

Bereishit

BEGINNINGS

Genesis 1:1

In a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Mishnah Hagigah 2:1

The Work of Creation may not be taught to more than one student at a time.... Whoever contemplates these four questions, it would have been better for him not to have come into the world: What is above the world? What is below? What is before? What is after?

Bavli Eruvin 13b

For three years, there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former claiming: The law is in agreement with our views. And the latter claiming: The law is in agreement with our views.

Then a voice came out of heaven and said: Both of these views are the words of the living God, but the law goes according to the School of Hillel's rulings.

But if both are the words of the living God, why is the law set according to the School of Hillel? Because they behaved modestly and like *mentshes**. They studied Shammai's rules as well as their own and even mentioned Shammai's words before they said their own.

* Yiddish for "gentlemen"

Discussion Questions

1. The first word of the Torah, *bereishit*, is generally translated “In *the* beginning”. Strictly speaking, however, it means “In *a* beginning”. How does this change your understanding of this verse?
2. Do you agree with the Mishnah’s assertion that questioning the mechanics of Creation is an invasion of God’s privacy? Does God have some secrets that shouldn’t be explored? Do you feel entitled to your secrets? Does having secrets put distance between you and your loved ones? Does keeping secrets sometimes allow you to be closer to them?
3. For the Bavli, the voice of God which in the beginning created the world now speaks through the disparate voices of the schools of Shammai and Hillel.

It appears, then, that God speaks in many voices and that there may be many correct answers. This idea should lead to tolerance and humility. Do you think you could practice this intellectual discipline in your own life — thinking that God’s truth is everywhere and that success goes to those who act in a mannerly fashion?

Noah

PROCREATION

Genesis 9:6-7

(God blessed Noah after the flood, saying:)

Whoever sheds a man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in God's image was man made. And as for you, be fruitful and multiply: Bring forth abundant life in the earth and multiply life on it.

Mishnah Yebamot 6:6

A man shall not abstain from the performance of the duty of maintaining the human race unless he already has children.

How many children?

The School of Shammai ruled: two boys.

The School of Hillel ruled: a boy and a girl. For the Bible states, "Male and female created He them" (Genesis 1:28).

Sifra on Leviticus 19:18

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Rabbi Akiba said: This is the greatest principle in the Torah.

Ben Azzai quoted the verse, "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In that day, God created human beings in the likeness of God did God make them" (Genesis 5:1). He said: This is a principle greater than the first.

Discussion Questions

1. This Torah passage is an example of “Jewish karma”, that is, the concept *middah k'neged middah*, literally, “measure for measure”, or more colloquially, “what goes around comes around.” Have you seen evidence of this in your own life? Can you think of other biblical examples of this concept?

2. In rabbinic literature, students are considered to be the “children” of their teachers. Using this reckoning, how many children do you have? How could you acquire more? How do you “parent” those who learn from you?

Have you had teachers who helped create you? Who?

3. Does reminding yourself that everyone is created in God’s image ensure that you’ll treat others better? Will you treat yourself better because of this teaching?

Lech L'cha

UNDERTAKINGS

Genesis 12:1

(Terach, the father of Avram—later known as Abraham—has just died in Haran.)

The Lord said to Avram, Get you out (*lech l'cha*) of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:4

Abraham, our father, was tested ten times and he withstood all ten tests to let everyone know how great was his love for God.

Bavli Baba Batra 163a

How much space should be between two lines of writing? Rav Yitzhak ben Elazar said: As much, for example, as is required for the writing of *lech l'cha* (Genesis 12:1 and Genesis 22:2) one above the other.



*A section of Genesis 22,
with the words lech l'cha highlighted.*

Discussion Questions

1. The Hebrew of the Torah verse lends itself to many meanings. Translated literally, *lech l'cha* can mean “go to yourself”. Can one “go to oneself” (become oneself) by attending to God’s communiqués, and beginning an outward journey? Or would an inward journey be more in order? Abraham is the only person in the entire Tanach to be commanded with the words *lech l'cha*. Why do you think that is?

