
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER mail.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Questions for Self Study - by Menachem Leibtag

SEFER BREISHIT - Intro

There's a big difference between simply **reading** the Bible, and **studying** it. To help encourage and facilitate the **study** of Chumash, each week the Tanach **Study** Center provides a battery of questions on the weekly Torah reading in addition to [and in preparation for] several shiurim [lectures] that discuss its theme and content.

Our introductory set of questions will begin with a short explanation of why it makes sense that Chumash should be 'studied' (and not just read), followed by a discussion of the methodology that we employ which forms the backbone of these study questions and shiurim.

NOT JUST A 'STORY BOOK'

Before opening a book of any sort, the reader will usually have certain expectations based on the type of book that he has chosen. For example, the reader of a history book expects to find historical information; while the reader of a science book expects to find scientific facts; and certainly someone who picks up a novel expects to find drama, etc.

But what should we expect when we open a Chumash? Is it a 'history book' - the story of Jewish people? Is it a book of 'halacha' - laws that govern our life? Is it book of philosophy that discusses the relationship between man and God?

As Chumash is a book of 'nevu'a' [prophecy], it would only be logical for the reader to assume that each book will carry a prophetic message. Therefore, to get a better idea of what to expect when we read Chumash- we must first discuss what the word "nevu'a" means.

WHAT IS NEVU'A

The popular translation of nevu'a - prophecy - is often misleading, for it is usually understood as the ability to see (or predict) the future. However, in Tanach, 'predicting the future' is rarely the primary mission of the prophet.

In Hebrew the word 'niv' [nun. yud. bet] means a saying (or technically speaking - the movement of lips). For example, in Yeshayahu chapter 57, God is described as 'borei niv sefatayim' - He who created [or performs acts of Creation] with the movement of His lips. [See Yeshayahu 57:19 and its context, see also Mal'achi 1:12.]

Therefore, technically speaking, the word nevu'a relates to speech, and hence it makes more sense to understand a navi as a 'spokesman' for God. In this sense, when a navi speaks to the people, he is delivering God's message. Certainly, there may be times when his message may include a prediction of certain events, however his primary job is to deliver God's message to man.

Similarly, a 'navi Ba'al' - is a spokesman for the Ba'al god (see Melachim Aleph 18:22); while a 'navi sheker' is one who claims to be speaking in the name of God, but instead is making it up himself (see Yirmiyahu 27:14-15!).

In other words, the Bible uses the word "navi" in reference to anyone speaking on behalf of any god.

AHARON - the 'NAVI' of MOSHE

To clarify (and prove) this point, let's bring an example from a very interesting usage of the word "navi", found at the beginning of chapter seven in Sefer Shmot.

Recall from the story of the 'burning bush' (see chapters 3 thru 6)) how God had commanded Moshe to deliver His message to Pharaoh. After failing his first mission (in chapter five), God commands him to confront Pharaoh once again:

"And God said to Moshe, I am God - **go** speak to Pharaoh King of Egypt **everything that I speak to you.**" (Shmot 6:29)

In other words, God has charged Moshe with the job of being His 'spokesperson'. Then note how Moshe explains why he thinks that he is not fit for this job:

"But Moshe appealed saying: 'hen ani aral sefatayim' - Behold I am of uncircumcised lips [i.e. impeded speech], and how shall Pharaoh listen [or understand me]?" (see Shmot 6:29-30).

To solve Moshe's problem, God provides Moshe with a solution, where Aharon will become Moshe 'spokesman'! Note how the Torah uses the word **navi** in this description:

"And God responded to Moshe, see - I have appointed you as Elokim to Pharaoh, but Aharon your brother will be your **navi**" [i.e. Aharon will become Moshe's navi!] You will say [to Aharon] everything that I command you, and Aharon your brother will speak unto Pharaoh..." (see 7:1-2).

Because of Moshe's [legitimate] complaint, God offers a very logical solution. Moshe will remain God's spokesman, but now due to his 'speech problems', Moshe himself needs a spokesman! Towards that purpose, God appoints Aharon to become Moshe's **navi**, i.e. he will speak to Pharaoh on behalf of Moshe.

In the usual case of nevu'a - God has a message that must be delivered to the people, and hence need a navi as His spokesperson to deliver that message. Now, Moshe himself needs a 'spokesman' to deliver his words to Pharaoh, hence he will be like 'Elokim' and Aharon will be his **navi**.

In summary, the word nevu'a implies a message from God to man, and the navi becomes the person who delivers that message. Hence, a sefer of nevu'a must be a book that delivers a message from God to man, delivered by His spokesperson - the navi.

