

Bereshit 2024: Be.R.E.SH.I.T- An Acronym for Living

This is Shabbat *bereshit*. There is so much in this *parasha*- of course the creation of the cosmos, plants and animals and humanity. We have love, deception, murder. We have genealogies and ancestral lines. We have possibility, success, and failure. As you can imagine, there are so many different directions in which one can go when trying to make sense of this *parasha*. In the past, I've focused on just the first letter, the *bet* of *bereshit*. This evening, I'm going to push myself past the first letter, but not past the first word. For the word *bereshit* includes within it a universe, or if you're the sci fi type, perhaps even a multiverse of meanings, so I believe a deep dive into *bereshit* will give us plenty of interesting insight.

When I was studying *bereshit*, one teaching in particular spoke to me. Perhaps it has been because I have been studying *mussar*, Jewish personal ethics, and am excited to start the course again in November. Perhaps it has been because over the past year, we've been focusing so much on Israel, loss, and grief, that I am looking for some hope. Or perhaps, it just a really profound teaching. Whatever the reason, I'm going to share it with you. This is a commentary by Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, who lived in Lithuania in the mid 18th century. You may know him better as the Vilna Gaon. He sees in *bereshit* a roadmap for how to live a good life. He writes, "The letters of the first word of the Torah, *Bereshit*, supply a hint as to the basic principles which should govern man's life: *bitachon*, faith in God; *ratzon*, a willingness to do God's commands, *ahavah*, love of God, *shetikah*, silence, i.e., accepting one's lot: *yir'ah*, fear of God, and *Torah*, studying the torah." For the Vilna Gaon, *bereshit* means more than "in the beginning." It is an acronym for living a life of meaning and purpose. Let's examine each of these a little more.

Bitachon. Faith in God. I believe this is the most difficult of the six, which is why perhaps we need to start with it. I don't know about you, but when I have chores or tasks to do, I like to get the most difficult one out of the way. And *bitachon* is certainly not easy. What does having faith in God mean? There are no easy answers. But the modern Hebrew interpretation of *bitachon*, security, helps me understand this a little more. If we expand beyond *bereshit*, we see that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth, upon which we stand and live and breathe, was *tohu vavohu*, a strange, difficult to interpret expression which is generally translated to mean unformed, void, chaotic. Over the story of creation, that *tohu vavohu* is replaced with order, structure, perhaps. And yet, in late October of 2024, in many ways, our society feels *tohu vavohu*; wars in the middle east and Ukraine, an election that is right now on a razor's edge, a planet that is rapidly hurtling towards an out of control climate. How do we find *bitachon*? How do we find God amidst the chaos, as God existed in the primordial chaos and was able to shape it into something incredible? We do that through faith. Not a blind faith, or a faith that excuses us of responsibility, but a deep abiding faith that our people has survived for thousands of years, and we will continue to survive if we follow our hearts and our abiding values. I am secure in my belief that Judaism is one of the greatest blessings in my life, and that God is the source of those blessings, even if I do not always understand how that works. Faith is not a guarantee, faith has to be renewed and explored and challenged. But with faith, we can take the next steps.

Ratzon, a willingness to do God's commands. Judaism is not a religion of sitting back and letting God take the proverbial wheel. The mitzvot start in this *parasha*, the first one understood by many to be *pru urvu*, be fruitful and multiply. Once we have started to ground ourselves in *bitachon*, that gives us the courage to act. This is a little more challenging for us who subscribe to a liberal, post-Halachic stream of Judaism. We aren't keen to do mitzvot, commandments, just because God or our texts command us. We are skeptical. How many of us mistranslate mitzvot as good deeds? My teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz of blessed memory, often posed the question of commandedness to us. How do we accept being commanded and doing God's commands when Reform Judaism has taught us to question everything? As you can imagine, there are no easy answers to this, but I believe, and the origins of Reform Judaism, teach us that we should focus on the ethical mitzvot. So, while willingness to do God's commands might have meant keeping kosher or laying tefillin for the Vilna Gaon, for me it means being a good person. Clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, caring for the orphan, the widow, the stranger. *Ratzon* is a *middah*, an ethical measure, which prays that our will aligns with Gods, that we partner with God to make the world a better place.

