

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(office@etzion.org.il)

**Summary of the Book of Bereishit and Introduction to the
Book of Shemot**

By Rav Yehuda Rock

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the books of *Bereishit* and *Shemot* as books, we must first answer the following question: What defines them as independent books? The division of the Torah into five separate books is very common in *Chazal*, and this division is expressed halakhically in the Torah scroll in the four lines of empty space between one *chumash* and the next (*Bava Batra 13b*). In the text of the Torah itself, however, no mention is made of an internal division of the Torah into five *chumashim*. It is, therefore, unclear whether the division of the Torah into *chumashim* is original, part of the giving of the Torah, or a later development. Even if the Torah was already divided into *chumashim* at the time that it was first given, it is still not clear whether this formal division reflects independent literary units with respect to the contents of the books.

Many have already pointed out that the transition between the book of *Bereishit* and the book of *Shemot* is also the transition between individuals/family and a nation: at the beginning of the book of *Shemot*, the children of Israel are recognized by Pharaoh as having turned into a nation. It is certainly possible, however, that within each of the books, there are changes that are no less significant – and perhaps even more so. Thus, the two books might not be marked by significant characteristics that are firmly grounded in the narrative text and distinguish the one from the other. This being the case, it is not our intention in the present lecture to characterize the different *chumashim*.

Our intention here is different: we wish to understand the direction and goal of the scriptural narrative that continues all across the book of *Bereishit* and into the book of *Shemot*. In other words, we shall adopt a broad perspective and try to understand the lengthy narrative that stretches out over the two *chumashim*, in accordance with the literary and substantive characteristics found therein, and through an understanding of how the smaller units contribute to the story as a whole.

Even with respect to this objective, it cannot be assumed *a priori* that the results will be meaningful. We must first examine the matter itself: Do the literary and substantive characteristics of the two *chumashim* indicate that there is a single narrative that extends across the chapters of the books? Or perhaps the two *chumashim* are merely a series of isolated anecdotes, between which there may be certain localized

connections, and a certain chronological continuity, but which do not join together to create a single narrative, a narrative that develops specific contents?

In order to answer this question, we must open with the following introduction:

In two previous *shiurim* (*Chayyei Sara* and *Vayeshev*), we mentioned the exegetical approach called "*shitat ha-bechinot*," the method of standpoints. This approach was developed by my revered teacher Rabbi Mordecai Breuer. Rabbi Breuer describes his method and his interpretation of Scripture based on that method in a number of his books: *Pirkei Mo'adot*, *Pirkei Bereishit*, and *Shitat ha-Bechinot*. According to this approach, God authored the Torah in layers, with parallel stories (or halakhic sections) written from different standpoints, each one capable of standing and being read on its own, in such a manner that there might be contradictions between them. The stories that are told from the different standpoints are often interwoven so that they create a single combined story. The combined story blurs the transition from one standpoint to the next, but also preserves the difficulties in the transition between them. Each story expresses independent content, which is important in its own right, and between the two stories there is a relationship that justifies their being combined into a single story. Through the difficulties that follow from the combination of the standpoints, e.g. redundancies and contradictions, it is possible to reveal the two independent standpoints, and then appreciate their significance.

The previous applications that we made of *shitat ha-bechinot* related to specific stories, at the level of a chapter. In addition to localized applications of that sort, however, there is also an important division into standpoints that runs throughout the book of *Bereishit* and even beyond it into the book of *Shemot*, and perhaps even in the rest of the Torah. This division is based on a network of different considerations, which we shall not spell out here. We shall merely mention one important characteristic of these two standpoints: Over the course of the book of *Bereishit* the two standpoints use different Divine names. One standpoint uses the Tetragrammaton (sometimes together with the name *Elokim*, i.e., *Hashem Elokim*), whereas the other standpoint uses the name *Elokim* and *Kel Shakkai* (the standpoint of the name *Elokim* uses the Tetragrammaton in one place in the book of *Bereishit* [at the beginning of chapter 17], for reasons that we cannot go into here, and in the book of *Shemot* in *Parashat Va'era*, it begins to use the Tetragrammaton on a more frequent basis).

Now, the question that we raised, whether across the book of *Bereishit* there is a single unified and continuous story,

must be asked separately for each of the two standpoints. It seems that the answer to each of these two questions is different.

In the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton, we find a series of stories, between which there does not appear to be any uniformity or continuity. There are, however, certain localized connections between them, but they seem to be at the level of connections and references between different stories, not at the level of one continuous narrative. In the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton, each unit at the chapter level constitutes a complete literary unit that is capable of standing on its own, and there are sometimes even contradictions between the various units. Proving and establishing this characterization of the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton requires a wider discussion than is possible in the framework of the present *shiur*.