2. The ten trials of Abraham are listed in Avot d’Rabbi Natan 33 (the earliest commentary on Pirkei Avot). They are as follows: two trials when he left Haran, two with his two sons, two with his two wives, one in the war of the Kings (Genesis 21:22-34), one at the “covenant of the pieces” (Genesis 15), one when he was thrown into a furnace by Nimrod and one at his circumcision. These are grouped, in Avot, with the ten utterances that created the world, the ten generations from Adam to Noah, the ten generations from Noah to Abraham, the ten wonders that God performed in Egypt, and the ten things created on the eve of Shabbat. Is there any list of “ten” you might add from our own era?

3. The Gemara here is discussing how much space must be left between lines of text in a document. Note the illustration on the facing page. Of all the Hebrew letters, *lamed* extends the furthest upward and the letter *chaf sofit* extends the furthest downward. Therefore, scribes are directed to leave enough room to accommodate the possibility of *lech l'cha* appearing on two lines, one directly above the other.

What do you make of the symbolism that *lech l'cha* extends in the furthest directions up and down? Can you find any significance in the fact that the words appear identical in the Torah?

What do you make of the fact that the second usage of *lech l'cha*, in chapter 22, shows up during Abraham’s 10th trial, the command to offer Isaac on the altar?

Vayeira

SENSITIVITY

Genesis 18:12-13

(God promised Sarah, 90, that she would have a child.)

Therefore, Sarah laughed sadly within herself, saying: “Is there any chance, given how old I am and how old my husband is, that I could have a child?” And the Lord said to Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying: “How could I, who am so old, give birth?”

Mishnah Baba Metzia 4:10

Just as harm can be done in buying and selling, so harm can be done with words.

So one must not ask a seller: “What is the price of this article?” if he has no intention of buying it.

Nor should one say to a repentant sinner: “Remember your former deeds.”

Nor should one say to a son of converts: “Remember the deeds of your ancestors,” because it is written, “You shall neither wrong nor oppress a stranger” (Exodus 22:20).

Bavli Shabbat 23b

If one has only enough money to buy oil for either the house light for Shabbat, or the Hanukkah light, but not both, the former is preferable on account of the peace of his home.

If one has only enough money to buy either the house light or wine for the Sanctification of the Day (*Kiddush*), but not both, the house light is preferable on account of the peace of his home.

Discussion Questions

1. Note the difference between what Sarah says and what God tells Abraham she says.

The most frequently cited explanation for why God doctored Sarah's words is the desire to foster *shlom bayit*, "household peace", between husband and wife. Can you think of other reasons God might have altered Sarah's words in the fashion reported in the Torah?

2. This mishnah shows the importance of feelings in Judaism. Hurting someone with words is equated to monetary misconduct. It helps to know that the Torah's word for stranger, "*ger*", can also mean "convert". What does an inconvenienced sales clerk have in common with a repentant sinner and a convert?

3. The Gemara demonstrates the relative value of different ritual acts based on the needs of *shlom bayit*, i.e., household peace. Do you ever experience discord because of religious choices? Does household harmony play a role in your decisions? Should it?

How to use this book

☞ Choose a section based on the week's Torah portion or an upcoming holiday. Generally speaking, during the week, one studies the Torah portion that will be read the following Shabbat morning.

☞ The texts have no particular order other than that of the Jewish calendar, so feel free to jump in anywhere at any time. Each week stands alone. We make no assumption that you've read the previous week's texts.

☞ Read through the texts. See what they have in common.

☞ All translations are my own. They are much more free-flowing than is my usual style. I do this expecting that this book will be used without any additional commentaries or reference volumes.

☞ Some of the texts may seem hopelessly technical. Don't be discouraged if their meaning isn't immediately obvious. You'll find explanations in the corresponding question section.

☞ After a once over, read through each text again and its corresponding discussion questions. If you're studying around the table or in a group, feel free to discuss the questions that interest you and to ignore the rest.

☞ If you want to join in the chain of Torah study, then write in some of your own thoughts where space permits.

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