



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Bereishit

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 22, 2011  
Bereishit

**Our Fragile World**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

Do we have any right to exploit the environment for our own needs and survival? What responsibility do we have to the world around us? What virtue and blessing is there in the fact that humans “dominate” over nature, as we read in this week’s Torah portion?

Once a child, who would become a famous Rebbe and sage, was rebuked for destroying a single leaf of our sacred universe. How much more so the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms.

The prevalent mood today is fear and uncertainty due to our volatile world. But as we enter a new year and begin reading the Torah anew – and are reminded about the genesis of the world and the proactive role of the human race – we are empowered to be leaders, not victims; to revisit and renew our responsibility to perfect the world in which we live. For how we establish ourselves on *Shabbat Bereishit*, that’s how it will go for us all year long.

This sermon makes use of much humor, inspirational examples and stories. And it focuses on today’s environmental issues, animal rights and our responsibilities to the Planet Earth.

*Note: This sermon is longer than usual, offering you many sub-sections, stories and anecdotes (some are marked optional) from which to choose from to suit your style. Due to the relevance of the topic, you can also use this material in many other contexts throughout the year.*

**OUR FRAGILE WORLD:  
WILL WE REFINE IT OR DESTROY IT?**

## 1. Doing Nothing (Humor)

A grumpy old man is sitting on the bench depressed. His friend asks him "Lou, why are you so down?"

"Because my wife is upset at me," replies Lou.

"Why is she is upset?"

"Because when I came home yesterday after sitting all day on this bench, she asked me: 'So what did you do today, Lou?' And I answered: nothing.' She got all nervous, and cried out: That's what you did yesterday! Yesterday you also did nothing.'" Yes, I answered, but I wasn't finished..."

## 2. Doing Something

My friends, today is *Shabbat Bereishit*, and we stand ready and excited to take on the new year - to do *something* ... something real and something important.

Too many people today are doing nothing. Too many are depressed and feeling powerless. The failing economy, our headless leaders, the volatile world, an uncertain future - in addition to all our other issues - are leaving many people today feeling fearful and hopeless.

Now with Steve Jobs' death some are saying that our last leader has gone, and we have no hope left. Ten years ago we had Steve Jobs, Bob Hope and Johnny Cash ... now we have no Jobs, no Hope and no Cash!

The good news is that today we have the power to begin anew.

### 3. New Beginning

*Bereishit* means (in the) beginning. We read in it about the genesis of it all – how all of existence began – which is apropos to the fact that we are now beginning a new year.

Beginning anew always feels great. It tells us that no matter what happened in the past, despite any setback, we now turn a new page, begin a new phase, in which we enter with renewed enthusiasm and resolve.

This feeling is amplified in this year's schedule, when *Shabbat Bereishit* follows immediately after our exuberant dancing on Simchat Torah, which was just yesterday. On Simchat Torah we concluded reading the entire Torah, and immediately began reading the Torah anew, from the beginning, *Bereishit*. Because we Jews never really end anything. The end always means that it is the last step of one stage, transitioning into the first step of a new stage. As such, we leave no room for doubt, no room for pause. As soon as we finish reading the entire Torah, straight away, we begin reading *Bereishit* anew.

So on this special day – when we begin the Torah anew and we channel all the newness from the new year holidays (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah) – we truly have the power to create a new beginning, a new genesis of heaven and earth. Just as it was on the first *Bereishit*, we have the ability to recreate the universe anew!

*Bereishit* which we translate as “in the beginning” literally means “at the head of” from the Hebrew word *rosh* or *reishit* meaning “head.” Like Rosh Hashana and this entire month of *Tishrei* (whose letters also form the word *reishit*) *Shabbat Bereishit* tells us that this is not just the beginning of the new year, but its head – for it is the head or brain that really controls the entire body. Thus when we read *Parshat Bereishit*, we tap into the concentrated energy that has the power to affect the entire year ahead, like the head that controls the entire body.

So, renewal accomplished today is the source of renewed energy for the entire year.

The Rebbes tell us: As we establish ourselves on *Shabbat Bereishit*, that's how it will go all year long. So let us establish ourselves with renewed energy on this critical day, which will set the tone for our entire year.

#### 4. The Formula

That brings us to the question:

What can we practically do to renew ourselves and the world on this day? You would be surprised to know that this Torah reading offers us an actual formula that we can each easily implement in our lives.

All we need to do is read closely the account of the creation of the human being, Adam and Eve – which is actually the creation of every human being, including you and I.

#### 5. Get Your Own Dirt (Joke)

Of course, this can only be appreciated after we recognize that we are not self-made, but we were actually put here on earth by God.

