

Genesis Rabbah 22:13

ויצא קין מלפני ה'...רבי חמא בשם רבי חנינא בר רבי יצחק אמר יצא שמח,
היך מה דאת אמר (שמות ד) הנה הוא יוצא לקראתך וגו', פגע בו אדם הראשון
א"ל מה נעשה בדיןך, א"ל עשיתי תשובה ונתפשרתי, התחיל אדה"ר אדם
הראשון מטפח על פניו, אמר כך היא כחה של תשובה ואני לא הייתי יודע.

"Cain left the presence of Hashem . . ." (Gen. 4:16). R. Hama [taught] in the name of R. Hanina the son of R. Yitzhak, who said: [Cain] left happy. This is even as you find [elsewhere]: "Even now he is setting out to meet you (and he will be happy to see you)" (Exod. 4:14). Adam met Cain and asked him, "What happened with your judgment?" [Cain] said, "I did *teshuvah* and was reconciled [with God]." Adam slapped his own face and said, "Such is the power of *teshuvah*, and I did not know."

This midrash combines several modes of rabbinic interpretation in order to answer key questions about this week's Torah portion. What were Adam and Cain thinking and feeling after Abel's murder? What became of their relationship with God and with each other? How does this passage relate to later events in the Torah and in our own lives? The author of this midrash begins with a close reading of the Torah and then imagines an unexpected scenario that conveys an uplifting yet surprising message.

First, the midrash links two seemingly unrelated verses through a common verb root (*va-yetze/yotze*). Closer examination of these verses reveals a common theme of exile and sibling estrangement in both the story of Cain and Abel in this week's Torah portion and later for Moses and Aaron in the early part of Exodus. While God informs Moses that Aaron happily awaits his return, it is much harder to imagine how Cain could have been happy after complaining to God that his "punishment is too great to bear." In fact, the midrash seems to take that statement as Cain's implicit acceptance of responsibility, for he claims not that the outcome is unjust but rather burdensome.

The second half of R. Hama's teaching adds a didactic message to the midrash. In the imagined encounter between Adam and Cain, the son teaches the father about the power of repentance and atonement. At the same time, one must ask, just a few weeks after the High Holy Days, whether Cain had reconciled with Adam, who would have been mourning Abel's death as a result of his sons' violent sibling rivalry. In this way the midrash provokes us to question the true meaning of *teshuvah* and pulls us into dialogue with the quoted verses and the rabbinic interpretation.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat B'reishit
Genesis 1:1–6:8
October 17, 2009
29 Tishrei 5770

Parashah Commentary

This commentary was written by Rabbi Robert Harris, associate professor of Bible, JTS.

The Torah and Its *Clearly Ambiguous* Message

(Or: "In the Beginning, There Were . . . Commentaries!")

(Full disclosure: these thoughts are taken from a book I am in the process of writing, tentatively entitled *Unfolding the Text*).

There is a verse that I love to invoke whenever I teach about "the poetics of biblical narrative," and it *doesn't* come from this week's portion (but who's keeping score, anyway?). Instead, it is found in the first extended legal section, Parashat Mishpatim (Exod. 21–24). Loosely translated, this is the text: "In all charges of misunderstanding . . . whereof one party alleges, 'This is it!'—the case of both parties shall come before God" (Exod. 22:8); the Hebrew phrase underlying the words "this is it!" is: *זה הוא כי* (*ki hu zeh*). The verse seems to be addressing a case in which no one side has a total claim on the truth; in such a case, then, one is bidden to consider *both* possibilities.

The reason that I like this verse is that I think it expresses the essential nature of biblical composition: the rule is *not* that one can discover "the" meaning of Scripture. Rather, the rule is that the Bible is always (oh, all right, "almost always") delightfully ambiguous, and one's job as a reader is to determine the *range* of potentially reasonable interpretations, or "meanings" of Scripture. I could give you dozens of perfectly fine examples of this rule, but—thankfully—I will not.

However, one case should suffice for now and, yes, let's take it from this week's parashah, B'reishit. Heck, let's take it from the very first verse of the portion, and as long as we're at it, let's begin with the very first word, *b'reishit*.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתֵה תֵהוֹ וְהוּא יְהוֹ וְהוּא יֵשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: וַיֵּי אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר:

As you see, I have not translated the text; this is deliberate, because I think most of us can at least, for now, conjure up the beginning of the Torah in our mind's eye (the text is Genesis 1:1–3, if you're scoring at home). Most of us remember the translation of the famous King James Bible, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." This translation finds its root in the Greek and Latin rendering of the verse (the Latin is *in principio creavit Deus caelum et terram*), and also, as it happens, the thirteenth-century commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak). This is, in my humble opinion, a perfectly reasonable understanding. But is it, in fact, the best or even the only possible interpretation? I think no! (Descartes said that once, and disappeared! Ahem.)