Therefore, when we study a book of nevu'a, we should expect it to contain a message from God to man.

However, when we read Chumash, that message is often not very explicit. Instead, we often find that Chumash delivers its message in a more implicit manner, through a set of stories - and not necessarily through an explicit set of commands.

The problem then becomes: how do we decipher that message from those stories, and how can we be sure that our interpretation is correct!

Through the centuries, it has been the goal of the Rabbis and the great commentators to attempt to the best of their ability to decipher God's message. Even though there have been many approaches, and wide variances of opinions, most all commentators began their study and base their commentary on a critical reading of the text (while taking into consideration the commentaries of the previous generations, sometimes agreeing and sometimes arguing).

Our contention is that to best appreciate the works of those commentators, and to be able to the best of our ability to understand God's message, we too must first undertake a critical reading of Chumash. By sharing the same experience of carefully reading every story, and attempting to understand the flow of topic and the underlying theme that unfolds, we increase our chances of properly comprehending the commentaries of previous generations, and hopefully can reach a better understanding of God's message to us via His "nviim" [prophets].

For example, as we study Sefer Breishit, we must assume that purpose of the Torah's presentation of the story of Creation and all of its subsequent stories, must relate (in one form or other) to a message that God wishes to convey to man.

The goal of our questions for self study will be to raise certain points that may facilitate that study, and enhance the appreciation of the interpretations suggested by the classical commentators.

We conclude our introduction with an explanation of a methodology of study that relates to 'parshiot'.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'PARSHIOT'

One of the most significant - but often overlooked - ways that Chumash conveys messages is through its division into parshiot.

First of all, don't let the word parshia (small 'p') confuse you with the name Parshat Ha-shavu'a (capital 'P')!

In our shiurim, we use the word "parshia" in reference to the 'paragraph' like divisions of the text that are found in the Sefer Torah. In contrast, the word Parsha [with a capital 'P'] is used in reference to the weekly shabbat Torah portion, e.g., Noach, Lech Lecha, Vayera, etc., through which we complete the entire Torah once a year.

From a thematic perspective, the parshia divisions are very important, for they were given by God to Moshe Rabbeinu together with the Torah! Therefore, if God found it necessary to provide us with parshia breaks to aid us in our study of His Torah, it only makes sense that we should pay careful attention to them when we study. In fact, in his opening commentary to the book of Vayikra, Rashi himself provides us with a very similar insight:

These short breaks were given [together with the Torah by God] to allow Moshe Rabbeinu the opportunity to contemplate from one parshia to the next, [in order] to understand the flow from one topic to the next, [and if this was necessary for Moshe Rabbeinu] then even more so - we who study Chumash must pay attention to these breaks!

(see Rashi's commentary to Vayikra, 1:1).

In contrast, the 'Parshat Ha-shavu'a' division of Chumash - i.e. the weekly sedra (technically speaking, Sedra is the proper name for what we call Parsha) - reflects a tradition that began during the Babylonian exile, over a thousand years after the Torah was first given.

With this in mind, it's important to clarify an important point. Should one speak of the 'theme' of a certain Parsha, (e.g., the theme of Parshat Noach), this statement can be misleading, for God never composed Parshat Noach (or Parshat Lech Lecha etc.) by itself. Instead God gave an entire Sefer (book) to Moshe Rabbeinu. Hence, when someone speaks of the theme of a certain Sedra, he is simply explaining why Chazal chose to group together a certain set of psukim together (over others) to compose that weekly Torah reading.

On the other hand, when we speak of the theme of a Sefer (e.g., the theme of Sefer Breishit, Shmot, etc.), we attempt to uncover God's underlying message in that Sefer. In other words, that fact that God chose to include all of the stories in Sefer Breishit into one complete book implies that it should carry one basic underlying theme. In fact, many commentators (e.g. Ramban and Seforno in their introductions to each Sefer) attempt to uncover that theme.

This assumption is important for it provides the basis for the methodology that we employ in our weekly shiurim. Our analysis of parshiot will be helpful in our attempt to uncover the primary theme (or themes) of each Sefer; and in turn we will use those themes to help appreciate the detail of its various stories (and/or mitzvot).

Ptuchot & Stumot

As you are probably familiar, there are two types of parshia divisions

1. 'ptuchot' = open.

Indicated by a gap of blank spaces until the end of a line; the next parshia begins at the start of the next line. See board

2. 'stumot' = closed

Indicated by a gap of at least nine spaces; the next parshia can begin on that very same line. See board 2

As a rule of thumb, a parshia ptucha usually indicates a major change of topic, while a parshia stuma indicates a more subtle one. As we will see, however, there are many exceptions.

