

Torah Weekly

ד"ר

PARSHAT BEREISHIT

Tishrei 23-29, 5787

October 4-10, 2026

Torah Reading

Bereishit: Genesis 1:1 - 6:8

Shabbat Machar Chodesh: Samuel I
20:18-42

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

A TWISTED CREATURE

Within the ocean of blood and fire that is surrounding us now, there are seemingly isolated, detached islands, here and there. Here we are, sitting and talking about Torah, Mitzvot and good deeds. On the one hand, it may be comforting to know that there are such islands of serenity within the confusion. But is it really right, at a time like this, to be within a kind of bubble of a world that is all good? Maimonides gives a list of people who do not have a share in the World to Come.

This list includes apostates, skeptics, those who deny the Torah, etc. However, it also includes a type of person that usually is not overly noted: he who separates himself from the congregation. This person, says Maimonides, may be flawless in his faith and deeds. It may even be impossible to find any article in the code of law that he violates. However, he does not want to be part of the Congregation of Israel. He wants no share either in its troubles or in its joys. It is as if he says: Let me live alone! For that reason, this person has no share in the world to come. He is rejected forever. If we do not wish to be included in that category, we must remember that even the islands of quiet that exist, exist in a relationship and a struggle with the noise all around us. Therefore, we must not live within the silence of isolation. Rather, we must feel that we are living within the currently existing reality, with its confusion, flames, danger, and spilt blood.

I do not want to speak about politics - not because politics is inherently loathsome; on the contrary, it is part and parcel of what we are all living within. In a place like ours, whoever wants to keep away from this is to be considered one who separates himself from the congregation. With all that, I choose to speak about a completely different issue. However, this issue is profoundly related to what is happening now.

I believe that the foundation of things is not always visible. Often it is to be found much deeper, and sometimes it seems totally abstract. So too, the topic about which I am going to speak may seem abstract. I think that it is deeply connected with our current reality. This connection is not a mystical one. Rather, it is a direct link between the blemishes of the mind, heart and consciousness, and what is happening to us now.

The subject I wish to discuss is sophistication. The only place in the Torah in which one may, perhaps, say that there is a term akin to that is in Genesis 3:1, which says: "The serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field." In contemporary terms I would translate it as "the serpent was more sophisticated." Indeed, this is what he

was. He was neither wise nor clever, but he was sophisticated, the very first sophisticated being in the world.

Defining sophistication is not easy. I shall therefore not speak here about the very existence of this term, nor about the multiplicity of forms - from storming in to creeping in - whereby it enters into real life. I would like to focus upon one main point: sophistication forces the most basic things not only out of the discourse, but even out of the very process of thinking. Sophistication demolishes the possibility to conduct a simple conversation, make a simple statement, touch the fundamentals of existence.

The abundance of sophistication, the multitude of explanations - regardless of the method employed in them - makes us cease to know what is right and what is wrong, what is truth and what is a lie. We forget what simple words such as "I hate," "I love" mean. Instead, we get dragged into a heap of complex, convoluted talk that is completely detached from reality, from genuine experiences and emotions. In the aftermath of sophistication there is no longer a need to deny or ignore the basics. People have become so sophisticated, that they no longer believe in or understand anything anymore.

Consequently, what should have been most basic and simple not only ceases to be self-evident; it becomes totally incomprehensible. I am speaking about basic words, such as: "I believe," "I am afraid," "I am a Jew." One can explain these things at great length, with or without footnotes, in complicated sentences that no one understands - for this is part of what sophistication is about.

Unlike sophistry, sophistication is not an attempt to mislead the thought. Rather, it may be likened to the continuous activity of cutting down flowering, fruit-bearing trees, pulverizing them, turning them into paper and then replacing them with paper trees and flowers. The sophisticated person converts living things into much more complex, complicated, wiser surrogates - and in the process, loses touch with the basics.

The curse of sophistication today has occurred mainly among educated people, or those who want to be considered educated, throughout the world. Once, before the onset of sophistication, a person could go to an exhibition, see a painting, and say, "This is beautiful!" Today, one can no longer say such a thing, just as one can no longer say that something is horrid. Rather, one needs to explain precisely to which era this painting belongs, what genre is used, and whether it is outdated, modern or post-modern, how this painting relates to works of other painters, and whether the brush strokes go from right to left or from left to right. After all that, a person ceases to know if the thing itself is beautiful or ugly...

This applies also to religion, as well as to an increasing number of religious people. Today, religious people are becoming more and more sophisticated. They speak a highbrow language and write highbrow poetry and literature. They explain Judaism in a metaphysical way and in a Kabbalistic way and in a poetic way and in a literary way. All these explanations brush aside the simple reality of speaking and thinking about basic concepts and of experiencing the most fundamental things.

Sophistication is a deadly poison to Judaism, because it eradicates from it all those things that - even if somewhat primitive - are real. The sophisticated person no longer has children - he has state-of-the-art dolls (sometimes, living ones). He has no life - he has super-modern machinery. All this sophistication creates a complete structure, which I also often encounter in religious life. All those explanations, and attempts to be bigger and brighter, make us lose our most basic understandings.

This process occurs with our emotions and reactions, too. We can no longer say about anything: "How good it is," just as we can no longer exclaim: "Phooey!" Man has become captive of this style, this jargon. He has become so elaborate, ornate and refined, that nothing true remains.

