

Open on One Side

Bereishit 5787: from the fair of Tishrei to the road of the year

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On Simchat Torah we did something that, if you stop to think about it, is a little strange. We reached the last words of the Torah, the great might and awesome power that Moshe displayed “before the eyes of all Israel” (Devarim 34:12). We danced with the scrolls until our feet ached. And then, before the echo had even settled, a second scroll was opened and someone read aloud: Bereishit bara Elokim, “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.”

No pause. No week off. The book ends and begins in the same morning.

This week, for the first time since that dancing, we read Bereishit as a parsha of its own. The sukkah has come down. The lulav is drying on a shelf. The guests have gone home. And the Torah, which a week ago was the centre of a crowded room, now asks to be carried into an ordinary week. What does it mean to begin again?

Why no pause

The Tur gives a short and rather striking reason for the custom (Orach Chaim 669). We begin Bereishit straight away, he writes, so that the Satan should have no opening to accuse us and say: they have finished it, and they do not want to read it any more.

The danger at the end of a great festival is not that we did too little. It is that we did a great deal, and now feel finished. So the halacha does not let the closing words stand alone for even an hour. The joy of finishing and the humility of starting are fused into one act. On the same bimah, the Chatan Torah closes the book and the Chatan Bereishit opens it again, and the Rema notes the custom that both of them pledge gifts and make a celebration (Orach Chaim 669:1). Finishing is honoured. Beginning is honoured equally.

The letter that faces forward

The Torah opens with the letter bet. The Midrash asks why (Bereishit Rabbah 1:10). Rabbi Yona, in the name of Rabbi Levi, answers: just as the bet is closed on three sides and open only in front, so you may not ask what is above, what is below, what came before and what comes after. You may ask from the day the world was created and onward.

The Midrash is setting a limit on speculation about what lay before creation. But the shape of the letter also carries a lesson for the week after Tishrei. The bet is closed behind us. We cannot go back into Elul, back into the sukkah, back into the dancing. What we gathered there is ours, but the door into those days has shut for this year. The bet is open in only one direction, and that direction is forward.

Why begin with creation at all?

Rashi's very first comment on the Torah (Bereishit 1:1) brings the question of Rabbi Yitzchak. If the Torah is a book of commandments for Israel, it should have begun with the first commandment given to the nation, "This month shall be for you the first of months" (Shemot 12:2). Why begin with the creation of the world?

The answer is a verse from Tehillim: "He declared to His people the power of His works, to give them the heritage of the nations" (Tehillim 111:6). If the nations say to Israel, "You are robbers, you took the land by force," Israel can reply: the whole earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it, and He gives it to whom He sees fit.

This year that Rashi lands less than three weeks before Israel goes to the polls, in a season when the country argues hard about borders, partners and its own future. Rashi's point is not a campaign slogan for any side. It is deeper than that. Our claim on the land does not begin with a treaty or a vote. It begins with "In the beginning." Whatever the Knesset looks like on 27 October, the first verse of the Torah will still be true.

Rashi then offers a second reading. The world was created "for the sake of reishit": for the Torah, which is called "the beginning of His way" (Mishlei 8:22), and for Israel, who are called "the first fruits of His harvest" (Yirmiyahu 2:3). The world, in other words, was made so that Torah would be learned in it and a people would live by it. That is the purpose we carry out of the festivals and into the week.

The plan before the building

The Midrash Rabbah opens with a parable (Bereishit Rabbah 1:1). A human king who builds a palace does not build it from his own head. He uses an architect, and the architect works from plans and drawings that show where the rooms and the doors will go. So too, says Rabbi Hoshaya, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world.

If the Torah is the blueprint of the world, then starting Bereishit again is not merely re-reading an old story. It is unrolling the plans again at the start of a new year of building. On Simchat Torah we danced with the plans rolled up and closed. Now we open them, and go back to work.

A light put away

The Talmud adds a famous teaching (Chagigah 12a). Rabbi Elazar said that the light created on the first day was not the light of the sun. By it a person could see from one end of the world to the other. When the Holy One saw that later generations would act corruptly, He hid it away, and stored it for the righteous in the time to come.

Tishrei is, in a sense, a month in which a little of that hidden light shines through. We see further on Yom Kippur. We feel closer in the sukkah. On Simchat Torah, for a few hours, the whole people seems to dance as one. Then the light is put away again, not lost, but stored. The work of the year is to live in a way that is worthy of it.

One more day, and then the road

Shemini Atzeret, Rashi tells us (Vayikra 23:36), is like a king who invited his children to a feast for a set number of days. When the time came for them to leave, he said: “My children, please stay with me one more day. Your parting is hard for me.”

The parting comes anyway. In Chabad, on the night after Simchat Torah, there is a custom to announce a verse from later in this very book: VeYaakov halach ledarko, “And Yaakov went on his way” (Bereishit 32:2). The Rebbe Rashab spoke of the time after Simchat Torah as the time for this verse, and the Previous Rebbe explained it with a parable. A merchant goes to the fair and buys up goods. The fair is exciting, but the real business happens when he comes home and unpacks his bundles and puts what he bought to use throughout the year.

Tishrei was the fair. We bought a great deal there: teshuvah, resolve, joy, a sense of being held. Bereishit is the unpacking. It is the first week of a long road in which ordinary days, the days of Yaakov, are meant to become holy.

For the table

The Torah ends with Yisrael and begins with Bereishit. Between them there is no gap, only a bimah and a breath. Perhaps that is the lesson of this Shabbat: there is no moment in the Jewish year when we are finished. The bet is closed behind us and open in front. The light is stored, not lost. The plans are unrolled. And Yaakov, tired and happy, goes on his way.

A question for the table: what is one thing you “bought at the fair” this Tishrei that you want to unpack and use this winter?

Shabbat shalom.

Sources checked on Sefaria: Devarim 34:12; Tur, Orach Chaim 669; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 669:1 (Rema); Bereishit Rabbah 1:1, 1:10; Rashi on Bereishit 1:1; Tehillim 111:6; Mishlei 8:22; Yirmiyahu 2:3; Chagigah 12a; Rashi on Vayikra 23:36; Bereishit 32:2. The Chabad custom and the merchant parable follow published talks of the Rebbe as reported on chabad.org and sichos-in-english.org.

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