pasuk, or be put off by a parashah, but you must always approach Torah with humility.

The founder of the HaBaD movement, in his *שלחן ערוך*, gives us an interesting derivation of the custom of Jews to walk with their heads covered. The reason is: *צניעות*, modesty. Clothing is worn for one of two reasons: warmth or modesty. The head covering is too small to serve for purposes of warmth; it is there for reasons of *צניעות*. It is our way of expressing before God the limitations of our intellectual self-sufficiency. We cover our heads to indicate that we have a degree of bashfulness about our intellectual inadequacy in the face of God. This is how we approach the study of Torah -- with respect and humility. This does not mean that what is demanded of us is intellectual capitulation and submission; merely modesty and reverence.

Respect for Torah means also that we must not assume too much about Torah in advance. Do not approach the sacred text with ready-made conclusions. I know people who read a portion of the Torah with a "nothing but" attitude: the Torah is "nothing but" a collection of mid-Eastern myths; "nothing but" a record of early religious superstitions; "nothing but" primitive science; "nothing but" the fear of the unknown expressed magically. With such a presumptuous attitude you emerge from your encounter with Torah knowing nothing more than the smug prejudices with which you began.

In a sense, I would say that respect means: not to get too close to Torah. Despite the fact that Torah is closer to us than anything else, *כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאוד*, you must avoid excessive intimacy, the familiarity which breeds contempt

a fact true both of men and of books, a true fact of men and books. When we are too much "at home" with Torah, when we are "pals" with the text, and we lose the distance which makes both for reverence and perspective, we allow ourselves the liberty of making snap judgments which are unworthy. That is why when we read the Torah we use the silver pointer. The Halakhah forbids us to touch the inner part of the Torah scroll. Should we contact the parchment, our hands become unclean, טומאת ידים, and the reason is, primarily, to keep us respectful by forbidding us to handle the sacred scroll directly. We must not lay hands on the Torah; thus we learn to respect it.

The second guideline in how to read the Torah is the awareness of its depth. זה ספר תולדות האדם. Just as you do not "read" a man, because he is too complex and deep and requires studying and investigation, analysis and pondering, so it is with Torah. When you say of a man, "I can read him like a book," yet diminish his humanity, you reduce him to a manageable and manipulable automaton, one whose Pavlovian reactions are all predictable, and hence one who has been de-personalized into a mere mechanism. So if we ask, How do you read the Torah? The answer is: don't read it! Go much deeper than reading. Reading of the Torah in the synagogue, in its formal sense, with all its carefully prepared melodies and exact text, is only the challenge to what we ought to do, each of us, privately: go deeper, ever deeper. It is not enough to read, one must study; it is inadequate to have קריאה, one must have לימוד of the Torah. For both Man and Torah are living things, organic beings, and merely reading the Torah is like describing a man's physical qualities: in neither case have I captured the soul, the essence.

That is why our tradition recommends at least four methods of interpretation, the famous פרדס. It is because we know that there is depth upon depth, layer upon layer, that the various forms of interpretation are valid.

Several years ago, someone wrote a book in which he tried to trace the origins of Freud's seminal idea of depth-psychology, that the human consciousness consists upon layer upon layer of awareness, and that we can dig ever deeper until we come to the root of a man's psychic life. This writer (Bakan) maintained that Freud derived his notions, despite the paucity of his formal Jewish education, from the Jewish ideas which were vaguely, but pervasively, present in his environment.

One of those great ideas was that of the Kabbalah and its

teaching, that the Torah must never be understood only on one level, but that it is a mine or reservoir of infinite layers of meaning, and that when you have plumbed one, you must still mine the next, and when you have done the next, you must prepare to dig even deeper to a newer and more profound level of meaning. I do not know if that writer is right or not; I believe he exaggerates. But certainly today we must reverse the direction of the equation. Today we know a great deal about depth psychology, about the layers of meaning, in a man's life. We must now conclude the same about Torah for this is "the book of the generation of man." What is true of Man is true of Torah: depth upon depth, layer upon layer, level beneath level.

The third thing that we must learn in approaching Torah is that, with all our scholarly techniques and analysis to probe depth, above all learning must remain an existential encounter. When you truly know another human being, you know more than the sum of his various parts, his physical description and psychic condition and his clothing and the state of his liver and bile and cardiogram. There is more to man than merely that. There is a sense of mystery. The encounter with him is a genuine experience. Meeting him is what Buber calls an I-Thou relationship. You see him as an equal Gestalt, not as a mere "it."

And so it is with the text of Torah. You must look upon it not as merely an ancient document, not merely as a problem in legal philosophy, not merely as a record of ancient history, but as something living, something dynamic, as an encounter with a "thou" one which preserves and realizes the eternal Thou.

In Hebrew, da-at means more than just intellectual cognition. "Knowledge" in the Biblical scheme means total knowledge, which includes the physical and the spiritual, the material and the psychological and the intellectual. When Adam "knew" his wife Eve, the knowledge covered all areas of human existence, from the sexual to the spiritual. The same word daat or knowledge is used for the knowledge of God: it means more than merely a profound grasp of theology or a listing of the philosophical interpretations of the negative attributes of God. It comprehends the totality of existence. So too, we learn from Man to Book: the knowledge of Torah is more than analysis; it is a profound existential meeting with Torah itself. In a word, it is a learning of love.

This encounter of love, both in the case in Man and in the case of The Book, involves a recognition that the one

we encounter has absolute individuality, a uniqueness that is irreplaceable. If I know (love) another human being, then I know that person as one who cannot be duplicated, who is utterly different. And the same holds true when I know a passage of Torah.

Furthermore, to know in the sense of love means to want to know more! Maimonides, in the beginning of his great Code, teaches us, concerning the love of God, that when you contemplate the marvels of nature, you begin to love God and then immediately you are seized with

Repairing Humpty Dumpty

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Around twenty-five years ago, on Shabbat Breishit, I attended a Friday night sicha of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l prior to Ma’ariv. These extensive wide-ranging sichot usually lasted more than an hour and certainty challenged weary Friday-night audiences. During his speech, Rav Lichtenstein spoke eloquently about original sin and the fall of Man. At one point, his Hebrew language speech was interrupted by an English quote: “And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again”. I was startled by this quote from a popular children’s rhyme. It was not uncommon for my Rebbe to quote non-Jewish scholars who had written passionately about religion. However, a quote from the Mother Goose collection seemed incongruous. Evidently, this line about a rotund figure who fell from a high wall was more than a children’s rhyme. Apparently, it was a metaphor about the stunning and irrecoverable fall of Man. By disobeying the Divine command, humanity fell so precipitously that we were shattered beyond repair- even with great effort on behalf of all the king’s horses and all the king’s men.

Throughout history a debate has raged surrounding the innate essence of Man. Was he created primarily good and virtuous or fundamentally evil and immoral? Many modern thinkers such as Dostoyevsky and Orwell have suggested that Man was created evil and morally damaged. This approach is deeply rooted in Christianity, in the concept of original sin- every person is born into this world through an act of sin. Without question, many of the horrors committed by Man in the past century corroborated a sense that Man was profoundly and innately sinful. Judaism flatly denies this view and asserts that G-d

an uncontrollable passion to know the great Name.

So it is with man too. When you love someone, your desire for knowledge, your appetite for knowing him or her more, is insatiable. The more you know, the more you want to know. And that is precisely the condition that must obtain in Torah. If you study Torah with the right attitude, that of love, you will never be satisfied with what you know; you will always strive for more.

Read more of Rabbi Dr. Lamm’s drashot at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

fashioned Man in the Divine Image and vested him with unlimited potential as the pinnacle of creation. Man was created noble and pure and to underscore this primal nobility, the creation of Man on the sixth day is marked by effusive Divine praise at the spectacle of Man: “Va’Yar Elokim et kol asher asa v’hinei tov me’od – G-d beheld his masterpiece and it was surpassingly good”. Moreover, in the book of Kohelet, in which Shlomo Hamelech addresses the vanity and futility of our world, he, none the less remarks that “G-d fashioned Man as good but man sought complications and distortions”. At his core Man was created kind, good and noble!