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that man had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him.

The scientist walked up to God and said, “God, we’ve decided that we no longer need you. We’re to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don’t you just go on and get lost.”

God listened very patiently and kindly. After the scientist was done talking, God said, “Very well, but I think you should prove your assertions. So let’s have a man-making contest.”

“Okay, great!” said the scientist.

But God added, “Now, we’re going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam.”

The scientist said, “Sure, no problem” and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt.

God looked at him and said, “Oh no. You get your own dirt.”

Now that we have established that we did not create ourselves, let us review the account of the creation of the first human being.

## 6. Creation of Man

Following the creation of heaven and earth, light, darkness, the firmament above and the waters below, vegetation, the celestial bodies and all water and land animals and creatures and birds, and all animals and creatures on land,<sup>1</sup> the Torah tells us about the creation of man:

God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.”

And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth. “

And God said, “Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and to all the fowl of the heavens, and to everything that moves upon the earth, in which there is a living spirit, every green herb to eat,” and it was so.<sup>2</sup>

So the human being – male and female – were the last of all creations.

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<sup>1</sup> Day one – light. Second day – separation of the firmament above and the waters below. Third day – vegetation. Fourth day – sun, moon and stars. Fifth day – all water creatures and birds. Sixth day – all land creatures (Genesis 1:1-25).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:26-30.

## 7. Why Last?

This poses a question – as presented in the Talmud:<sup>3</sup> Why was the human created last?

The Talmud offers four answers,<sup>4</sup> but we will focus on just two of them, which seem to contradict each other:

- 1) The human being was created last so that if s/he ever becomes too proud, he may be reminded that insects were created ahead of him
- 2) The human being was created last so that s/he might straightway enter in to the banquet – partake in the ready-made bounty of the world

We can easily understand the second answer, for when we invite a special guest to dinner, we don't first sit him at the table and then start to get things ready. We first lay down a tablecloth, arrange the dishes and the cutlery and then welcome the guest to the feast. So, too, God first sets the table, so to speak – he created the entire world with all its nature and creatures, and then created the human to enjoy this “banquet.”

But this explanation seems to contradict the first one. To say that even bugs preceded a human being in creation is a far cry from saying that the person is the most special guest on earth!

## 8. It All Depends on Us

But really there is no contradiction. For it all depends on us – on how we behave. We determine our own destiny – whether we will be lowlier than a bug on earth, or the honored guest who reigns supreme over the entire universe and all its creatures.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sanhedrin 38a.*

<sup>4</sup> The remaining two answers are as follows: 3) To negate anyone from saying that man was partner with God in creation; 4) That man might immediately enter upon the fulfillment of a precept, namely the mitzvah of Shabbat.

Now, what distinguishes us human beings from all of existence is our ability to change the course of nature – for good or for bad.

Nature on its own is neutral. It never will digress from its programming. The sun will always rise at its designated moment. Plants will follow their seasonal shifts. Every single thing in existence has innate mechanisms and laws that define its nature and personality, its cycles and movements.

Only we human beings can digress and change the course of our own nature and the natural environment around us. Only we rule over creation.

But with this great power comes even greater responsibility: To ensure that we use our dominance to refine and elevate the world, and not destroy it.

## 9. Our Great Power

Why were we given such great power? Why do we have the ability and ingenuity to subdue, conquer and consume the world around us, even creatures that are physically far more powerful than us?

This question goes hand in hand with the biggest question of: Why are we here? Why were created in the first place?

Simply put: To be partners with God.

Only we were created in His Divine Image; only we have within us a Divine personality – in order to fulfill our special responsibility to develop the resources God has placed in our hands.

Therefore, we were endowed with the wisdom and power to dominate over nature and the creatures of the world, so that we could tame the elements, civilize the raw materials of the universe and turn the world into a refined and spiritual environment.



## 10. Our Choice

But we also have been given a free will, and so we have a choice:

We can choose to be arrogant, and in our superiority feel entitled to anything that we can get our hands on. If that is how we behave, we are reminded that even bugs preceded us in the order of creation.

Or we can choose to be humble, and in our modesty recognize the awesome gift and responsibility we were given to protect and elevate the environment. Then we are the extra-special guest that the entire banquet of the world was set for.

## 11. The Apple Example (Optional)

For example, let us say that you encounter, a juicy apple growing on a tree. You have before you three choices:

Choice #1: You can ignore the apple and just move on.

Choice #2: You can indulge yourself and consume the apple, and then use the energy and pleasure you have gained from the apple for your own selfish purposes (or for no purpose at all), or worst of all – for destructive purposes.

