

Rabbi Meir Kahane

Stop Being Defensive

The most famous of all the commentaries of the great Rashi is, undoubtedly, the very first one. Concerning the verse, “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth...” (Genesis 1:1), Rashi quotes the *Midrash* that asks: Why did the Almighty begin the Torah with the story of creation? After all, the Torah is essentially a book of laws and statutes. Surely, it should have begun with the first *mitzvah* the Jews were commanded to keep.

The well-known answer is, of course, that the Almighty wished to underline the fact that “He told His people the strength of His deeds in order to give them the inheritance of the nations” (Psalms 111:6). Meaning: Should the nations come to the people of Israel and complain, “You are thieves! You have stolen the land of

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the seven Canaanite nations!” the Jews can reply, “The land belongs to the Almighty who created it. By His will He originally gave it to the Canaanites, and by His will He took it from them and gave it to us.”

Thus the words of Rashi. Nevertheless, a look at the verse from Psalms that is cited gives rise to a question. If the verse is to be an answer to the *nations*, surely it should have read, “He told the *nations* the strength of His deeds,” not “He told *His people* the strength of His deeds.”

The answer is, however, that the most serious problem when it comes to the Jewish claim to *Eretz Yisrael* is not the fact that the *nations* do not recognize it. The nations are no problem for a Jewish people with faith in G-d. The real tragedy is the fact that so many of the Jewish people *themselves* do not believe or have grave doubts about the legitimacy of the Jewish claim to the land. In order to make the nations believe, it is the Jews themselves who must first be convinced! And that is why the verse emphasizes, “He told *His people* the strength of His deeds.” If the *Jews* believe it, they will have the strength and self-confidence to tell the nations.

Yet another question is raised by the Siftei Chachamim. In *Parshat Lech Lecha* (Genesis 12:6), Rashi writes, “[The Canaanites] were capturing the land from the descendants of Shem since Noah had given it to Shem when he divided the land.” If that is true, what claim do the nations have on *Eretz Yisrael*? How can they accuse the Jews of stealing the land? After all, if Noah originally gave the land to Shem and the Jews are his descendants, it is only right for them to retake the land from the Canaanites who stole it in the first place.

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It appears to me that the answer to this question contains an important lesson for today. Yes, the Jews *once* lived in *Eretz Yisrael* and the land *once*, originally, belonged to Shem, but the nations of the world can always say, “What does it matter what happened centuries ago? People come and people go. What matters is that now, *today*, the Canaanites live here, and you cannot come after so many years claiming it’s yours.” Indeed, this is exactly what the Arabs say to the Jewish people today!

How do we reply to this claim? The lesson of the first Rashi in the Torah is that, in the end, there are no “logical or “political” answers to the world. The ultimate answer is only the one: The Almighty created the land. He is the owner and in Him vests all title. He decreed the Jewish people to be His inheritance, and the land to be theirs. Let us believe it and shout it forth joyously.

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Rabbi Binyamin Kahane

Think Jewish

The *Midrash* declares that the Torah preceded the creation of the world by 2,000 years (*Bereishit Rabba* 8:2). This same *Midrash* also compares the world’s creation to the building of a palace and states: Just as a king of flesh and blood

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consults with an architect before constructing a palace, G-d looked at the Torah and created the world (ibid. 1:1).

What is the *Midrash* trying to teach us? What does it mean by its strange statement that the Torah existed before Creation?

To answer these questions, we must remember a fundamental principle of Judaism – one which we are liable to forget immersed as we are in the mundane physical matters of this world. This principle asserts that all the ritual *mitzvot* were given to us by G-d as symbolic expressions of particular ideas. If we distort the ideas, the *mitzvot* lose their significance since they no longer symbolize their essence.

Many of us have lost sight of this principle. Two thousand years of exile amongst the gentiles have transformed us from a nation into a “religion.” We have become practitioners of Jewish ritual without grasping the inner concepts. We perform rituals by rote, paying little attention to the meaning of our actions and words. We have become the type of people who declare G-d’s omnipotence in synagogue and immediately afterward ask, “How can we survive if America won’t give us money?” The religious world has come to believe in *mitzvot* rather than G-d.

The Rabbis in the *Midrash*, therefore, emphasize that the “ideas” – that is, the Torah – preceded the existence of the material world. The ideas are crucial. Without understanding the *mitzvot*’s inner significance, they are sterile – like a body without a soul. And a Jew fulfilling the *mitzvot* without reflection is nothing more than a robot, a practitioner of ritual.

This message is also evident in G-d’s instructions a millennia later in regards to building the Tabernacle, which is compared to a

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“small world.” G-d first commands Bezalel to build the ark – the symbol of the Torah – and only afterward does He command him to build the altar – the symbol of deed, or the *mitzvot*. If one does not start from the basics, from the Torah in the ark, one’s sacrifices on the altar are of no significance.

It was with this premise in mind that my father, *Hy”d*, called the school he founded “The Yeshiva of the Jewish Idea.” He wanted a yeshiva devoted not only to studying “religion,” so to speak – Talmud and *halacha* – but one that also connected the rituals to the concepts they symbolize. Thus, in addition to “regular” subjects, this yeshiva also stresses *Tanach* and *Midrash*, the sources of authentic Jewish ideas and concepts.

Not for nothing did the Rabbis set down the rule that five-year-olds should study *Tanach*. Before a Jew learns the rituals, he must learn to think like a Jew. Only in that manner will the Torah he observes be authentic.

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