Even amongst those who affirm the essential goodness of Man, many assert that this innate virtue was squandered through Man’s first disobedience- partaking of the eitz hada’at or Tree of Knowledge. After all, this rebellion triggered Divine punishments which have fundamentally altered the human condition. Unlike his ideal conditions in Eden, Man must labor and toil to feed himself and support life. Our very birth into this world is occasioned by pain and physical discomfort. Though it may be true that original Man was created pure and perfect, by sinning, he forfeited that original status. “Original” Man may have been empowered as the pinnacle of G-d’s creation however “Fallen” Man no longer possessed that great potential. We have fallen from our original stature in Eden and we now live flawed lives; we inhabit a different and more bleak world. This view of fallen and compromised humanity dominated much of Jewish outlook in general, and, in particular, of the world of Jewish mussar. Man has abdicated his original lofty position and was now mired in a state of ineptitude. Under these futile conditions Man’s

only salvation is careful adherence to Divine command amidst minimal engagement in the affairs of a fallen world. Stuck in a confusing maze of a pointless world, redemption could only be achieved through withdrawal from that dark and confusing world.

About 140 years ago one of the great leaders of pre-war Eastern European Jewry asserted a radically different religious view of human experience. Rabbi Noson Tzvi Finkel- affectionately known as the “Alter of Slobodka”- served as the mashgiach in the great Slobodka Yeshiva. He articulated a revolutionary manner of understanding the great fall of Man. Though “Fallen” Man was punished and was banished from Eden, he still retained his original grand and elevated potential. The expulsion didn’t fundamentally alter Man’s identity and we continue to live in that original state of empowerment, as pinnacles of Divine creation. Indeed, sin has significantly muddled moral clarity and complicated human experience. Indeed, our vast potential isn’t as easily applied or implemented as it was in gan eden. However, at our core, we still possess majestic potential to affect our world and author history. We are still princes – though fallen and marred! Striving for a morally and religiously sensitive life isn’t

driven by the acknowledgement of the futility or the hopelessness of human experience. Quite the contrary, Man continues to live an empowered life, and his enormous potential entails great responsibility and uncommon duty. Proper human behavior can redeem and advance the human condition just as our errant behavior can wreck the entire world. Precisely because of

Man’s lofty status, he must live an “epic” lifestyle so that creation itself can advance. This mussar of “empowerment and expectation” constituted a major shift from the conventional view that we inhabit a dark and empty space amidst a world of defeat. G-d places great expectations even upon “Fallen” Man and this recognition should produce religious drive and ambition.

Many find this approach more suitable to the modern context. For several millennia Man inhabited a confused and regressive world in which the human condition was plagued by violence, socio-political inequality and widespread inertia. This backward world did indeed seem bleak and dreary, inviting the more classic view of “Fallen” Man. Modern Man has flipped the script and fashioned a world of science, progress and potential. In this context the notion of helpless and powerless Man is detached from reality. The Slobodka doctrine which asserts that Man still retains his original unlimited potential is far more resonant and reflective of the world we occupy. We live in a world of meaning and progress and we are mandated to express the prodigious potential which characterizes Man while advancing our world to greater levels of moral and religious achievement.

Remembering this mandate is even more crucial during a period of crisis in which empowerment of human beings is less obvious. We are enduring a difficult passage within the human journey but we must not forget the great potential God endowed us with and the great expectations He has for us.

The Seal of Creation

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

5 781. A new year. New beginnings. A new cycle of Torah reading and learning. Bereishis. *בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ - In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth (Bereishis 1:1).*

Parshas Bereishis: The creation of the world; the formation of man and woman; the primordial serpent; the first sin; banishment from the Garden of Eden; the first murder; the generations of man; the degeneration of mankind; G-d’s resolve to destroy the world which He had created.