Ahavah, love of God. We don't talk enough about love in Judaism. But it is so fundamental to who we are and how we should behave in the world. For me, the liturgy reminds us of this during two particular places in the service, with *ahavah rabbah* in the morning and *ahavat olam* in the evening, and then in *v'ahavta*. Loving God and loving humanity for me are one and the same. It means we give one another the benefit of the doubt, it means we do not place conditions on love. It means what is so beautifully sung in the epic musical, Les Miserables, to love another person is to see the face of God. We love God because God created us, and we love one another because God created us. But we know love takes work. So often anger and disappointment and jealousy and resentment get in the way. We see this later in the *parasha*, when Cain grows angry and jealous over how God gives preferential treatment to his offering and murders his brother. And that serves as a warning to all of us. Life is not fair. Sometimes we get the short end of the stick. But if we can remember that fundamental truth that loving God is a foundational piece of living a good life, then often we can overcome what tries to dampen our love for God and our love for our fellow.

Shetikah, silence, or as the Vilna Gaon writes, accepting one's lot. When I think of the creation of the cosmos, I do not think of silence. I think of volcanic eruptions, the crashing of the oceans, the fury of thunder. Our lives are filled with so much noise, our devices are always beeping, my children are always screaming for my attention, there is traffic and television and sound everywhere. I even use a noise machine to fall asleep. And yet, perhaps the most peaceful I've ever felt is scuba diving underwater, when noise is minimal, when you cannot talk. There is no sound in space for some scientific reason I cannot recall right now. *Shtika* is that *middah* which encourages us to take time to breathe and to focus on our own breath, to look inward. In *bereshit*, the world is created through words, God says let there be light, and there was light. Silence then, is accepting that creation, making sense of it, and finding our place in it. We want to create too, we create our families, we create art and music and poetry, we create intelligence and meaning and questions. But there is also a time for *shtika*, for simply sitting with what we have and who we are and accepting our place in the world.

Yir'ah, fear of God. Another difficult one for us moderns to totally understand. Sometimes this is better understood as awe of God. We go about our day to day lives, often so filled to the brim with work, school, errands, commuting, shlepping, volunteering, eating, sleeping, recreating. *Yir'ah* teaches us to try and take moments for wonder and awe. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his seminal work *God in Search of Man*, teaches that a relationship with the divine must start from wonder. We just finished the festival of sukkot, which is a celebration of the natural world and its wonders. The fall colors around here are bursting into beautiful shades of reds, yellows, and oranges. We know the scientific reason for the changing of the leaves, yet when we develop a sense of *yir'ah*, we can wonder at their beauty, we can marvel at the magnificence of this world. *Yir'ah* teaches us to take in what is all around us, to try and see beyond ourselves and all that we feel that we need to accomplish throughout the day.

Finally, Torah. We are the people of the book. Our lives are a never-ending journey of learning. We read the Torah every year, but there is always so much to learn from our ancient text. Torah means the five books of Moses, but it also means law, instruction, education. The emphasis on education has sustained us throughout our darkest times. No matter how much we were persecuted and oppressed, nobody could take away our love of learning. Remember the origin of the story of the dreidel. Our people were studying torah and when they heard the Assyrian Greeks coming, they put it away and pretended like they were playing with the silly spinning tops. Even in the darkest days, we have found ways to learn and study. The Torah is what has kept us together for millennia, and this thirst for knowledge all the way from the first story in our *parasha*, Adam and Eve, is what will continue to sustain our people for generations to come.

From *bereshit*, the first word of Torah, the Vilna Gaon gives us a roadmap for how we should receive the miraculous gift of creation. With faith, action, love, silence, awe, and learning, we can live lives of goodness and meaning. I pray that as we start reading our sacred texts anew, that this year will be one of sweetness and joy. I hope we will continue to find inspiration and meaning in this sacred community. And I hope that in these challenging days, we will be sustained by our devotion to our God, our Torah, and our people.