

# Haftarot Unrolled: Breishit

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## Bearing Witness

The Torah is not a book of science. It does not tell us how the world came into being or how it functions. The Torah is not a book of history. It does not tell us how civilization came about, or which forces and events affected its development. What the Torah is, is a book of instruction, a guide to creating a moral society.

In his very first comment on the very first verse, Rashi raises a key question about the essence of the Torah. If the Torah is a book of commandments, what is the purpose of beginning with the creation of the world? What is the moral value of knowing that G-d created the world? The answer Rashi gives is famous for its defense of the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel<sup>1</sup>, but it is not the only answer to that question. The Haftarah of Breishit provides us with a different perspective.

אתם עדי נאם ה' ועבדי אשר בחרתי למען תדעו ותאמינו לי ותבינו כי אני הוא לפני לא  
נוצר אל ואחרי לא יהיה

You are My witnesses, says Hashem, My servant that I have chosen, so that you may know and believe in Me, and understand that I am He; no power was formed before Me, and after Me, none can exist (Yeshayahu 43:10)

According to the Haftarah, the Jewish People have been tasked with bearing witness to all of humanity that G-d is the only creator, and therefore, the only source of power in the universe. In its description of the creation of the world, the Torah emphasizes one point over everything else: everything that came into being is there because G-d wanted it there. There was no struggle between primordial forces of good and evil which led to a world permanently at war with itself. There was no committee of gods each of which was responsible for a different aspect of reality. There was no unrelated action that a god was doing at the time that accidentally caused the world to be created. G-d created the world deliberately and intentionally, each and every aspect of it, from the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea. If there are powerful creatures in the world, it is because He created them; if the sun rules the heavens, it is because He put it there. There is no other being besides Him that has any power over the universe.

This concept has moral ramifications. If the world was created by accident, then it has no purpose, and it does not matter how we act. In that case, whatever biological imperatives drive us are sufficiently moral. If the world was created by a conglomerate of forces with varying motivations, then we can exploit those motivations for our own needs. If there's a god of destruction, then that god needs to be appeased with acts of terror. If there's a god of war, then that god needs to be appeased with victims and captives.

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<sup>1</sup> "If the nations of the world say to Israel, "You are thieves! You conquered the land of the 7 nations!", they can answer, "The entire world belongs to G-d, He created it, and He chose to give it to them, and He chose to take it away from them and give it to us." (Rashi, Breishit 1:1)

But if there is one G-d that created the world and said that it was good, then we are responsible only to Him. He, and only He, dictates what is good and what is evil. That is the message of the Torah's account of Creation.

Yet if mankind is not aware of this message, it is impossible for it to embrace G-d's morality and His definitions of good and evil. The task of making them aware falls upon the Jewish People. As the Haftarah says, we bear witness to Creation. The Midrash explains:

אתם עדי נאם ה' ואני אל כל מי ששומר את השבת מעלין עליו כאלו מעיד לפני מי שאמר  
והיה העולם שברא עולמו לששה ונח בשביעי שנאמר וינח ביום השביעי :  
"You are My witnesses, says Hashem, and I am G-d": Whoever keeps  
Shabbat, it is as if he testifies before Him who spoke and the world came into  
being, that He created His world in six days, and rested on the seventh, and it  
says, "He rested on the seventh day."  
(Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Yeshayahu 452)

According to this Midrash, keeping Shabbat has a dimension beyond our commitment to Torah and its commandments. By keeping Shabbat, which signaled the completion of the process of Creation, we testify that G-d is the One who created the world.

This concept, that Shabbat is a testimony, is expressed in our Halachic observance. The Shulchan Aruch says that when we say "Vayechulu", whether in Ma'ariv or during Kiddush, we must stand. The Mishna B'rura explains why:

ואומר ויכלו מעומד - שהוא עדות על בריאת שמים וארץ ועדות בעיני מעומד  
One says VaYechulu standing - being that it is testimony about the Creation  
of the Heavens and the Earth, and testimony is given standing.  
(Mishna B'rura 271:45)

So when we stand up to make Kiddush on Friday night, we are not simply standing out of respect for the Kiddush. We stand because by repeating the verses that describe how Creation was concluded on Shabbat, we are giving testimony and bearing witness.

Without the Jewish People, there would be no Shabbat, and without Shabbat, the world would not know that there is One Creator, One source of all that exists, One arbiter of morality. It would still be shrouded in the darkness of a pagan world, where there is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and both need to be appeased.

It is for this reason that the Haftarah outlines the mission of the Jewish People in these terms:

אָנִי ה' קְרָאתִיךָ בְּצִדְקָה וְאַחֲזַק בְּיָדְךָ וְאַצְרְךָ וְאַתָּנֶנְךָ לְבְרִית עִם לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם  
I, Hashem, have called you in righteousness; I took you by the hand. I formed you,  
and I made you a covenantal people, a light for the nations. (Yeshayahu 42:6)

The "light for the nations" is the righteousness, the morality, that comes from G-d, which is the essence of the Torah, and the purpose of the Jewish People.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l  
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל