



Partners in Torah

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**Study Guide**

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פרשת לך לך

*Parshat Lech L'cha*

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**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego Mission Statement:**

**Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text of interest to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

**Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.**

**Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.**

## Sefer Bereisheet / The Book of Genesis

Rashi begins his essential Bible commentary with a question, quoting Rabbi Yitzchak: Why did the Torah begin with the Book of Genesis, describing Creation and recounting the lives of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs? If the Torah is meant to convey to mankind obligations in the form of commandments, then the Torah should rightfully have begun with the first mitzvah (commandment) – the responsibility to sanctify the New Moon (Exodus Chapter 12- Artscroll p. 348).

Rabbi Yitzchak answers unusually, quoting Psalms 111:

ספר תהילים פרק קיא- כַּחַם מַעֲשָׂיו הִגִּיד לְעַמּוֹ לְתֵת לָהֶם נַחֲלַת גּוֹיִם :

*He declared the strength of His deeds to His people, to give them a portion among the nations.*

Should the world's nations ever tell the Jewish people, "You are thieves for having conquered Israel from the seven Canaanite nations, taking their land from them," the Jewish people can respond, "The whole earth belongs to Hashem since He created it. Until now, He let those nations have it; but now He has chosen to give it to us."

Rabbi Yitzchak's question actually applies to the entire Book of Genesis and the beginning of the Book of Exodus: Why does the Torah include all this "background" information? Certainly the answer provided is perplexing, and we will return to consider it at the conclusion of this discussion.

Let's initially consider the purpose of the Book of Genesis, which recounts the Creation, the Flood, Tower of Babel, and the lives of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and Matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah) up until the descent of the Children of Israel down to Egypt, a span of approximately 2,250 years. Could we imagine a Torah without this Book?

The question posed by Rashi is provocative: is the Torah, as taught from generation to generation, given to the Jewish people upon entering the Land of Israel 3,330 years ago, simply meant to be a book of do's and do not's? Rashi's question forces us to think beyond a catalogue listing of 613 Commandments. It evokes a statement of the Rabbis:

דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה

*Proper behavior and good character must **precede** Torah fulfillment.*

In fact, the Talmud (A.Z. 25a) names the first Book of the Bible "Sefer HaYashar" (the Book of the Upright), stating "this recounts the lives of upright people, who dealt fairly with all others." The lives of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, present us with paradigms of individuals whose everyday conversations and actions show a striving to act kindly, considerately, and being always mindful of others and the full implication of each choice being made.

This is mirrored by a concept stated near the conclusion of the Torah, describing G-d also as "Yashar" (all His ways are just.... Righteous and **Upright**; (Deut. 32:4, Artscroll p. 1100)

Earning the title *Yashar* is not simple praise, but a tremendous statement of human achievement. Our legacy of wisdom, the Torah, in recounting the complex lives and details of the Founding Families of the Jewish people, offers us the chance to perceive their uprightness of character, and to appreciate it as the mirror (human) image of the essence of G-d. This approach to the first Book offers a profound expansion on the concept that humans are created in G-d's image. (Gen. 1:27, Arscroll p. 8)

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, d. 1893) writes a moving introduction to the Book of Genesis, delving into the meaning and implication of being “yashar”/upright. He explains that proper interpersonal conduct – integrity, respect, and the valuing of all human life – is the essential lesson to be learned. Abraham begins in this week's portion by following G-d's calling to travel to a promised place and to “become a blessing to mankind.” (Gen. 12, Artsroll p. 54) These Founding Families of the Jewish people strove to fulfill ‘becoming a blessing’ in their every interaction with one another and with everyone they encountered. Their conduct was always marked by affirming dignity, acting with compassion and concern for others – no matter who the ‘other’ was. He takes note that Abraham interacted with idolaters his entire life, with rulers whose only concern was power and self-aggrandizement. Abraham, even when connecting to those who opposed the moral progress of mankind which he advocated, showed hospitality and kindness. For example -

- Abraham risked his life to save Lot, who had joined the people of Sodom; (Artscroll p. 61)
- Abraham prayed on behalf of the people there once the decree of destruction was issued; (Artscroll p. 83)
- Isaac forgave the Philistines in spite of their sealing his wells and retarding the moral advancement of their citizens; (Artscroll p. 133)
- Jacob lived in peace and acted honestly in the house of Lavan, whose intention was to wrest his family from him. (Artscroll p. 165)

The Netziv goes to great lengths to contrast the lives of these men and women to the generation of Jews who lived at the time of the destruction of the Temple. Then, in spite of meticulous religious observance, the lack of respect for differing viewpoints, especially among fellow Jews, and the baseless hatred that was rampant was fueled by religious fervor (circa 70 C.E.); the destruction of the Temple was necessary because we the Jewish people, while clinging to observance, had lost the uprightness and integrity upon which Judaism is sustained. This, the Netziv explains, is why the Book of Bereisheet (Genesis) is the prerequisite to the commandments because without uprightness of character, integrity, and respect for others that bridges chasms of ideology, observance of commandments is a castle built upon sand which cannot endure. The striving in life which underscores the purpose of Judaism is to be righteous and upright at all times. Greatness in one area does not make up for a lack in the other.

‘You shall do what is **upright** and good in the eyes of G-d’ (Deut. 6:18 – Artscroll p. 976). Nachmonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, d. 1270) wonders about the intention of this verse. After all, he notes, the previous verse states “you shall surely observe all the commandments” and, among the commandments we have many which uphold acting Yashar: “do not take revenge” (Lev. 19, Artscroll p. 660); “do not curse the deaf” (ibid.); “respect elders” (ibid); and many others which promote good character. What additional element is the admonition to ‘do what is upright’ meant to add?

Nachmonides states that “one should always do what is good and upright in every situation (even those not explicitly stated in the Torah).” After all, he notes, the Torah cannot address every situation that will arise. He recommends that as part of our standard of behavior we should be ready to compromise with others, to go beyond the letter of the law out of compassion, to act pleasantly, speak softly, and seek to provoke a response from all who know us ‘it is a pleasure to know you; you are a pleasant person’.

Nachmonides tells us that it is impossible to codify an *attitude* of uprightness, impossible to capture all the implications of acting with integrity. The Torah here is suggesting to us that we picture in our mind’s eye the vantage point of G-d looking upon us, and impute G-d’s viewpoint of what is upright and good, and then act to fulfill this lofty vision within our own personal behaviors. As much as possible we should be mindful that even with all of our human limitations

and needs, a goal worth pursuing is “just as G-d acts with compassion, so do I; just as G-d shows patience and kindness, so can I.”

The success of Abraham in achieving this in his lifetime is borne out in the events surrounding the simple transaction of purchasing a burial plot for Sarah, upon her passing. The local people refer to Abraham as “a prince of G-d in our midst.” (Gen. 23 – Artscroll p. 106). It is odd that a community of another faith would refer to Abraham in this manner. Perhaps in their daily interactions with him they were able to perceive that his moral frame of reference and his personal standard of conduct represented Abraham’s best understanding of G-d, and G-d’s vision for mankind. In this way, Abraham was properly ‘a prince of G-d’ – a member of His royal family, acting as an ambassador who demonstrates G-d’s definition of uprightness in all of his behavior.

“Love the Lord Your G-d” (Deut. 6, Artscroll p. 972): how so? Act so that the Name of Heaven should become beloved through you. (Talmud Yoma 86a)

Now, let’s revisit Rabbi Yitzchak’s specific explanation as to what we can derive from the opening of the Book of Genesis. He teaches that when the nations of the world will challenge our right to the Land of Israel, we, based on the Book of Genesis, should respond and say that the Creator of the world decided to give this land to us, the Jewish people.



Perhaps Rabbi Yitzchak is addressing our own internal misgivings, an exaggerated sense of uprightness provoked by world criticism. Was he anticipating a future time when, through our moral training, there will be a moment when we question ourselves, thinking 'the world is challenging us, questioning the correctness and uprightness of us living in Israel? Should we give it up?' For moments such as these we are reminded that our sense of uprightness is based upon G-d's vision for humankind.

The same upright, kind, and fair G-d who we emulate, is He who brought us into this land. When the Temple was destroyed we were sent out in exile. Now we once again possess it. Let's inhabit it, and live lives wherever we are, in a way which makes it manifest that we strive to be a Holy nation, some of us living in the Holy land which is our portion in the world. We can be secure in upholding the right, and acting uprightly, as G-d gives us to know what is right.