

# GENESIS

## A BLUEPRINT FOR JEWISH IDENTITY AND MISSION

October 7 ignited an existential quest: some Jews re-examined the bedrock of their identity, others confronted its very presence in their lives for the first time. This introspective journey involves a challenge to pinpoint the defining principles that underpin their humanity. For some, Judaism itself has become a source of stigma and confusion. Faced with intense hostility from various external and internal sources, individuals are compelled to engage in a personal struggle, making choices that lead to the discovery of the essence of “Israel” within themselves.

### Bereshit as the Blueprint of Jewish Identity

The book of Bereshit plays a pivotal role in the formation of the Jewish nation. It was during the time leading up to the giving of the Torah at Sinai that Moshe taught the nation of Israel, a group that had so recently sunk to unprecedented depths of spiritual depravity in Egypt,

the teachings of Bereshit (Exodus 24:7, Rashi). Despite witnessing miraculous events and undergoing a transformative journey with Moshe into the desert, their faith remained fragile until the Sinaitic experience. As Rambam notes, the miracles they had witnessed were performed by Hashem as responses to immediate necessities, and thus produced a faith that was lacking. Only at Sinai did a lasting national identity form.

מְכַלְל שְׂקֵדִים דָּבָר זֶה לֹא הָאֱמִינִי בּוֹ נֶאֱמָנוֹת  
שֶׁהִיא עוֹמֶדֶת לְעוֹלָם אֲלֵא נֶאֱמָנוֹת שֶׁיֵּשׁ אַחֲרֶיהָ  
הַרְהוֹר וּמְחֻשָּׁבָה:

*It is implied that prior to this, they did not have everlasting faith but rather faith that was mixed with contemplation and consideration.*

#### Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 8:1

The lingering doubt among the people raises a profound question: What inspired their commitment to a God whose nature they were uncertain about? Rashi provides an answer by pointing to the book of Bereishit. It was



**Dr. Danielle Bloom**

Faculty, Stern College for Women

this foundational text that convinced them and motivated them to declare the famous words of “*naaseh v’nishma*” a pledge of allegiance to obey and listen to the one God.

This essay will explore what makes the book of Bereishit unique in solidifying Jewish identity and mission. What about the book of Bereishit convinced the doubters of certainty and conviction? This book is fundamental—it is **reishit** it is the foundation on which all else is built. It

enabled the first generation to commit to God, to commit to our Jewish identity, and it contains the secret that enables each and every student of Torah to commit again—individually in his or her generation. To delve into this inquiry, we must examine the overarching themes, characters, and pivotal moments within the narrative.

## God's First Attempt at Connection

Leon Kass, in his book *The Beginning of Wisdom*, offers insights into the first eleven chapters of Genesis, describing them as a response to the calamities resulting from “human life uninstructed.” The narrative unfolds as God attempts to connect with humanity, creating beings in His image. However, at each stage, there is failure, and man continues to devolve. Kass identifies five episodes marking this devolution: the temptation in the Garden, fratricide in the first family, the Flood as a response to societal violence, Ham violating Noah thereby destroying family sanctity, and the Tower of Babel representing an autocratic and god-like aspiration. The extremes of chaos and totalitarianism are both rejected by God (Kass, 2006, 10).

These initial chapters also depict humanity losing its way religiously. The verse (Genesis 4:26, Rashi, Rambam) indicates the beginning of idol worship in the third generation, and the Tower of Babel story reveals people seeking to make a name for themselves (11:4) rather than aligning with divine purpose. The Torah is leading us to see the misguided path humanity has chosen.

The reader begins to wonder if there is an alternative to all of this.

## The Need for the Jewish People

With Avraham's entrance, God presents a different approach, seeking connection through a specific individual and family. Avraham is given a mission to be a blessing to all families of the earth and to teach justice and righteousness (*venivrechu becha kol mishpechot ha'adamah* 12:3)—Through you, God tells Avraham, blessing will flow to the families of the earth. Through you, my messages of “*tzedek umishpat*” will reach the world. God tells us (18:19), “I chose you Avraham because I knew you, and I knew that you would teach your children to do what is right and just.” Rabbi Menachem Leibtag writes, “Avraham Avinu was chosen to fulfill a **specific mission**—to become the forefather of a nation that will lead all others to a theocentric existence and refocus mankind's energies in the proper direction. Thus, Avraham Avinu's distinction came not as a **reward** for any specific deed, but rather for a **specific purpose**.” God chose Avraham for what he **will do**—And Avraham does! (Leibtag, n.d.)