Let us turn instead to the commentary of Rashi (R. Shelomo Yitzhaki):

B'reishit bara: This text says nothing other than "explain me"! This is as our Rabbis have taught: For the sake of the Torah, which is called *the beginning of his way* (Prov. 8:22); and for the sake of Israel, which is called *the first of his produce* (Jer. 2:3).

Now, *that* made it all clear, no?!

Well, of course, not. What we need to do is to "unpack" Rashi. As the question popularized by the late Nehama Leibowitz would put it, "*Mah kashah le-Rashi?*" Literally, this question asks "what is difficult for Rashi?" but a more expansive way of understanding it is, "what is the difficulty that Rashi perceives

to be at play in the biblical text, and that prompts his comment?"

In the case of Genesis 1:1, the difficulty lies in the way the first two words of the Torah (*b'reishit* and *bara*) interact: if, as seems likely, the word *b'reishit* means not "in the beginning" but "in the beginning of" (construct case, or *semikhut*, for all you lovers of Hebrew grammar out there in TV land), then it seems strange that it comes right before the second word, *bara*, which seems to mean "(He) created" (i.e., a conjugated verb in the past tense). This would yield a literal translation of "In the beginning of . . . (He) created, God (did)"—hardly sounding like the classic we all think it is! In fact, were we to have written a high-school essay in this way, our teacher would likely have circled the whole thing in red ink and made us rewrite it!

So, Rashi says, as it were, "since I see this apparently unsolvable grammatical problem, I am going to use the tools of midrash to help explain it for me" (his words "This text says nothing other than 'explain me!'" employ the Hebrew expression *darsheni*, in which one can see the same root as *midrash*). First, the (relatively) easy part: look at the letter *bet* at the beginning of the word *b'reishit*. Usually, this letter means *in* or *with* something; however, here, Rashi claims (with some justification) that it should be understood according to one of its lesser-known meanings, *for the sake of* something. Perfectly legitimate, and now let us move on to the harder part. As we continue to "unpack" Rashi, he sends us to Proverbs 8:22, where the word *reishit* refers to something God created "at the beginning of His way." In Proverbs, this generally is taken to be the concept of *hokhmah*, or "wisdom": God created wisdom at the beginning of God's own way. However, for the Rabbis, *ain hokhmah elah Torah*, "Wisdom means nothing other than Torah." Thus, in a rabbinic tautology (it is one, because they taught it!) (ouch), "*Reishit*=wisdom=Torah." Since the methodology of midrash permits him to do so, Rashi then takes this last value, and "plugs" it back into the Creation narrative: *b'reishit*, "for the sake of *reishit*," that is, "for the sake of the Torah, God created the heavens and the earth." Now, *that* is a translation that you are never likely to see in an English translation of the Torah, but it is, in fact, Rashi's "first" resolution of the grammatical problem. Creative, no? I won't go into as much detail in explaining Rashi's second midrashic solution, but suffice it to say that Rashi sends us to the word *reishit* in Jeremiah 2:3, and derives from its use there that it is midrashically equivalent to the word "Israel"; Rashi then plugs *this* interpretation back into Genesis, and it yields the translation: "for the sake of Israel, God created the heavens and the earth."

Thus, Rashi has given us two (similar) ways of resolving the grammatical problem of which we have been made aware: the word *b'reishit* means neither "In the beginning" nor "In the beginning of" but rather "for the sake of Torah/Israel, (God created the heavens and the earth)"—and what a brilliant and morale-building rabbinic lesson that is!

But this exercise is, after all, an occasion for creative midrash; it is pointedly *not* the process that we normally associate with what we call *reading* (in fact, Rashi's commentaries were one of the most important components in developing that thing we call *reading*, but, well, more on that another time!). When *we* read, we normally include such considerations as "what do words 'normally' mean in the language that I am reading?"; and "what is the *context* of the text that I am reading?" This word *context* is one of the ways to understand the Hebrew word *peshat*, often translated as "plain meaning," and for our present purposes *peshat* can be considered the opposite of the word *derash*. Since he has already given us a midrashic interpretation, Rashi, as he sometimes does, gives also a "plain meaning" (*peshat*) interpretation of the beginning of Genesis:

If you wished to explain this passage according to its plain meaning, this is how you should explain it: "In the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth—and the earth was howling waste, and darkness [was on the face of the deep] . . . —then God said, "Let there be light!" And Scripture does not come to teach the order of creation, saying that these came first. For if it had come to teach this, it would have said, "In the beginning [בראשונה] (*ba-rishonah*) God created the heavens and the earth." For there is no instance of the word ראשית (*reishit*) anywhere in Scripture that is not juxtaposed to the word that follows it, as in the *beginning* (*reishit*) of the reign of *Jehoiakim* (Jer. 26:1); *the beginning of his kingdom* (Gen. 10:10); *the first of your produce* (Deut. 18:4). Here, too you should understand *b'reishit bara Elohim* as "in the beginning of God's creating (*b'ro*) . . ."

So, Rashi says, when we wish to read the Torah contextually, we should acknowledge that the word *b'reishit* should be considered as in construct relationship with the following word, *bara*—or more simply put, the two words together *do* mean "in the beginning of God's creating . . ." Of course, *that* is not a sentence, it is just the *beginning* (sorry!) of a sentence. The "real" first sentence of the Torah does not occur until one reaches verse 3: "God said, 'Let there be light'"—everything that comes before this (Genesis 1:1–2) is a series of subordinate clauses (dare I say it? Santa's little helpers!).

Now, *that* sentence would definitely be one to which our high-school English teachers would object. But that is, in fact, how the New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible renders it, as a long, run-on sentence:

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Go pick up a copy of *Etz Hayyim*, the Torah most of our congregations use for services—this is precisely how we now are led to understand the passage.

But what are the implications of what we have just learned? They are, I believe, profound. The main point is this: because of the grammatical problem identified by Rashi (and others), we can see that the Torah essentially begins with a sentence that is ambiguous. Or put differently, the Torah begins with a text that requires our involvement and intervention in order to achieve some meaning. And we can only achieve some meaning by controlling the text through some active participation (in Rashi's case, he did so either by "changing" the word *b'reishit* (by substituting new values) or the verb *bara* (by rereading it as a gerund or infinitive). God's Torah *requires* human involvement in order to achieve its meaning—it is incomplete without the participation of humankind.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary on Joseph B'khor Shor by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

As we begin a new cycle of Torah reading, we bid farewell to the wisdom of Ramban (Nahmanides) and turn our attention to another classical commentator, Joseph B'khor Shor. This twelfth-century French exegete offers wisdom and insight with each parashah, and I trust that you will be enriched by his commentary this year. As far as I know, my translation of B'khor Shor is the first time his work has appeared in English.

Genesis 1:6–8 God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water that it may separate water from water." God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

Joseph B'khor Shor, "God made the expanse," *Making* does not mean *creating*; rather *making* falls under the category of *tikkun* or *repairing* and therefore anything that is developed by a human uses the language of "making" (for example, "And Bezalel made . . ." (Exod. 37:1)). For humans are not creators (like God who creates out of nothing) but rather they are beings that repair the world.

One of the chief characteristics of the Creation story found at the beginning of Genesis is God's ability to create. God speaks (or separates) and worlds come into being. It is a remarkable task that God undertakes and we are the beneficiaries of this divine project. Typically, the Hebrew verb connected to God's creative act is *bet-reish-aleph* or *bara*. And so it becomes all the more curious when Torah uses a different word for God's creative act. By the second day of Creation, we are told that God's creative speech is insufficient. It seems that God is forced to intervene and engage in an active gesture. Torah reads: "God *made* the expanse." Why isn't it sufficient for God to merely give the command in order for the desire to become reality? Moreover, why doesn't the text say that God *created* the expanse? What are we to make of this change in vocabulary?

Joseph B'khor Shor sheds light on the question. In explaining the difference between *making* and *creating*, he underscores a critical difference between humanity and God. Humanity's task in this world is not to create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) as God may create, but rather to repair a broken world. Anything that a human being does, Joseph B'khor Shor argues, involves reshaping and repairing—not creating something totally new as God did during the six days of Creation.

In employing the word for *making*, Torah suggests that God repaired a defect in Creation—already present during the initial two days of this venture. We continue in God's footsteps. And if God deems his own work to be insufficient and in need of repair, all the more so do human projects require such deliberate involvement. We are enjoined to repair that which is defective or insufficient—that is to say, to take divine Creation in our hands and refine and repair it. By relating to our daily activities in such a way, we come to realize, quickly and humbly, our role in the divine project. We are God's helpers in reshaping God-given materials

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.