

Ki Mitzion: Parashat Bo

Translated by: Jeremy Tibbetts

Edited by: Raphael BenLevi

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Please submit all comments and feedback to jtibbetts94@gmail.com

“God said to Moshe and Aaron in Egypt: This month shall be the head month to you. It shall be the first month of the year” (Exodus 12:1-2).

This *mitzvah*, which establishes the exodus from Egypt as the starting point for the Jewish calendar, is the *mitzvah* which signifies the beginning of the Torah as the “Book of *Mitzvot*.”

Our accustomedness to label the five books of the Moshe as “the Torah” causes us to overlook a fundamental question which occupied our sages at the beginning of Bereishit which we will discuss below.

There are two sections in our *chumash* which are of a completely different essence. The first is a historical narrative which begins with the creation of the world and ends with the exodus from Egypt. The second is a collection of *mitzvot* which were given to the generation who left Egypt guided by Moshe’s leadership for forty years until entering the land of Canaan.

Given that the system of laws and the historical narrative are two different topics, we would expect them to comprise two different books: one, a legal-*halachic* work, the other a historical work, a sort of introduction to the historical narratives to come, such as the book of Yehoshua or the book of Melachim.

It is worth asking: why do these two topics which seem so different appear in the same volume?

There is a deep reason for this. The Giver of the Torah desired that we should know first of all who this Yisrael is, who is destined to receive the Torah, even before the Torah itself is formulated.

Here is the point: the historical narrative (“the *mikra*”) is itself the Torah. The laws and *mitzvot* are only one aspect of the divine revelation. The Hebraic prophecy is first and foremost a revelation of the meaning of history according to God’s intentions, which is why the “*mikra*” is called Torah.

This topic is discussed in an important *sugya* in the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 5a):

R. Levi bar Hama said that R. Shimon ben Lakish said: “why does the Torah say ‘I will give you the stone tablets, the Torah and the commandment that I have written for [the people’s] instruction?’ ‘Stone tablets’ refers to the Ten Commandments, ‘Torah’ is *Mikra*, ‘the commandments’ are the Mishnah, ‘that I have written’ is the Prophets and Writings, ‘for [the people’s] instruction’ is the Gemara. This teaches that all of these were given to Moshe at Sinai.”

It would be worthwhile to interpret this *sugya* at length. Here we will highlight only two points:

- 1) “‘Torah’ is *Mikra*.” The word *Mikra* relates to the Written Torah as it must be **read** out loud.¹ In *Mikra*, the description of the *mitzvot* and the biblical story are mixed together.
- 2) “The *mitzvot*” are learned as practical *halacha* via the Mishnah and Talmud.

The question of the addition of the “historical part” of the Torah to the “legal-*halachic* part” is asked first by Rashi on Bereishit 1:1:

“The Torah should have opened with ‘this month is for you [the first month],’ which is the first *mitzvah* with which Yisrael were commanded. What is the reason that it opens with Bereishit?”

Note that apparently Rashi is asking his question about everything in the Torah that precedes the verse “this month is for you the first month,” but his answer seems relevant only to the first chapter of Bereishit:

“Because ‘God declared to His people the strength of His works, in order that God might give them the heritage of the nations,’ and so if the nations of the world would say to Yisrael ‘you are thieves! You conquered the land of seven nations,’ they will say to them ‘all of the land belongs to the Holy One blessed be He who created it...’”

The reason for this is that **the first *mitzvah* which with Yisrael were commanded** also requires an introduction, an “opening” which goes all the way back to Adam HaRishon. This is due to the fact that it has to be explained who this Moshe and Aharon are, who God turns to and reveals the

¹ This reading is a vestige of the time of the prophets, when they would hear the word of God spoken and immediately understand what they heard in their ears, without any intermediary or interpretation. Prophecy, revealing the plans of the Creator for humanity and their descendants, appears first of all as speech, as words in the mouth of the prophet. This speech can then be recorded as words written in a book, but only afterwards. Therefore, the covenant with Bnei Yisrael was sworn **according to [al pi, literally by the mouth of]** the Torah, on its being spoken out loud in words, and not on the book of Torah: “God said to Moshe, ‘write these words down for yourself, since it is through these words that I have made a covenant with you and Yisrael’” (Shemot 34:27).

unique “order of times” to Yisrael (the Hebrew calendar), and what they are doing in the land of Egypt etc.

Practically speaking, Rashi’s question is: why does the Torah open with chapter 1 verse 1, “in the beginning God created” and not chapter 2 verse 4 “these are the chronicles of Heaven and Earth when they were created” which is where the story of the chronicles of Adam HaRishon begins. Rashi explains that there was a distinct necessity to include in the historical opening of the Torah this first chapter in order that the nations of the world would know **in what way** God gave the land to who God promised to give it to.

“God blessed them. God said to them, ‘Be fertile and become many. Fill the land and conquer it’ (Bereishit 1:28).²

As it turns out, the nations of the world were not so perturbed by the idea that Eretz Yisrael belongs to the nation of Yisrael (as we see from Rashi’s words, they read the Tanakh...) as much as by the fact that Yisrael **conquered** it forcibly.

It is interesting to note that the same argument that was put forward against Yisrael in the time of the conquest of Yehoshua is put forward today in the same words exactly: “why did you **conquer it?**”

One must remember that the Torah was given to the nation of Yisrael as they left Egypt for Yisrael, with the goal that it would be fulfilled **in the land of Yisrael**. Until then, the time of Yisrael was contained within the time of humanity at large, beginning in the month of Tishrei. Starting from the exodus from Egypt, the year unique to Yisrael begins with the beginning of the month of Nissan.

² Meaning, God gave the land to humanity, and humanity is commanded to conquer: “conquer it!”