Choice #3: You can eat the apple with respect and sensitivity, thank God for this gift, and then use the energy you gain from the apple to help another person or for some other constructive goal.

As you are eating the apple you recognize that you have been given the opportunity to consume another entity on this earth, not merely for your indulgence, but to elevate it to another plane that it could never have reached on its own. And that in this way, you become a partner in helping to refine the world and make it a home for God.

If you follow Choice #2, the apple complains: “I was just hanging on a tree, living out my life according to the Divine plan for which I was created. What right did you have to rip me off my tree, eat me and make me a partner with in your crimes?!”<sup>5</sup>

If you follow Choice #3 and use the apple’s energy to build something positive or to help a person in need, then the apple thanks you: “Hanging on my branch, I, the apple, could never have been part of improving the world in quite this way. I will have done my part in nature, but I would not have been able to be part of showing compassion and kindness to another person. Now that you have consumed me, and I have become part of your flesh and blood, I have the merit of being partner in your mitzvah of helping another.”

This is how Judaism looks at the universe. This is how the Torah, in this week’s reading directs us humans to care for, cherish, protect and elevate the world around us.

## 12. One Leaf (Optional Story)

Consider this touching story:

Rabbi Joseph Isaac writes in his memoirs: One day in the summer of 1896, my father took me for a walk in the fields. The crops were ripening. A light breeze moved through the sheaves, ears of corn nodded and whispered to each other. My father said to me: “See my son? Divinity! Each movement of every ear of corn, and of every tuft of grass, was anticipated ... [in God’s master plan].

We had gone into the forest, and I, absorbed in our conversation, stirred by the sound of my father’s voice and the purity of his words, had distractedly broken off a leaf from a tree and was holding it in my hand, tearing it to bits and dropping the pieces to the ground.

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<sup>5</sup> A Chassidic aphorism: When a wicked person walks on the street, the cobblestones cry out “What right do you have to walk on us?! We – the cobblestones – have never transgressed God’s will, we have never hurt anyone else, why do you defile us? What entitles you to trample upon us?”

My father said: “The holy Ari used to say, apart from the fact that every leaf of a tree is a creature that has in it divine life and was created by G-d for some predesigned purpose, there is also contained in every leaf a spark of some soul that has descended to this world in order to be redeemed.

“And now, regard how careful a man must be in this world, whether awake or asleep. See, even now, as we were speaking about divine providence, you absentmindedly plucked a leaf, held it in your hand, tore it into little pieces, and scattered the pieces to the ground. Should one regard the God’s creations so lightly? The Creator wrought this creation, too, for some purpose, there is divine life in it. Within its own body is contained its own life. In what way is the ‘I’ in the leaf less than your ‘I’? Yes, there is a great difference. The leaf is in the category of the ‘plant,’ and you in the category of the ‘human.’ But everything created has its own end, and its divine obligation to accomplish something in the world.”

### 13. Purpose of Existence

Appreciating the Divine in everything around us – especially the habitat that provides us sustenance and allows us to live – is the essence of the entire purpose of existence.

This is the message of today’s Torah reading.

For, thousands of years before Earth Day, Arbor Day, the modern Green Movement – and even before Al Gore – the Torah established that the world is a sacred place, and no person has a right to touch anything in this world – not animal, not vegetable, not mineral – unless he elevates it to serve the Divine.

## 14. Creation in 2011 (Humor)

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

Quickly, God was faced with a class action suit for failure to file an environmental impact statement. God was granted a temporary permit for the project, but was stymied with the cease and desist order for the earthly part.

*Then God said, "Let there be light!"*

Immediately, the officials demanded to know how the light would be made. Would there be strip mining? What about thermal pollution? God explained that the light would come from a large ball of fire. God was granted provisional permission to make light, assuming that no smoke would result from the ball of fire, and that He would obtain a building permit and, to conserve energy, He would have the light out half the time. God agreed and offered to call the light "Day" and the darkness "Night." The officials replied that they were not interested in semantics.

*God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plant yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit."*

The EPA agreed, so long as only native seed was used.

*Then God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth."*

The officials pointed out that this would require approval from the Department of Game coordinated with the Wildlife Federation and the Audubon Society.

Everything was okay until God said the project would be completed in six days. The officials said it would take at least two hundred days to review the applications and the impact statement. After that there would be a public hearing. Then there would be ten to twelve months before...

*At this point, God created Hell.*

## 15. Animal Rights

Animal rights activists often argue that we humans have no right to kill and consume animals for our own sustenance. But truly the case could be made for plants as well. What right do we have to destroy *any* living thing in order to sustain ourselves?