The Sages (Shabbos 55a) teach that חֻתְמוֹ שֶׁל הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

הוא אֵמֶת, the seal of Hashem is emes, truth. Rashi (ibid) comments: חֻתְמוֹ שֶׁל הַקֵּב“ה אמת - אמצעית לאותיות וראשון ואחרון: the seal of G-d is truth: the middle, first and last letters of the alef beit (alef, mem, tav) spell emes - which is the seal of G-d, הוא ואני אחרון ואני ראשון, For I, G-d, am First, I am last, and I am He [aside from Me there is no other - cf. Is.44:6].

Embedded into the very beginnings of our Torah, and woven into Ma’aseh Bereishis, is this seal of G-d.

On the words *בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת*, the Ba’al Ha’Turim (Bereishis 1:1) teaches:

סופי תבות אמת, מלמד שברא העולם באמת, כמו שנ’ “ראש דברך

the final letters spell emes (truth). This teaches that G-d created the world with truth, as the verse states: *The beginning of your word is truth* (Ps.119:160).

Furthermore, the Ba'al Ha'Turim continues:

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹקִים אֶת (1:4); the final letters spell emes;

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים, אֶת (1:21 and 1:27); the final letters spell emes;

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹקִים אֶת (1:31) - the final letters spell emes;

בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים לַעֲשׂוֹת - *G-d created to make* (2:3) - the final letters spell emes.

Throughout every stage of creation, G-d threaded His seal of Truth into our existence.

In a world where truth seems to have disappeared from the world stage, it is a message and lesson that we, bnei Torah, would do well to remember.

Not for naught do the Sages teach that: רַבֵּן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גָּמְלִיֵּאל אָמַר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם קָיָם עַל הַדָּיּוֹ, וְעַל הָאֱמֶת, וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם - *Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel would say: Upon three things is the world sustained: upon justice, upon truth, and upon peace* (Mishnah Avos 1:18).

Comments the Bartenura (ibid): וְעַל הָאֱמֶת. שְׁלֵא - that a man should not lie to his fellow. Rabbeinu Yona (ibid) teaches that as we are commanded to walk in G-d's ways, שנאמר והלכת בדרכיו [Deut.28:9], we too must walk always along the path of truth.

The seal of Hashem is truth, the Torah of Moshe is truth, and we must always strive to speak, teach and live by the truth. It is a lesson and way of life embodied by our greatest leaders and teachers.

“R' Moshe's (R' Moshe Feinstein zt'l, 1895-1986) commitment to truth in his everyday life was unwavering; nothing in the world could ever cause him to stray from it. Undoubtedly this attribute was another important reason

why Hashem, Whose seal is truth, granted him the help needed to arrive at the truth in halachah.

“His passion for truth went to unusual lengths. He always insisted on paying for the breakfast he ate in Tifereth Jerusalem. While the yeshiva administration felt that he was entitled to the breakfast - and a great deal more - R' Moshe would not hear of it. He received a salary from the yeshiva for his services and he would not accept a penny more than had been agreed upon. Of course, when it came to making appeals, attending functions, or doing anything else to raise funds for the yeshiva, R' Moshe was always ready to be of service, without the slightest notion of accepting payment for such voluntary services” (Reb Moshe, 25th Yahrzeit Edition, Artscroll, p.195).”

“Once, when judging a din Torah, R' Moshe caught someone offering testimony that was clearly false. He reprimanded the man and asked him to leave the room.

“While judging a dispute, R' Moshe stated a halachah that was not to the liking of one of the parties involved. The man had the audacity to accuse R' Moshe of falsifying the law so that the case would be brought to a speedy conclusion. R' Moshe rose to his full height and emphatically declared: ‘My name is Moshe Feinstein. True, I do not know how to learn. But go in the streets and ask if I am a liar!’” (ibid, p.438-439).

L'havdil, Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865) famously said: “I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts.”

Would that we merit that the ultimate truth will be revealed to our people, our Land and our world, וְהָיָה ה' - *and Hashem will be King upon the entire earth, on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One* (Zechariah 14:9).