Upon reaching the *aretz asher areka*, “land that God will show him (12:1),” he builds an altar and “calls out in the name of God” (12:8).

Ramban explains that Avraham built altars and taught people about God:

והנכון שהיה קורא בקול גדול שם לפני המזבח  
את שם ה' מודיע אותו ואלהותו לבני אדם.  
*The correct explanation is that he would call out the name of God with a great voice in front of the altar in order to publicize Him and His divinity to other people.*

God changes Avraham's name in chapter 17:5 from Avram to Avraham because: “*av hamon goyin netaticha*—You will be the father of many nations.” Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin in his

peirush, *Ha'amek Davar*, explains that this is not meant in the biological sense but rather in the ideological sense.

ולדבר זה הזהיר הקב"ה את אברהם שיהי רצונו להשקיע דעתו להיות לאב המון גוים להכירם את ה'.

*On this matter, God commanded Avraham that he should commit himself to being the father of nations to teach them to recognize God.*

Yitzchak consolidates this legacy, re-digging wells (ch. 26) and continuing his father's teachings. In 25:19 Isaac's main achievement is described as being the son of Avraham:

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בְּרֵאֲבָרָה אֲבִרְהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק:

*This is the story of Isaac son Abraham. Abraham produced Isaac.*

In his book, *Biblical Images*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes the contribution of Yitzchak in the following way: “This apparently was Isaac's essential problem: to find his own place in a world dominated by the genius of his father. He did the only thing left for him to do: he carried on... The capacity to persist is no less important than the power to begin” (Steinsaltz, 2010, 33). Yitzchak's role is to persist in the mission initiated by his father.

## The More Yaakov Assimilates, the Less Assimilated He Becomes

The complexity of Yaakov's story presents a unique challenge involving a struggle for identity. In what might be argued as one of the most painful of all scenes in the book of Bereishit, Yaakov stands in front of his blind father Yitzchak, clothed in the hunting skins of his brother Esav, and his father asks him, “Who are you, my son?” He responds, “I am Esav your firstborn” (*anochi Esav bechorecha*).



As a result of this moment of falsehood, Yaakov will need to flee from the only life he has ever known. He will spend the next two decades living in a foreign environment and he will never see his beloved mother again. This moment that his father describes as trickery (*ba achicha b'mirma* 27:35) will echo painfully throughout the rest of his life, which will be marked by the trickery that others will impose upon him.

Yaakov flees from his brother Esav who wants to kill him in revenge for having stolen his blessings. He falls asleep on the way to the house of his uncle Lavan, effectively taking the reverse journey that his mother Rivka, and grandfather Avraham, had taken before him.

That night he had a dream. When he awakens, he cries out that God is in this place and he had not known. The exact words are *va'anochi lo yadati* (28:16), and I didn't know.

The reader of Chumash cannot help but hear the echo of the last time Yaakov used the word *anochi*—when he claimed to be someone he wasn't. Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet writes, "How those words, 'I am Esau, your firstborn,' must be haunting him the way they have made readers squirm for thousands of years. No wonder that when he is startled awake in the middle of the night he blurts out, '*Anokhi lo yadati*,' which

**"To be complete we do not need Esau's blessings of wealth and power... The face we bear is the image we see reflected in the face of G-d when we wrestle with Him and refuse to let go."**

can easily be read as, 'I don't even know who I am.' Jacob's loneliness is beyond words; he has lost even himself" (Grumet, 2017, 318).

How will Yaakov go about reclaiming himself? What is the process that he must undertake to rediscover who he is and reclaim his identity? This is not something that can happen in the house of Lavan. God Himself must come and tell him to return to the land of his forefathers:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל יַעֲקֹב שׁוּב אֶל אֶרֶץ אַבְרָהָם וְלְמוֹלַדְתֶּךָ וְאָהֳרָה עִמָּךְ.

*Hashem said to Yaakov, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family and I will be with you."*

**Bereishit 31:3**

We hear echoes of the language used to motivate Avraham so many years before to leave this same location. But this time Yaakov is being told to **return** to the land of his fathers and birthplace.

The reader is left wondering, what would have happened had God not intervened?

וַיִּנְגַב יַעֲקֹב אֶת לֵב לָכוֹן הָאֲרָמִי עַל בְּלִי הַגִּיד לוֹ כִּי בָרַח הוּא.

