

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Bereishis

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Compiled from the works of
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Bereishis**

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Rashi in His Own Words

בראשית א', א': בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

רש"י ד"ה בראשית: אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא מ"החודש הזה לכם", שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? משום "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:

Bereishis 1:1: In the beginning of G-d's creation of the heavens and the earth...

Rashi Heading - In the beginning, Said Rabbi Yitzchok: It was unnecessary to begin the Torah except from¹ "This month is to you," which is the first commandment that the Jews were commanded. Now, why did He commence with "In the beginning?" Because of (the verse)² "The strength of His works He told His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations." For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, "You are robbers, for you conquered the lands of the seven nations (of Canaan)," they will reply, "The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them; when He wanted, He took it away from them and gave it to us."

Synopsis

This Torah portion, Bereishis, begins³, "In the beginning of G-d's creation of the heavens and the earth ..." Rashi questions the Torah's need to start with a discussion of creation. Torah is a book of laws; it is not a history book. He explains in the name of Rabbi Yitzchok that "if the nations of the world should say to Israel, 'You are robbers, for you conquered the lands of the seven nations (of Canaan),' they will reply, 'The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.'"

We, "the nations of the world" within us, all have an evil inclination. Rashi begins his commentary of the Torah by teaching that G-d only temporarily gave the world over to the laws of nature. Our job is to "conquer" every part of the world we encounter and transform it into holiness, i.e., Israel.

1. Parshas Bo, Shemos 12:2.
2. Tehillim 111:6.
3. Our Parshah, Bereishis 1:1.

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Rashi's Explanation

In this Torah portion, Bereishis, we begin reading the Torah anew. The Torah starts by saying, "In the beginning of G-d's creation of the heavens and the earth ..." Rashi cites the words "In the beginning," which he explains with the following comment. "Said Rabbi Yitzchok: It was only necessary to begin the Torah with the words⁴ 'This month is to you,' which is the first commandment that the Jews were commanded. Now, why did He commence with 'In the beginning?' Because of (the verse)⁵ 'The strength of His works He told His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations.' For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, 'You are robbers, for you conquered the lands of the seven (Canaanite) nations,' they will reply, 'The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.'"

Rashi points out that the Torah is a book of laws; it is not a history book. Hence, Rashi explains why the Torah begins by telling us about Hashem's creation of the world rather than starting with the first commandment given to the Jewish people.

The purpose of Rashi's commentary on the Torah is, first and foremost, to explain Peshat, i.e., the simple meaning of each verse. Rashi himself tells us this several times⁶. However, his commentary also contains and alludes to wondrous, Kabbalistic mysteries and life lessons. We find that the Alter Rebbe said that Rashi's commentary is the *wine* of Torah⁷. This applies to every word of Rashi's comments on each of the five books of the Torah. How much more so does this apply to the very beginning of his commentary. Generally, the beginning of a work contains a summary of what is to follow. At the beginning of the Torah, Rashi summarizes what we need to know. Unlike some other Torah commentaries, Rashi did not compose an introduction to his work. We can, therefore, view this opening explanation of his to the Torah as an introduction of sorts. The "wine of Torah" contained within these words serves as a general lesson and insight into all aspects of Torah.

It is pretty clear what lesson Rashi is teaching us here. There are times when the world seems to oppose our Torah study and Mitzvah observance. The world claims the Torah and Mitzvos have no place in this physical world. Do we believe that we could *conquer* the Canaanite nations? Do we think that our Torah can take precedence over the laws of nature? Rashi is teaching us that we must not allow this attitude to affect us. On the contrary, we must remain firm in our resolve to do whatever G-d demands.

4. See footnote 1.

5. Tehillim 111:6.

6. See Parshas Bereishis, Bereishis 3:8, 3:22, 3:24, 4:8 and 6:3.

7. See Hayom Yom pp. 24. The significance of wine, is that just as wine reveals the secrets that are contained within a person, so too do Rashi's comments reveal the secrets and mysteries of the Torah.

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Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

The above lesson is true. However, it is only a general lesson in the service of G-d. There must be something more specific that Rashi is teaching us here. Furthermore, the basis of Rashi's explanation is the verse, "The strength of His works He told His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations." He builds his comments upon this verse. What is their significance?

Also, why does the verse focus on "the *strength* of His *deeds*?" It's simple: because the Almighty created the world, He can give it to whoever pleases. What is being brought out by the word *strength* and the word *deeds*? Finally, why does Rashi's proof text use the words "He told His people (הגיד) in Hebrew) " rather than the more common "He said to his people (אמר) in Hebrew)?"

