



Bereishis (Genesis 1:1 - 6:8)

GOOD MORNING! This week's Torah portion marks the dawning of a new Torah reading cycle. That is, the Five Books of Moses are broken up into 54 "portions of the week" and each week we read one (occasionally we read two). Apropos to this concept is the name of this week's Torah portion, which is "*Bereishis* – In the beginning." *Parshat Bereishis* is commonly translated the same as the eponymously named book of Genesis. Thus, the book of Genesis begins with the portion named Genesis.

Since we are beginning a new cycle of Torah reading, I decide to ease into it and write about a fairly light subject matter – death. Okay, perhaps not the lightest of topics, but certainly one of the most crucial.

This week's Torah portion explains both the how and why death came to the world. But before I begin I thought you might appreciate the following:

Wife: Did I get fat during the quarantine?

Husband: You were never really skinny.

Time of Death: May 3, 2020 @ 9:51pm

Cause of Death: Coronavirus

Mankind is absolutely preoccupied with death; either obsessed with actively evading it or obsessed with actively trying to avoid thinking about it. But at some point in our lives we must come to terms with it. A person is called a mortal (from the Latin *mortalis* – subject to death) because from the

day we are born we are all in the process of dying. (The word murder comes from the same root.)

Why is it that we are preoccupied with death? To begin with, it is hard to come to terms with the emotional pain of non-existence. There are many ways people deal with this; some focus on building monuments to their life's achievements, while others focus on passing on a piece of themselves in some shape or form like a child or a literary work ("publish or perish").

Still others try to focus on making the most of whatever limited time they have. They understand that having time to achieve and grow as a person, whether materially or spiritually, is the greatest gift of all.

Consequently, being gifted life is the ultimate opportunity – of which time is the greatest currency (which also means that the youngest amongst us are also the wealthiest). Time, like money, can be ill-spent and squandered away. Thus we should be making a real effort to spending that very valuable currency on maximizing the meaningful things in our lives .

Fans of the Marvel Universe will undoubtedly remember the famous line of The Ancient One; "Death is what gives life meaning. To know that your days are numbered and your time is short."

Yet this was not always the case. Time only became incredibly valuable when it became a very limited asset. But this wasn't always so.

According to our sages the Almighty originally created man to be immortal. The soul and body were fused as one and the immortal soul was to sustain the physical body eternally. But, as we all know, Adam sinned and that mistake changed everything. In this week's Torah reading we find:

"And Hashem the Lord commanded the man, saying; 'Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad you must not eat thereof; for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die'"
(Genesis 2:16-17).

In other words, as soon as Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge they became mortal – in the process of death; thus fulfilling “*on the day you eat of it you will surely die.*”

Because Adam violated the prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God decreed that he and all human beings in succeeding generations would ultimately die. God doesn't punish just to be punitive. How are we to understand this decree?

According to the great medieval philosopher Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, the reason for this is that by sinning and eating from the Tree of Knowledge Adam drove a wedge in the union between his physical body and his spiritual soul. The physical body that sinned became disengaged from the spiritual soul and the soul was no longer capable of sustaining the body eternally.

Therefore, in order to fulfill the Almighty's original intent, man must die. It is only through death that the body disintegrates and excises the original sin. In the future, at the time of the Resurrection of the Dead (following the times of the Messiah), the body will be reborn and once again fused with its soul and will once again have an immortal existence.

There is a puzzling Midrash (*Tanchuma, Pekudei: 3*) that explains how the Almighty gathered soil from all four corners of the earth to create man so that, regardless of where a person should die, the earth would absorb him in burial.

This is a highly perplexing statement. Ostensibly, one of the functions of the earth is to absorb any organic matter that is buried in it. Any living thing – an animal, bird, or fish – that dies and is buried in the earth will decompose and be absorbed by the soil. How can the Midrash assert that man had to be formed specifically from earth from all over the world in order for the earth to

absorb his body? Shouldn't the natural properties of the earth have made it inevitable that the body would be absorbed?

There is a fascinating story in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 90b) that relates how Cleopatra asked Rabbi Meir if the dead will be wearing clothes when they are resurrected. Rabbi Meir responded by likening the resurrection of the dead to the growth of grain. A seed, he explained, is completely bare when it is placed in the earth, yet the stalk of grain that grows from it consists of many layers. Likewise, a righteous person will certainly rise from the ground fully clad.

By comparing the burial of the dead to the planting of a seed, Rabbi Meir is actually hinting at a much deeper lesson. Rabbi Meir is teaching us that just as a seed is planted and it rots and is reborn as a new and complete entity, so too when the deceased are interred in the earth it marks the beginning of a process of growth and rebirth. This process will reach its culmination at the time of the resurrection of the dead.

The burial of a human being is not like the burial of any other living thing after its death; when a dog or a pet rabbit is buried the purpose is simply for the creature's body to decompose and be absorbed by the soil – for which any soil will suffice.

But for a human being the process of death and burial is the process of shedding the physicality and reconnecting it back to the earth from whence it came. It is only within that very same earth that man was originally created that he can be once again recreated in the future. This is one of the reasons why Judaism finds cremation so abhorrent.

Burial is not a mere disposal of the body, an act of discarding the deceased. On the contrary, it is the beginning of a process of recreation. Indeed, the Hebrew word for grave or tomb is *kever*. But the word *kever* also has another meaning – a womb. We can now understand why. The grave,

like the womb, is a place where the body is developed and prepared for its future existence.

But there is another thing that can give one a sense of eternity – the study of Torah. All of Judaism’s timeless wisdom emanates from the source of all wisdom, the holy Torah.

As we begin a new year and with it a new Torah reading cycle, now is the right time to rededicate oneself to a weekly commitment to complete the Torah portion of the week. Our teacher Moses instituted Torah readings in the synagogue on Monday and Thursday so that the Jewish people should not allow three days to pass without studying some Torah.

Undertaking to study some Torah every day with the goal of finishing the Torah portion each week is a tradition for the Jewish people that spans a few millennia. After all, there is a reason that we are called the “People of The Book!” Most portions can easily be completed in as little as 5-10 minutes of daily study.

Be another link in a chain spanning thousands of years and hundreds of prior generations of our illustrious ancestors and make a real commitment to study the Torah each and every week!



TORAH PORTION OF THE WEEK

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The Five Books of Moses begins with the Six Days of Creation, the Shabbat, the story of the Garden of Eden -- the first transgression, consequences and expulsion; Cain & Abel, the ten generations to Noah, the Almighty sees the wickedness of man in that generation and decrees to "blot out man" (i.e. the flood).

One of the most profound verses in the whole Torah is "And God created man in His own Image." Since God does not have a physical being, this means that we are endowed with free-will, morality, reason, and the ability to emulate God Who bestows kindness. Also, if we really appreciate that we are created in the image of God, we realize that we have intrinsic worth. Therefore, there is no need to be depressed wondering if you have intrinsic worth!

“Quote of the Week”

I am gonna live till I die.

– Frank Sinatra

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