Without a doubt, however, the standpoint of the name *Elokim* constitutes a continuous literary succession across the book of *Bereishit* and into the book of *Shemot*. Our objective in the present *shiur*, then, is to follow the story of the standpoint of *Elokim*, and to understand its essential content and direction.

THE STORY OF THE STANDPOINT OF THE NAME *ELOKIM* IN THE BOOK OF *BEREISHIT*

The story of creation (chap. 1 together with the first verses in chap. 2) was entirely written using the name *Elokim*, and it constitutes the introductory chapter of the standpoint of the name *Elokim* in the book of *Bereishit*. We are interested in examining its contribution to the overall story of the book. For this purpose, let us examine which points in the chapter serve as a foundation for things appearing later in the book.

Already the Rashbam explained that the chapter serves as the foundation for the *mitzva* of Shabbat, which repeats itself later in the Torah. Our interest, however, lies in the function of the chapter in relation to the continuation of the book of *Bereishit*.

There are four important points in the chapter, all in the same context – the creation of man and his blessing – which repeat themselves over the course of the book:

- 1) The idea of "the image of God" - which repeats itself three times in chapter 1 (26-27): "Let us make Man in our **image**, after **our likeness**. So God created man in **his own image, in the image** of God He created them" – appears again in "the book of the generations of man" at the beginning of chapter 5: "In **the likeness** of God He made him."
- 2) The Torah emphasizes (1:27) that "male and female He created them," something that is not mentioned regarding the various animal species, despite the fact that the animals species were also created male and female. There is also no mention of this point with respect to the fish and the birds, despite the fact that they too were destined to multiply. This point is also repeated at the beginning of chapter 5 (v. 2): "Male and female He created them."
- 3) God's blessing of man (1:28) is also mentioned in chapter 5 (v. 2): "And He blessed them."
- 4) The expression "be fruitful and multiply" that appears in God's blessing of man (1:27) is repeated no less than five more times over the course of the book of *Bereishit*!

It is clear, then, that the key to understanding the creation saga in the context of the book lies in the understanding of the aforementioned points.

Rabbeinu Sa'adia Gaon (in Rav Kapach's Hebrew adaptation of Rabbeinu Sa'adia's Arabic translation of the Torah – published in Mossad HaRav Kook's *Torat Chayyim*) renders "*tzelem Elokim*" as "*shalit* – ruler." That is to say, the word *Elokim* does not refer to a particular spiritual component of man, as it was understood by others, but to man's function and role vis-a-vis the world. This means that over the course of the six days of Creation, God ruled the world in absolute fashion, filling and improving the world of chaos and desolation, and then He created man "in His image," similar to God regarding his role in the world, so that he should go and fill the world, subdue and have dominion over it.

According to this explanation, the emphasis on man's having been created male and female is clear: reproduction is the instrument that was given to man that will allow him to fulfill his role and destiny of filling the world and subduing it.

Chapters 2-4 (with the exclusion of the opening verses of chapter 2) belong to the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton. The standpoint of the name *Elokim* of chapter 1 continues in chapter 5 in "the book of the generations of man," where the Torah repeats and summarizes that element of chapter 1 that is relevant to the continuation of the story – man's role as having been created in God's image, as ruler. This motif itself is repeated again the next time that being fruitful and multiplying is mentioned. In the aftermath of the Flood, God blesses Noach, who stands before a new world, which must be refilled and replenished, with a blessing that is very similar to that which was given to the First Man (9:1-7): "And God blessed Noach and his sons, and said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air... And as for you, be fruitful, and multiply, bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply in it."

Chapter 5 itself surveys the generations of the First Man through Shet until Noach. In every generation a count is given of the years until the birth of the son who constitutes the next link in the chain of generations until Noach, and so too the number of his years following that birth, it being noted that during those years additional children were born as well. It seems that the primary function of this chapter is to create succession and continuity, in such a manner that it is possible to join the counts of years until those births and come up with the total number of years across the generations. This is a literary mechanism that contributes to the character of the long story. Noting the many years lived after those births, during which period additional sons and daughters were also born – presumably many sons and daughters, corresponding to the length of the period – is meant to explain how the world became populated over the course of a mere ten generations. This contributes to the continuity of the narrative, for the story of the flood that follows assumes a populous world; in addition, it constitutes a description of the fulfillment of God's blessing of man, the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying and replenishing the world.

We shall skip over the story of the "*benei ha-Elokim*" and the daughters of men.