The Explanation

We will understand the answer to these questions by first explaining the spiritual significance of the Land of Israel. The Torah tells us that Israel is the land which⁸ "the eyes of Lord your God are always upon ..., from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." In other words, Divine Providence is far more revealed in the Land of Israel than anywhere else. G-dliness is *felt* more in Israel than it is anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, the above-quoted text states that "the eyes (as so to speak) of Lord your G-d are always upon it." This means that were it not for the individual's freedom of choice, it would be impossible to sin. Evil would be non-existent.

From this, we can understand that the spiritual "Israel" is the perfection of Divine service. It is constantly drawing G-dly light into the world. It is a situation where nothing evil can exist. This is also alluded to in its name. The Land of Israel in Hebrew is "ארץ ישראל." As the Sages teach us⁹, "Why is it called 'the land?' Because it wants, and it runs to fulfill the will of its Creator." It is called "the land - ארץ" from the Hebrew root meaning "will, wanting - רצון," and the Hebrew root meaning "running – רץ."

It seems as if Israel should be pure and holy. However, after the great flood, Hashem gave Israel's physical land to Shem, the Jewish people's ancestor. However, the impure Canaanites took it away from the descendants of Shem. When the time came for the Jewish people to leave the servitude of Egypt, receive the Torah, and enter Israel, the land had first to be taken back and conquered by the Jews. In the spiritual sense, this conquering of the Holy Land is the spiritual service of using the physical world to serve the Almighty. It's insufficient to serve G-d in the synagogue or while occupied in Torah study. Instead, it must be the occupation of every Jew every moment

8. Parshas Aikev, Devorim 11:12.

9. Bereishis Rabbah, Chapter 5, 8.

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of every day. We must "*conquer*" the material world for the service of Hashem. We must transform it into the Holy Land.

However, while traversing through the desert on their way to Israel, the Jewish Nation sinned with the spies¹⁰. Moshe sent twelve spies, each of whom was righteous and the leader of a tribe. He sent them on a mission to spy out the land of Israel, which the Jews were about to enter. Yet all of them, save two, brought back an unfavorable report. They said it would be impossible, even for G-d Himself, to conquer this land. How could such pious people make such a grave mistake and commit such a sin?

Regarding our daily service to G-d, the explanation is that they felt that it's not possible to "*conquer*" an inhabited land. Hashem created the world according to the laws of nature. The Torah commands us to respect nature and care for our bodies and the *physical* world. The spies felt we could only serve Hashem in an uninhabited wilderness, where the "real" world rules do not apply. How could we transform a physical, material world into something Divine? Spirituality is fine for a desert, but how can it mesh with a limited, earthly world?

Similarly, some mistakenly believe that G-d belongs in a synagogue or a hall of Torah study. However, does He belong in an office or a place of business? How can we "*conquer*" such sites and transform them into something holy? In this world, we must be concerned with maintaining worldly matters!

This is a tremendous and dangerous mistake. Our entire purpose in this world is to convert it to something G-dly. We can, and we must, conquer this world for Hashem. Hashem empowered us to transform the "land of the seven nations" into the Holy Land. As our Sages teach¹¹, the Almighty created the world "for the sake of the Torah and the Jews." In other words, the reason for creation is for Jews to study the Torah and perform Mitzvos, thereby conquering and sanctifying the world.

This is why, at the very outset of the Torah, Rashi guides us in our life path. The world's nations, the "gentile" within us, will approach us with a complaint. Not only that, but his complaint will appear to be valid. How can we steal things from the domain of this physical world and elevate them to G-dliness? The explanation is that not only is the creation of the world Hashem's action His deed, but it is the *might* of His deed. Based on nature, if Hashem created something to be a physical object in a manner that seems to be separate from Him, how dare I change it into something holy? What gives me the ability to do so? The answer is that Hashem invested the power of His actions into creation. He empowered us to remove something from the laws of physics and transform it into something G-dly.

10. See the Book of Bamidbar beginning with Chapter 13.

11. Bereishis Rabbah Chapter 1, 6, and Vayikroh Rabbah Chapter 36, 4.

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This also explains why Rashi cites a verse saying Hashem *told* His people rather than merely *said* to them. The Hebrew word for *told* is הגיד. This word also implies drawing down. G-d drew down and transmitted to the Jewish Nation the power and strength to reveal the holiness that already exists within this world. We can "conquer" the land of Canaan and transform it into Israel, the Holy Land.

(Adapted from talks given on Shabbos Bereishis 5731)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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