These parshia breaks are so important that a Sefer Torah without them is 'pasul' (not valid). In this regard, I recommend that you read chapter eight in Rambam's Hilchot Sefer Torah where he not only explains the importance of these parshia breaks, but even lists each and every one of them to make sure that sofrim [scribes] will write their Sifrei Torah properly!

So what are the chapter divisions that we are so familiar with?

To the surprise of many students, even though just about every Chumash in print today uses a chapter/verse system, this division of Chumash into chapters is not a Jewish tradition. It is, however, a very useful convention, as this system has been used by just about every publisher of the Bible (regardless of religion or language) since the invention of the printing press (15th century). Therefore, as we study Chumash, its division into chapters is a very useful convention, and a helpful reference that reflects how other people may have understood (or misunderstood!) its topics, but it certainly does not carry any prophetic significance.

In contrast, the division of Chumash into Seforim [books] and parshiot is of paramount prophetic significance. Hence, their consideration will often be a primary focus in our shiurim.

Tanach Koren

To easily identify these important parshia breaks when studying Chumash, it is very useful to use either a 'Tanach Koren', or (what is known as) 'Rav Breuer's Tanach'.

The Tanach Koren (named for its beautiful Hebrew font designed for that publication) was first published in the sixties, and is probably the most widely used Tanach in Israel today, both in schools and shuls. More recently Mossad ha-Rav Kook also published a complete Tanach based on the famous manuscript of the Keter Aram Tzova, and edited after exhaustive research by Rav Mordechai Breuer, one of Israel's most renowned Bible scholars. Both publications provide the reader with a very accurate and clear printing. [Which Tanach is 'better' has become a 'hot topic' in the Yeshiva world, and therefore, I refrain from taking a stand.]

It is difficult to explain why, but rest assured that once you become accustomed to studying with this style of Tanach, you will quickly find how useful a tool it becomes for analytical study of Chumash, especially in regard to appreciating parshiot.

In some Chumashim, and quite often in Mikra'ot Gedolot versions, the parshia divisions are noted by letters instead of spaces. Usually the Hebrew letter 'peyh' notes where a parsha ptucha should be (see board 3), and the Hebrew letter 'samech' notes where a parsha stuma should be (see board 4).

Long parshiot and short ones!

Even though we have noted that parshiot act more or less like paragraph breaks, we find numerous exceptions - that are thematically very significant. We will demonstrate this by undertaking a quick analysis of the parshiot found in the first five chapters of Sefer Breishit.

Using a Tanach Koren, take a quick glance at the story of Creation in chapter one. Note how each day of Creation forms a single 'parshia'. This reflects a very logical 'paragraph like' division.

Next, take a look at what happens in chapter two! A new parshia begins with the story of Gan Eden in 2:4 and continues for some forty psukim - all the way until 3:15, and there we find parsha stuma!

Then, we find another parsha stuma, but this one (to our surprise) is only one pasuk long! The next parshia is also stuma and continues for five psukim until 3:21.

At first glance, this division seems to be rather absurd! Why should some forty psukim continue without any parshia break, even though there are plenty of spots in between that would easily qualify for a paragraph break? Then, immediately afterward we find a mere pasuk that becomes its own parshia (i.e. 3:16).

Clearly, these examples prove that a parshia break is not always the equivalent of a paragraph break. Instead, sometimes the Torah will intentionally group numerous psukim together without any parshia break to emphasize a certain point, and sometimes, the Torah will intentionally provide a parshia break at a spot that does not necessarily require one. However, when the Torah does this, we should assume that it carries some thematic significance.

Let's return now to this example and attempt to understand why. Note that the lengthy parshia (2:4-3:15) contains not only the story of God's creation of man in Gan Eden (i.e. 2:4-25, and hence the chapter break at 2:25), but also the story of the 'nachash' and man's sin (3:1-15).

The lack of a parshia break between these two stories already alludes to the intrinsic connection between them, i.e. between the story of man's sin in Gan Eden (chapter 3), and the very creation of Gan Eden (in chapter 2).

Immediately afterward we find a one line parshia that describes Eve's punishment, and then another very short parshia that describes Adam's punishment, and then yet another parshia that describes mankind's punishment (i.e. the banishment from Gan Eden in (3:22-24)!