Dividing up the story of the Flood between the standpoints of the Tetragrammaton and the name *Elokim* is complex and requires a deep and thorough treatment, which we cannot engage in here. We shall merely note that each of the two standpoints have introductory verses in chapter 6, which describe the sins of man and God's attitude toward those sins as reasons for the decree of the Flood. Regarding the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton, I refer to verses 5-8; and regarding the standpoint of the name *Elokim*, verses 9-12. We shall cite from the introduction to the story of the Flood from the standpoint of the name *Elokim* (verses 11-12) together with the beginning of God's words to Noach from this standpoint (v. 13):

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.

And God said to Noach, The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

The key words in these three verses are "*eret*" (earth) (five times) and "*hashchata*" (corruption, destruction) (four times). The *hashchata* is of two types – the social corruption of the "earth" and the physical destruction that God decrees for the earth. The idea is clear: the earth, which God had physically developed and handed over to man for further development, has become ruined and corrupted, and it must be replaced. The emphasis is not on the sin and the punishment, but on the failure of the first attempt and the need for a new model. And indeed, at the end of the story of the Flood, Noach is entrusted with a clean world that had been returned to chaos, and he receives from God the blessing that had been given to the First Man.

Following the story of the Flood, the standpoint of the name *Elokim* continues in two units of generations: the generations of the descendants of Noach (10), which tell of the development of the families of Noach's children into the nations of the world, and the generations of Shem (11:10-32), which create chronological continuity from Noach to Avram.

The famous command of "*Lekh lekha*" belongs to the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton. From the standpoint of the name *Elokim* there is no such command, and Avram's move to the land of Canaan does not result from a Divine command. At the end of chapter 11, it is related how Terach took his family from Ur Kasdim with the goal of reaching Canaan, but he stopped in Charan, where he died. In chapter 12, verse 5 (which constitutes a redundancy in relation to verse 4 which mentions the Tetragrammaton, and therefore belongs to the standpoint of the name *Elokim*), it is related how Avram together with Lot continued his father's journey and reached the land of Canaan. The building of the altars, and so too the story of Avram's going down to Egypt, belong to the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton, and are not relevant for our purposes. This is followed (chapter 13) by an account of Lot's separation from Avram (from both standpoints).

The Torah, from the standpoint of the name *Elokim*, does not explain what drove Avram to move to Canaan; the implication is that he was driven by natural causes, in continuation of the journey initiated by his father, Terach, and that the specific motives are unimportant and irrelevant to the story. It seems that from this standpoint the only thing that is important in the story is the result of the journey: Avram is now all alone in a foreign country, with no family, except for his wife, and nobody from his old country with whom he might have shared a common culture.

Chapters 14-16 belong to the standpoint of the Tetragrammaton. The standpoint of the name *Elokim* continues in the story regarding the covenant of circumcision in chapter 17.

God's revelation in chapter 17 begins: "And He said to him, I am the Almighty God (*Kel Shakkai*)."¹ This is followed by God's proposal to Avram of a covenant: "Walk before Me, and be perfect. And I will make My covenant between Me and you." That is to say, if you agree to serve Me (in Scripture, the servant "walks before" his master) in perfect manner, I will make a covenant with you and cause you to multiply. Avraham expresses his consent through prostration: "And Avram fell on his face." Immediately God turns to him with the words of the covenant itself: "And God talked with him, saying, As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you...." Here, in verse 6, the term "being fruitful" appears: "And I will make you exceedingly

fruitful." The words "*me'od me'od*" (exceedingly) connect the actual covenant to God's proposal, "And I will multiply you exceedingly," demonstrating that they constitute a single continuity. Together, we have the expression, "Being fruitful and multiplying." Thus, the Torah characterizes the Covenant of Circumcision as a direct continuation of God's blessings to the First Man and to Noach.

We shall not enter here into a full analysis of the stories regarding the patriarchs. We shall merely note that God's blessing to Avram in the name of the "Almighty God" repeats itself with respect to the other patriarchs. Yitzchak, when he commands Yaakov to take a wife from his family, states that this is a condition for the blessing of the Almighty God (28:2-3): "And take you a wife from there of the daughters of Lavan your mother's brother. And God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, that you may be a multitude of people...." God repeats the blessing to Yaakov in Beit-El, when he returns from Padan Aram (35:11-12): "And God said to him, I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins...." Yaakov mentions the blessing in his words to Yosef (48:3-4): "And Yaakov said to Yosef, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you fruitful, and multiply you, and I will make of you a multitude of people...."

Without getting into the details of this analysis, it might be said that the stories of the patriarchs from the standpoint of the name *Elokim* revolve around these covenants.