God Formed Man, Man Forms the Person

Rabbi Eliezer Barany

And the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul. (Bereshit 2:7) The Torah specifies that God took dust from the ground in order to form Man. Rashi, a shrewd reader of the Torah, noticed a seemingly unnecessary qualifier in

the verse. The Torah could have merely stated that God took dust to make Man. Don't we know where dust comes from? Is it not known that dust comes from the ground? Therefore, there must be a need for the inclusion of the extra wording. Rashi then goes on to give two possibilities, quoting from two midrashic sources:

He gathered dust from the entire earth, from the four directions, so that wherever he [man] would die, it [the earth] would accept him for burial (Tan. Pekudei 3). Another explanation: He took his dust from the place of which it is said (Exod. 20:21): “You shall make Me an altar of earth.” If only it would be an atonement for him, so that he might endure! (Gen. Rabbah 14:8).

The first explanation provided by Rashi shows us that when Hashem took dust from the earth, it was from the entire earth. The extra word teaches us that dust was collected from “the earth/ground” – “Ha-Adamah. For what purpose was this done? This was done in order to allow man to be buried anywhere he may die throughout the earth. Therefore, had God not taken dust from all over, apparently a person would only be able to be buried in a location where the dust originated.

The second explanation regards the extra wording of the passuk as a specific location, the ground of where the altar (of the Beit Hamikdash) would stand. With this dust, Man might endure through atonement. For without this dust, it seems that atonement is unreachable.

What do we do with such an enigmatic Rashi? The first thing we should recognize is that these midrashim cannot be taken literally. We have yet to see the make-up of the terrain prevent someone from being buried. If we were to understand this explanation literally, the second explanation would have to concede its point. How could the second explanation even be offered? By the mere fact that anyone can be buried in any location, the first approach needs to be accepted as definitive. Additionally, the second explanation isn't at all bothered by an issue of burial. Would this mean that we can only be buried by the mizbeach or is there really no concern about the burial?

What does each midrash mean and what can we learn from them? The first Midrash expresses an idea that dust was taken from all over the earth, which allows the earth to accept the body upon death. The idea expressed in this midrash seems to be that man is really dust, and nothing more. There is no difference between the body of Man and the ground. We are made from it and will return to it. This idea is that we should not look beyond the earth for any purpose for the physical. The purpose of the physical is inherently useless. It is temporal and is

nothing special. However, the second midrash is expressing the opposite expression. It is showing that one can utilize the physical world for repentance, because without the dust of the altar, one cannot repent.

It seems to me that there are two different focuses present, two differing objectives. The first explanation focuses on the death of Man. The entire purpose for taking dust from around the world is to ensure the burial is taken care of. If it were not for that goal, there would be no need to collect the dust. The second explanation however focuses on life. The reason for choosing the dust from the altar is to allow Man to repent, to atone, and live. Perhaps, Rashi is informing us that we can look at the matter that we were formed with and have two different perspectives, lead two different lives.

If we focus on attaining everything without limit, by not rejecting any pleasure we seek, what are we pursuing? We tend to value restraint concerning what we ingest, when avoiding dangerous activities, but we may not recognize beyond that. Rashi is telling us that our goal in life should have the same focus. If we do not show restraint, if we try to grab things from all directions of the earth, then we are not really gaining the most from life. Rather, we are living a life focused on death. If we constantly seek pleasure, we are not gaining the most from life, we are in fact destroying ourselves. Diseases, health issues, and accidents attest to this. Seeking all our pleasures isn't life, it is death.

The answer for life lies in the second path, using the ground to endure and atone, to become close with God. When we keep Mitzvot, we improve ourselves and those around us. When we give Tzedakah, we help those less fortunate and do not overvalue the mighty dollar. When we learn Torah, we learn the ways God relates to the world, learning what to imitate and how to live. When we keep Shabbos, we cease our work, focus on the Creator, and recognize our position in this world. In fact, the second explanation Rashi quotes includes a directive for Man to do. It does not speak of what God did, rather, it speaks of what WE should do with what God did.

If we channel our desires towards God, if we use our money to not only supply our Holiday meals with meat, but help those in need, if we utilize our talents to help others, then that is the true purpose. Rashi is revealing that this dichotomy, this choice is in the very essence of man. Take what you have and utilize it for the good, or waste it on harmful matters. You can either be covered by the ground, or you can walk on it

Walking “With” God

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

Amid the genealogical review found towards the end of the Torah portion of Bereishit, we come across Chanoch. What do we know about Chanoch?

Three verses tell us the story (Bereishit 5:22-24):

“And Chanoch walked with (et) God after he had begotten Methuselah, three hundred years, and he begot sons and daughters. And all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty five years. And Chanoch walked with God, and he was no longer, for God had taken him.”

Chanoch stands out for two reasons. The first is the idea of “walking with” God, which in truth is not the most precise translation of the word “et”. Furthermore, the Torah emphasizes the unique relationship he had with God, as the “walking” is repeated in the final verse above. The other unique aspect of Chanoch is his fate. God appears to have intervened in his life, an end much different than any description up to (and beyond) this point in history.

Is there any more we can derive about him?

There is a Midrash that offers what at first glance does not offer much more. The author notes there are three traits described of those who are righteous. There are those who walk “with” God, those who walk before Him, and those who walk after Him. An analogy is given as to someone who has three sons. The oldest walks in front, thus the description of this trait afforded to the patriarchs, the avot. Why? They were great in the commandments (mitzvot). The middle child walks behind the father, referring to the Jewish people. They follow “after” His traits, such as being slow to anger or acts of good (chesed). Finally, there is the youngest child, who walks at the side of his father, ensuring he does not wander along an incorrect road. The early generations (dorot rishonim), with people such as Chanoch and Noach, personify this child.

Rashi references a different Midrash, but one that also sheds more light on Chanoch:

“And Chanoch walked: He was a righteous man, but he could easily be swayed to return to do evil. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, hastened and took him away and caused him to die before his time. For this reason, Scripture changed [the wording] in [the account of] his demise and wrote, “and he was no longer” in the world to complete his years.”

There are a number of important theological questions that could be raised regarding the concept of God bringing

a premature end to someone’s life without said person making use of his freewill. The focus for this piece is on the first part, the nature of his righteousness, as it converges with the previous Midrash.

What is the analogy above conveying to us? The idea of walking in front of the father seems to reflect an idea of setting an example. The avot were unique individuals, beacons of light in a world succumbed to idolatry. Avraham, through a process of intellectual discovery, came to understand the true idea of God. There was no clear Divine intervention, no miraculous moment that brought about this result. Each of the avot embarked on their own exploration, concluding the reality of God with equal conviction. They lived their lives, then, acting in line with God’s will (whether they literally followed the mitzvot is subject of a debate). Their actions and behaviors were always to be identified as representative of God. Ultimately, it was a natural alignment.

The Jewish people experienced the events of the exodus, the numerous miracles of the plagues and splitting of the Red Sea. They thrived in a desert environment through various miracles, and received a direct communication from God at Mount Sinai. They were the recipients of clear demonstrative acts of Divine intervention. Through these events, the Jewish people were now taught the correct path to follow. Their sense of morality was purely relativistic until God objectified it. How were they to act and behave? Once they understood God through His Divine intervention, the path to follow became clear.

Rambam, in the first chapter of his Laws of Idolatry, reviews the history of how idolatry became part of the world. At first, the idea of monotheism was familiar and known to all. Around the time of Enosh, the first distortions of the idea of God entered the mindset of humanity, progressing (or regressing, if you will) to the point of a “pure” form of idolatry. Chanoch and Noach are examples of the righteous who stood out as the initial perversions of God entered the scene. What would follow would be a destruction of proper values and a crumbling of social order. Unlike the avot, the conception of God of the righteous individuals was one passed down from generation to generation, rather than through a process of investigation. While they believed in God, their belief was

more based on “tradition” than a true internalization. The civilized world was slowly succumbing to the falsehoods of idolatry, and there was no clear Divine intervention available to someone like Chanoch. The pull was strong to leave the correct path, as Rashi alludes to in his muted praise of Chanoch.

While the Midrash is pointing to archetypes, we can also see a window into ourselves. There are times when we see the truth of God in the clearest possible way, and our actions intuitively line up with what God desires. There are other times when we turn to the Torah, seeking out the guidance we need to help create the proper path. And

Enhance the World

Rabbi Chananya Berzon

And Hashem blessed them [Adam and Eve], and he said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply...” (Bereishet 1:28)

The Rav relates that in the Torah’s reporting of the Divine blessing to the animal kingdom, the phrase, “Be fruitful and multiply” is employed; however, concerning Man the Torah states, “Hashem blessed them and Hashem said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” Man is forced to act not only by a biological motivation, but by an ethical right that inspires Man.

The Netziv, in his Torah commentary HaAmek Davar, points this out too, “גם הוא לברכה” i.e. deriving this from where the posuk says “וַיְבָרֵךְ אֱתֶם אֱלֹקִים”, it is also a commandment “ה’ יַעֲסֹקוּ בַפְּרוּ וּרְבוּ”

Why? Continues the Netziv, “כדי שיקום בהם הברכה,” so that the bracha Hashem bestowed upon Man should become fulfilled - when Man listens to G-d, then the blessing should come true, he will be fruitful and he will multiply. This is not a blessing G-d can give to any other creatures in the world, because mitzvot don’t apply to them!

A debate exists among the commentaries in regards to which commandment was given first.

Rashi writes that the Jewish People began as a nation when they were preparing to leave Mitzraim; therefore, the first Mitzvah is what they were commanded with at that time.

Namely, sanctifying the new moon in order to prepare the Korban Pesach and to be ready for Yitziyat Mitzraim.

Rambam writes in his Sefer Hamitzvot that the

there are times when insecurity might grip us, as we are surrounded by competing ideologies and differing moral codes. The allure of these other paths creates tension and conflict, as the tugging becomes even harder to resist. The idea of walking alongside God in such an instance is the hope that we merit some Divine providence to steer us back to the right path. Our lives are defined by our seeking out of God, whether it be a clear path or one fraught with struggle. Even when one is conflicted, the idea of being righteous is not a foreign one, an uplifting message brought about by this profound Midrash.

first Mitzvah is אנוכי ה' אלוקיך, the first of the Ten Commandments.

A third approach is that of the Sefer HaChinuch, following in the order of the Chamisha Chumshei Torah the first mitzvah to appear is פרו ורבו. The Chinuch writes, “בראשית יש בה” מצות עשה אחת, והיא מצות פריה ורביה, שנאמר ויברך אותם אלקים ויאמר להם אלקים פרו ורבו

In explanation, the Chinuch writes the fundament of this mitzvah is for people to settle this world, because that’s what ה' קב"ח wants. “כדכתיב לא תהו בראה” G-d didn’t create the world to be empty and desolate; rather, “לשבת” to inhabit it, build it, propagate it The Chinuch establishes that it is a great mitzvah, and it is for פרו ורבו that all other mitzvot exist! In fact, the Chinuch adds, one who doesn’t fulfill this mitzvah is over a mitzvat asei and will get great punishment because he is thereby showing disinterest in his own personal practice to work on finishing G-d’s work by being לשיב עולמו.

This is a key point in raising a family. Having children and creating the familial unit is much more than the desire to enable one’s genes to survive their death within their progeny; it is a command from the World’s Creator to propagate the amazing world that He created! We each need to understand this in order to convey the message to our spouses and to our children. We need to realize that the concept exists in terms of a responsibility to humanity and to the Torah-chosen people; we have a distinction in the joint undertaking to enhance and enrich the world He created. Hopefully, by conveying this message, the Borei Olam will in turn bless us with Kol Tuv, all of the best!