The Rebbe R' Sholom Ber once said to a vegetarian declining to eat meat: "And do you know what is transpiring in the food that you are eating...?!"<sup>6</sup>

The question deepens: Why were humans created in a fashion that our survival is dependent on the destruction and consumption of other species? Doesn't this necessity make us inherent narcissists?! When our very being is dependent on consuming other forms of life, how can we be expected to be kind and giving?!

The only reason we may consume or use elements of nature for our personal needs, according to the Torah, is not because we have a right to them - indeed, we have no *right* - but because we have the responsibility and privilege to refine, elevate and perfect them and the environment. We are permitted to consume what is not truly ours *only* when we use it for positive and constructive ends - to civilize and enhance the world, morally and ethically, for good and holy purposes.

When God created us humans he declared: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth." This charge and blessing makes us aware of our intimate dependence and integral connection with the world in which we live. And thus, the Torah imbues us with a profound sensitivity to all that grows and all that breathes around us.

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<sup>6</sup>Talk of the Second Day Rosh Hashana 5708 (p. 164).

## 16. Sensitivity

Such sensitivity is not arbitrary.

Some of us are sensitive only to certain people and at certain times. It is not uncommon to find executive sharks that are merciless in their business dealings, while behaving like gentle lambs with their own children and families. Not to be outdone, there is also the parent who, for some reason, demonstrates more love to strangers than to his or her own children.

Then, there is “seasonal” sensitivity, displayed by some only at particular moments, when it is convenient or it suits their mood to be in a benevolent frame of mind.

Of course, any sensitivity, especially in our harsh world, is always welcome. But true sensitivity is one that is not compartmentalized. Because sensitivity driven by personal interest can, and inevitably will, always be arbitrary. If you are sensitive on your own terms, then who is to say when those terms will dictate turning against even those you profess to love? If you are insensitive sometimes to some people or in some situations, you ultimately will be – if and when it suits you – insensitive to *most* people, in most situations.

Sensitivity is a state of being, not an act. A noun, not a verb. A sensitive person is sensitive all the time, to all people and in all situations.

## 17. Organic Holidays (optional)

Coming from Sukkot flora – when we gather together the “four species,” the *lulav* (palm branch), *esrog* (citron), *hadassim* (myrtles) and *aravot* (willows) – one cannot help but think of the fascinating organic nature of the holidays.

We gather together the four species – and wave then in all six directions: south, north, east, up, down, west – to demonstrate our responsibility to elevate the world around us. Each of the four represents another dimension of the ecosystem.

Our dependence on other species is not in order for us to be consumers but to become producers ... for our interaction with the species allows us the opportunity to elevate the world around us. By utilizing the strength and energy we receive from food for productive and constructive purposes, we in effect lift up the source of this energy to unprecedented heights, ones that these species could never reach on their own.

## 18. At the Crossroads

We always stand at a crossroad, with two choices before us. With every move we make, every breath *and bite* we take, in every interaction with the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms, we have two options - either to consume and destroy the world around us, or to use the energy to elevate and improve our environment.

If we, tragically, destroy our environment, we ought be reminded that the insects preceded us in the order of creation. Then, we become inferior even to an insect, which has not digressed from its purpose.

But if we protect and refine the world around us then we live up to our birthright and true purpose - for we were created in the Divine Image and endowed with the ability to transform the universe.

## 19. Renewing Our Commitment

Today, as we conclude the schedule of the holidays with *Shabbat Bereishit*, we are reminded of our mission to refine, elevate and transform the world into a beautiful divine garden. As we enter the new year, let us renew our commitment to our calling - let us determine to be mindful and extra sensitive to everything around us, which we were charged to watch over.

Let us begin with our children and our families ... extend ourselves to our neighbors and friends, and to all people, including strangers. Let us be sensitive to that which is around us ... to every blade of grass, every leaf, every fiber of our sacred world.

We are all responsible for our environment. We have no right to hurt or damage any object in this universe, from the largest animal to the smallest insect, from the mammoth to the microscopic components of nature. Everything was created for a purpose, and we are responsible to care for and protect every part of existence, whether it is human, animal, vegetable or mineral. Moreover, we are responsible to help it reach its fullest potential in realizing the purpose of its creation.

Responsibility for our universe is a great gift. It is the gift of being active participants in the dynamic unfolding of the world's destiny. And that responsibility and how we live up to it begins anew today.

Let us never forget that how we establish ourselves on *Shabbat Bereishit*, that's how it will go for us all year long. May it be a blessed year for us and for the planet. Amen.