What is the content of the covenant? As stated, it is characterized by the blessings of being fruitful and multiplying, seed, and land. The essence of the covenant, however, was already defined in God's words to Avraham (17:7-8): "And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you, and to your seed after you. And I will give to you, and your seed after you, the land in which you sojourn all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." The substance of the covenant is, "To be a God to you, and to your seed after you." In this context the meaning of the blessing of seed is the creation of a national framework with which to make the covenant. The covenant is made not with Avraham as an individual, but with Avraham's seed, with the nation of Avraham, and therefore there is a need for that seed to multiply. And the land of Canaan will serve as the geographical framework for the fulfillment of the covenant with the nation of Avraham's descendants.

Thus, it is clear from the literary data that the covenant of the patriarchs, the Covenant of Circumcision, constitutes the narrative continuation of the blessings given to the First Man and to Noach. But what is the significance of the connection? What is the continuing story that unites these two parts of the book? It would seem that we are dealing with different meanings of the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying. In the context of the First Man and Noach, we explained that the kingdom of God is revealed in the world by way of man, the image and likeness of God, who continues the act of creation, exercises dominion over the world, populates, fills and improves it. In contrast, regarding the covenant with the patriarchs, we are dealing with the creation of a people with whom God makes a covenant. What is the connection between these two meanings?

The idea may be understood as follows. The sins of the generation of the Flood, those who corrupted God's world, made it clear that giving man dominion does not suffice to reveal the kingdom of God in the world: for when the corrupt society does not act toward the improvement of the world but rather toward its corruption, there is no revelation of God's kingdom, but just the opposite, an impairment of His kingdom. The Flood removed the corruption that existed at the time and restored the world to its former state, but did nothing to resolve this problem. The fear remained that society would once again become corrupt (as is evident from the need for the sign of the rainbow). The covenant with the patriarchs came to resolve this problem. The image of God will not reveal itself in man spontaneously, simply because man was created by God, but only through the positive and active assignment of such a mission to man to reveal the kingdom of God in the world. God apparently understands that in order to instill this consciousness of destiny, it is necessary to develop a unique relationship with a defined group of people, whose alienation from the surrounding culture will work to intensify this consciousness of destiny and the mission of revealing God's kingdom in the world. For this purpose, God chose a person who aside from having the appropriate personal qualifications, was cut off from his family and nation and alien to the culture surrounding him, and offered him a covenant that would create a relationship of nation-God. This is the covenant of the patriarchs.

This is the topic of the book of *Bereishit* from the standpoint of the name *Elokim*, from the First Man through Noach and until the patriarchs: The divine plans for improving the world through the revelation of His kingdom; the first attempt begins with the First Man, and fails with the sins of the generation of the Flood; the Flood removes the corruption, and Noach is assigned the role of starting out again from the opening point of the First Man; Avraham is later assigned a new role that constitutes a second attempt, at a higher level - to repair the world in a conscious and destined manner.

THE END OF THE BOOK OF *BEREISHIT*, AND LOOKING AHEAD TO THE BOOK OF *SHEMOT*

The final unit in the book of *Bereishit* (37-50) is the story of Yosef and his brothers. The function of this lengthy narrative, from the standpoint of the name *Elokim*, is to show the Providence that controls the events that brings the family of Yaakov to Egypt (see our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayeshev*). What is the significance of the descent to Egypt in the context of the story of the book of *Bereishit* as outlined thus far?

In *Parashat Va'era*, God reminds Moshe of the covenant with the patriarchs in the name of the Almighty God, and details the Divine plan regarding the Exodus from Egypt and its objectives (*Shemot* 6:2-8): "And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him, I am the Lord; and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, by the name of God Almighty... And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan... And I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt... And I will take you to Me for a people and I will be to you a God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt." The goal of the Exodus from Egypt was the realization of the relationship that had already been designated in the days of Avraham: the relationship of nation-God. The Exodus from Egypt will instill the people with deep awareness of this relationship that is based on their being taken out of Egypt.

It seems that from the standpoint of the name *Elokim* the purpose of going down to Egypt was to allow for the Exodus from Egypt. The purpose of exile is redemption. It seems then that the role of the story of Yosef and his brothers, the exile in Egypt and the redemption from it is to bring the covenant of the patriarchs to the next higher level: the actualization of the relationship that had been promised in the covenant with the patriarchs, and the planting of a profound awareness of this relationship for the future.

The other parts of the book of *Shemot* are devoted primarily to the fulfillment of the purpose of the exodus from Egypt through the actualization of the relationship – through the covenant at Sinai, and the mechanisms that preserve this consciousness. These mechanisms include (primarily) the *mitzvot* that were given immediately in the wake of leaving Egypt, *mitzvot* whose role is to remember the Exodus; the construction of the *Mishkan*, whose role is to plant that same consciousness that was mentioned in *Parashat Va'era* as the objective of the Exodus from Egypt (29:43-46):

"And there I will meet with children of Israel... and I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God that brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>