Clearly, the fact that the Torah delimits each form of punishment with its own parshia break alludes to the thematic importance of aschar va-onesh' [Divine retribution] in Chumash - the concept that God holds man responsible for his deeds. As we should expect, this will emerge as a primary Biblical theme, and these short parshia breaks help emphasize its importance.

Let's return now to Parshat Breishit. Note that chapter four - the story of Cain and Abel - forms its own parshia. Then in chapter five, we find a separate parshia for each one of the ten generations from Adam to Noah. Note, however, that all of these parshiot from man's exile from Gan Eden (see 3:22) until the story of Flood (see 6:5) are parshiot stumot (see board 11)! As we shall see, this too will be thematically significant.

We will return to these topics in our shiur on Parshat Breishit, but to help you prepare for that shiur (and for all the remaining shiurim on Sefer Breishit), we conclude with some pointers for self-study that will apply what we have discussed thus far, and as usual, some more questions for preparation.

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QUESTIONS FOR SELF STUDY - Intro:

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Finding the Theme of Sefer Breishit: A self-study guide

With this background in mind, I'd like to introduce you to a methodology that I have found very useful when teaching. For the most basic level of preparation for class, I ask the students to scan through an entire Sefer (or at least one section at a time), noting its division into parshiot. Then, we take a sheet of blank paper, and along the left margin, we prepare a long list of short blank lines.

Then, after reading (or scanning) each parshia, we attempt to summarize its primary topic in four words or less! For some parshiot this is very easy, for others it is quite difficult (but try your best). As we proceed, you'll understand why it is so important to be concise.

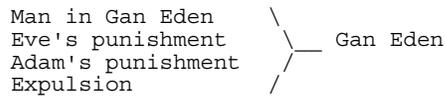
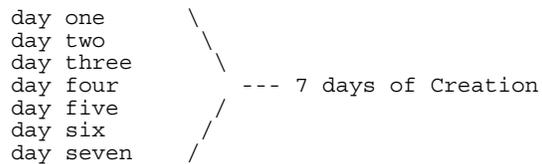
Then, we record that brief (one phrase) summary on the blank lines on the sheet that we prepared; one line for each parshia.

Ideally, we should do this list for the entire Sefer, but usually this is not very practical, so we choose instead one unit within the Sefer at a time. For example, in Sefer Breishit, we begin with the first twelve chapters.

After our listing of the parshiot is complete, we contemplate the list, looking to group together only the most obvious units. For example, when studying Parshat Breishit, the seven parshiot of the seven days of creation form a distinct sub-unit. Similarly, the nine parshiot of toladot in chapter five also form a distinct unit. To indicate these grouping on our list, we mark these units with 'greater than' signs. At the end of that sign, we write a short phrase that describes that group.

The following example will illustrate this, as it shows the

results of this method for the first three chapters of Sefer Breishit .



Usually, you will quickly see how several parshiot immediately group together, while many others stand alone. Again, be careful to group parshiot together only according to the most obvious groupings. If it's not obvious, then don't group it.

For example, the parshia of the Cain & Abel story (chapter four) would stand alone, since it's not part of the Gan Eden narrative, nor is it part of the toladot in chapter five.

Upon completing this process for the entire list, we reach the second level, for a new list has now formed towards the right, reflecting the summaries of the most obvious sub-units from level one.

Now we treat the new level in the same way that we treated the first level. We analyze our new list, again looking to group together the most obvious units. When we finish level two, we proceed to level three, etc.; and slowly, our list begins to look like a tournament. However, as we proceed from level to level, we need to apply a bit more creative thinking when grouping into sub-units, for the connection from one unit to the next will not always be so obvious.

In essence, we begin by constructing a table of contents for the book, and slowly (by taking theme into consideration) we attempt to turn this table of contents into a structured [and titled] outline.

In case you didn't catch on yet, our assumption is that if we continue this process, sooner or later there will be a 'winner' (on the right margin) - i.e. a short phrase that identifies a common theme for all of the sub-units of the entire Sefer - and that 'winner' is none other than the primary theme of the Sefer.

This methodology is far from an 'exact science', and it gets complicated at times (and doesn't always work so smoothly); but it certainly helps the student follow the thematic flow of a Sefer.

As we will see in future shiurim, it becomes an excellent tool to help appreciate not only what the various commentaries say, but also to understand why they argue.

As preparation for our shiurim over the next three weeks, try to complete this style of analysis for all of Sefer Breishit, or at least for the first twelve chapters. Don't expect for everything to be easy, and don't expect to find simple answers all of the time, but try your best. As you study, be sure to relate to the questions for self study that will follow in the next email.

b'hatzlacha,
menachem