*Yaakov stole the heart of Lavan the Aramean in that he did not tell him that he was fleeing.*

**Bereishit 31:20**

Yaakov goes, once again, running away. In the past, he had tricked his father. This time the Torah describes him as tricking his father-in-law. He is still lost.

## The Struggle is the Essence

As he enters the land of his father and prepares to face his brother Esav for the first time in two decades, Yaakov hears that his brother is coming to greet him with four hundred men. Yaakov is terrified that this means war. He prepares gifts, divides his camp to fight

or flee, and prays to God for help.

The night before the reunion, he finds himself alone on the other side of the river. We read one of the most mysterious passages in the Torah. Yaakov has a wrestling match with an unnamed man. At the conclusion of the fight, Yaakov requests that the man bless him, to which he responds by changing his name from Yaakov to Yisrael, the name that our nation still carries. This episode is the key to discovering Jewish Identity in Tanach.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes that Jewish identity is defined by Yaakov's shift from wanting to be Esav to embracing his unique destiny. The name change to Yisrael symbolizes a struggle not for wealth and power but to represent God and bring His messages to humanity.

*It is equally clear what was transacted in the wrestling match the previous night. It was Jacob's inner battle with existential truth. Who was he? ... "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says to his adversary. The unnamed stranger responds in a way that defies expectation... It is as if the man said to him, "In the past, you struggled to be Esau. In the future you will struggle not to be Esau but to be yourself. In the past you held on to Esau's heel. In the future you will hold on to G-d. You will not let go of Him; He will not let go of You. Now let go of Esau so that you can be free to hold on to G-d."*

*... That is the stunning truth at which Jacob finally arrived, and to which the name Israel is testimony. To be complete we do not need Esau's blessings of wealth and power. Ours is another face, an alternative destiny, a different blessing. The face we bear is the image we see reflected in the face of G-d when we wrestle with Him and refuse to let go. Not by accident was this episode the*

*birth of our identity (our “name”) as Israel... (Sacks, 2009, 219)*

So, what is the essence of Jewish identity as revealed through the book of Bereishit?

This mission is not one of material wealth or power but of a spiritual and moral calling. It is a journey that began with Avraham, continued through Yitzchak, and found its profound realization in Yaakov’s wrestling match on the banks of the river. The Jewish people are in a continuous struggle to uphold the name of Hashem and to represent His teachings in the world. We have a mission, reiterated in daily prayers and emphasized during Passover, reminding the Jewish people of their unique calling:

אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהִיוֹת לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים אָנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. I am the Lord your God.*

**Numbers 15:41**

## Conclusion

As the Jewish people continue to navigate the complexities of our identity and mission, the book of Bereishit stands as a timeless guide, offering profound insights into the core of Jewish identity. It explores the nature of humanity, the challenges of faith, and the transformative power of our continuous struggle with nations and with God Himself to uphold the Divine name. It is a narrative that invites introspection and reflection, challenging us to rediscover our unique calling in each generation. At this historic moment in which we find ourselves, where so many of us are searching and so many of our brothers and sisters with little or no formal Jewish background are confronting their Jewish heritage for the first time, it behooves us all to reconnect and to connect others to our fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

## References

- Grumet, Z. (2017). *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant*. Maggid Books.
- Kass, L. (2006). *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. University of Chicago Press.
- Leibtag, M. (n.d.). *Rabbi*. Archives of Past TSC Shiurim. Retrieved January 21, 2024, from <https://tanach.org/>
- Sacks, J. (2009). *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*. Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union.
- Steinsaltz, A. (2010). *Biblical Images: Men & Women of the Book* (Y. Hanegbi & Y. Keshet, Trans.). Maggid Books.



## Earn a Certificate in Jewish Bioethics with RIETS!

RIETS is proud to offer a Certificate Program in Jewish Bioethics that will provide advanced education in Jewish Bioethics for healthcare professionals and community members.

This Certificate will equip participants with the knowledge to guide patients and family members in navigating the world of medicine and bioethics from the perspectives of both secular law and Halacha.

**Now Recruiting For Fall 2024**

**The program will take place during Fall 2024 and Spring 2025.  
All classes meet online.**

**This course is open to both medical professionals and community members who are interested in studying Jewish Bioethics.**

**To apply, visit [yu.edu/riets/bioethics](https://yu.edu/riets/bioethics)**

For questions or help registering, email Rabbi Kalman Laufer at [kalman.laufer@yu.edu](mailto:kalman.laufer@yu.edu).