

In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and the earth. (1:1)

Sefer Bereishis is aptly given its name since it is the "first" of the Chumashim. The Talmud in Avodah Zarah 25a has another name for Sefer Bereishis: Sefer HaYashar or Sefer Yesharim, the Book of Righteousness. Yashar means more than righteousness. It means straightforwardness, integrity, mentchlichkeit, human decency. Sefer Bereishis chronicles the lives of the Avos, Patriarchs, men who exemplified righteousness to G-d and mentchlichkeit to all human beings. In the preface to his commentary on Sefer Bereishis, the Netziv, zl, expands on this idea. The Patriarchs distinguished themselves not only in their relationships with Hashem, which was on the highest spiritual plane, but also in their daily dealings with non-Jewish people. They demonstrated integrity and esteem for every human being. Propriety, honesty, and decency were character traits which earned them the deep admiration and respect of all people. The non-Jewish world knew not of their spiritual relationship with Hashem. They knew only of their yashrus with people.

In his commentary to the first pasuk in the Torah, Rashi questions why the Torah, which is primarily a book of commandments and instructions for life, begins with an account of Creation, rather than the first mitzvah which Hashem gave to the Jewish People. He explains that the Torah anticipated a time when, after we conquered Eretz Yisrael, the nations of the world would arise and condemn us as robbers and thieves. Thus, from the outset, the Torah informs us that Hashem created the world and as Creator and Proprietor of the entire universe, He gave Eretz Yisrael to us. He may do as He pleases. It pleased Him to give Eretz Yisrael to His Chosen People. We are not thieves. We are simply taking what is rightfully ours.

Everyone has heard of, or studied, this Rashi. Does anybody ever wonder about Rashi's answer? How will our response to the citizens of the gentile world allay their critique of us? They do not care about what is stated in the Chumash. Rashi's exposition certainly has no place in their minds. A quotation from Sefer Bereishis is not an argument that would compel the non-Jewish world to rescind their complaints against us. I do not believe that this approach will sway them.

Horav Yissachar Frand, Shlita, explains that Rashi is not suggesting a reply to be offered to the nations of the world. Nothing will impress them. They will never abandon their hatred towards us. The response, however, is for our own edification. As a kind, softhearted, mentchlech nation, we have a difficult time listening to complaints which impugn our integrity. If we hear the nations of the world calling us thieves long enough, we might even begin to believe them and doubt our inherent right to the land. Perhaps the Torah was wrong in granting us the land that had until now belonged to the Canaanite nations. These are some of the thoughts that might slowly infiltrate our minds. Before long, we will lose the courage and will to fight for the land.

It is for this reason that the Torah begins by assuring us that everything it does is with yashrus. The only way to act is with propriety and fairness. The nations that had inhabited Eretz Yisrael did not have eternal rights to the land. Their lease had expired, and it was time for them to move on. It was now time for the Jews to enter and inhabit the land which Hashem had given them. If it is written in the Torah, it is yashar and, therefore, the land is ours.

Let me take the liberty of citing a few vignettes to support the idea and demonstrate the significance of acting with yashrus. In the Talmud Sotah 40a, Chazal relate that Rabbi Avahu was a great Torah scholar who had the opportunity to become a Rosh HaYeshivah. This was an enviable position, not only because of the inherent esteem, but also because of the financial rewards that were involved. However, when Rabbi Avahu heard that Rabbi Abba, another Torah scholar, who was in deep financial straits also needed this position, he deferred to him, asserting that Rabbi Abba was more suitable to be Rosh HaYeshivah. This is yashrus at its zenith! Imagine, how much time and effort Rabbi Avahu had exerted preparing for such a position. He had expended endless hours of study and research to achieve a level of erudition and respect that would render him worthy of being selected as Rosh HaYeshivah. He also possessed another character trait that outshone his learning – yashrus. This trait did not permit him to assume a position that another scholar needed. His humility was consistent with his erudition. Rabbi Avahu was rewarded with five sons that illuminated the Torah world with their knowledge.

Horav Meir Simcha HaKohen, zl, Rav of Dvinsk and author of the Ohr Sameiach and Meshech Chochmah, was certainly well-known for his encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. He was also recognized for another unique quality – his relationship with, and the respect he received from, the

non-Jews of Dvinsk. When World War I broke out, Grand Duke Nikolai ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the Russo-German front. Dvinsk became a dangerous place for the Jews and many fled, leaving their homes and belongings. Even the Rogatchover Gaon, zl, the other rav in Dvinsk, was prevailed upon by his congregants to leave. Rav Meir Simcha refused to budge. He said, "As long as there are nine Jews and I am the tenth, I will be there for the Minyan." When he was reminded of the constant danger, his response was simply, "Every bullet has a designated address, and none will reach where there is no Heavenly decree that it do so." Despite the obvious dangers, thousands of Jews and gentiles signed petitions attesting to the nobility of the Rav's character and his vital importance to the well-being of all members of the community. He was allowed to remain unharmed. His reputation was so widespread that even non-Jews sought his counsel. Indeed, some say his universal acceptability began with a decision he had rendered in a dispute between a Jew and a gypsy. They had been business partners until a major conflict of interest developed between them. The gypsy suggested that they both go to the Rav for a decision. Rav Meir Simcha listened to both sides and, after his own careful independent investigation, decided in favor of the gypsy. From that day on, word of Rav Meir Simcha's integrity and sense of justice spread throughout all of Dvinsk and even Latvia.

Horav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, zl, was an outstanding tzaddik and undisputed halachic authority. Indeed, he was a man of singular greatness. His ability to "conceal" his greatness was a true measure of his gadlus, distinction. As the head of the famous Ezras Torah charitable organization, he carried on his shoulders the plight of literally tens of thousands of families throughout the world. Their daily well-being was his constant concern. Yet, he never revealed the identity of these families. His weekly salary was a paltry fifty dollars. Indeed, at one meeting, the resolution was passed that his "salary" should be increased. Rav Henkin immediately arose from his chair and exclaimed, "Must I leave Ezras Torah?"

Rav Henkin carried a small notebook with him, in which he kept a log of those minutes during the day that he did not fully dedicate to Ezras Torah. He was not involved with personal business during this time. He had no personal business. He lived for the klal, general community. When someone would visit to discuss a Halachah, however, or if he would receive a call from anywhere in the world requesting his opinion concerning a halachic issue, he would immediately look at the time and note in his record how many minutes he had borrowed from Ezras Torah. He would then know how many minutes he would have to "make up" for Ezras Torah. Yashrus!

