

“When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male.” (12:2)

Presenting various perspectives on the human condition, the Midrash cites the pasuk in Tehillim (139:5), “Back and front You have fashioned me,” as referring to human life. “Back” refers to the last day of Creation, while “front” refers to the beginning of Creation. If man is worthy and leads a life of virtue, he is told, “You preceded creation,” since it was all created for him. If he sins and is, consequently, found to be unworthy, he is told, “Even a gnat preceded you; even an earthworm preceded you.” Why really was man created last – after all other creatures? His neshamah was created on the first day. His body, however, was last in the order of Creation. The Midrash implies that man is to reflect upon the fact that even the lowest creation preceded him.

Man thinks that he is everything. His brilliance, his knowledge, his ability: they all join together to produce the crown of Creation. All of this is imaginary, because in reality no one is as weak and as dependent as the human being. Even the gnat preceded him. Man must search and work for his food. It is not ready-made and prepared for him, as it is for all other creatures. The Kesav Sofer compares this to a gravely ill patient in a hospital. The nurses and doctors minister to his every need. He is connected to many machines, each performing a vital function that keeps him alive. A young, innocent child who confronts this scene might envy the special care that the patient is receiving. He would also like to get such attention! That is the folly of our lives. We think that with all the inventions and gadgets that modern science has made available to us, we are better off than the simple animal who must fend for himself. We forget, however, that the animal world really has everything ready-made and accessible. We, on the other hand, need all of the help that we can get. Yes, at times the most insignificant creature takes precedence over man.

How, then, are we to understand the other side of the coin, that if man is worthy, he takes precedence over the creatures of Creation? The answer, explains the Kesav Sofer, lies in one word: purpose. True, other creatures have a soft, easy life. Everything is prepared for them. They do not have to go out and labor to eke out a living. But, is there any significance to their lives? Do they have goals or objectives to their lives, or do they merely exist without purpose, without a reason for living?

Man has a matarah, a raison d’etre, a purpose for his existence. It is to serve Hashem, to study His Torah, to gain access to Olam Haba, the World to Come. One thing is true, however: He who lives for the wrong reasons, whose values, goals and objectives are somehow confused; he who thinks life revolves around the almighty dollar and the temporary power it generates, who is obsessed with fleeting honor which is as artificial as the people who grant it, he really is on a lower plateau than the lowliest creature.