These matters are now part of the public political discourse in Israel. Without referring to the Right or the Left, I can say only this: before we were sophisticated, we knew that there was something called the Land of Israel, whatever it may be. Now we are so sophisticated, that we are no longer aware of its existence. There was a time when we knew that there was something called enemy. Now, there is no longer enemy; instead, there is such a profusion of complex, refined words, that we no longer know what an enemy is and who is a friend. These

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things have their implications on life, and on the conclusions that we draw from it.

If we go back to the serpent, we can see that sophistication contains an element that is truly, fundamentally irrelevant. Let us examine the dialogue between the serpent and Eve. Even though the serpent is difficult to describe, he obviously was not a small, simple creature of the reptile family. He was extremely elegant, charming, very educated and sophisticated. And there was Eve who, as the Talmud attests, was a beauty, but apparently totally uncultured. Now, these two have a dialogue. The serpent offers Eve to eat of the fruit, and she replies, in the simplest of terms: "It's forbidden!" But a word such as "forbidden" is passé in sophisticated talk. Sophisticated people are no longer familiar with terms such as "forbidden" or "no." So now, instead of speaking about the issue itself, the serpent starts discussing the motivation of He who forbade: "Yea, has G-d said you shall not eat—what was it that made Him say such a thing?"

Poor Eve! Prior to that encounter, she knew that some things were permitted and others, forbidden. Now, she no longer knows. True, the serpent does not tell her that everything is permitted, but he says to her: "Look, here is a world that is much more complicated, more sophisticated." And he tempts her to enter into this world: "Eat it!" Indeed, if one looks at how a serpent moves, one can understand what sophistication is. The serpent does not walk in a straight line; it is incapable of that. Serpentine gait is one of the most beautiful things there are, something between a wave and a dance. But it is a serpent, and it kills. For the fruit - not the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but the fruit of the serpent - is death, a total annihilation of human relations, of understanding and feeling of the most basic things. Once upon a time, everyone - simple and intelligent people alike - knew that one should awaken in the morning and recite the morning prayers. People may not have known why. Nobody provided them with subtle explanations about the vibrations and metaphysics of the thing, but they knew that they had to get up and get moving. Now, people no longer are aware of that, because they are sophisticated. And sophistication kills.

On the face of things, sophistication only seems to add structures of more refined thought. If so, why not build these rococo towers, with filigree of thought? It turns out, however, that these thought-towers destroy the basis from which they sprouted. They destroy the most basic concepts: no, yes, I am for, I am against—all those things that are simple, rudimentary, elementary, perhaps even somewhat foolish—but they are life.

The complex, wise book of Ecclesiastes puts this very succinctly: "A little folly is dearer than wisdom and honor" (10:1). There is grandeur in honor and splendor in wisdom, but both of these may freeze and die due to lack of inner vitality. A little folly of simple, naïve, innocent emotion—love, fatherliness, compassion—is what gives wisdom and honor the minute, yet so absolutely necessary, seed of life.

Indeed, what was it that prevented Adam from putting forth his hand and eating from the Tree of Life? I imagine that the Tree of Life was not more difficult to reach than the Tree of Knowledge. In fact, these two trees were adjacent to each other, in the midst of the Garden. But after having eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam was no longer capable of knowing where the Tree of Life was. The Tree of Life may very well have been right in front of him, but it just did not occur to him that that was it. He probably thought to himself: The Tree of Life cannot possibly be that wretched little shrub over here; it must be something a lot more splendid and sophisticated. He did not reach for the Tree of Life at that moment, because he was so sure that he had to do concentration and meditation exercises and read a lot of professional literature (that had not, as yet, been written). This is why man still is so far away from the Tree of Life.

As I have said before, I do not want to speak about politics, nor about the present. I want to speak about one thing only: the need to reconnect with the most basic things, with the points of truth that we can grasp, and which are the roots of existence. I mean the simplest things: "good," "bad," "beautiful," "ugly," "I love," "I hate," "this is my homeland," "this is my religion," "this is what should be done." I know that these concepts are not in fashion these days. Nevertheless, if we want to live—let us come, before the curse of the serpent befalls upon us; let us hold on to the Tree of Life.

*By Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinzaltz) OBM
From a speech given in Jerusalem, Israel*

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, October 4, 2026
23 Tishrei, 5787

Passing of R. Chanoch of Cordova (1014)

As a youngster (in c. 960), R. Chanoch was captured by pirates, along with his father R. Moshe and three other great Torah scholars. R. Moshe and his son were ransomed by the Jewish community of Cordova, Spain, where R. Moshe opened a yeshivah for Talmudic studies. When R. Moshe passed away, he was succeeded by his son.

These events marked a turning point in Jewish history. Until then, the primary centers of Torah scholarship were located in the great and ancient Jewish communities of Babylonia, and Jews throughout the Diaspora depended on their leaders for guidance. With the opening of the yeshivah of R. Moshe and R. Chanoch in Spain, Jewish leadership shifted westwards, and European Jewry slowly became independent of the Babylonian community. Thus began the golden age of Torah scholarship in Western Europe, where it flourished for the next five hundred years.

Monday, October 5, 2026
24 Tishrei, 5787

Returning Exiles Commit to Follow the Torah (335 BCE)

The Jews who had returned to the Land of Israel with Ezra and Nehemiah gathered on this day and repented their misdeeds, signing a document in which they committed to trust in G-d and follow His ways. Among the mitzvot they specified were to refrain from intermarriage and from purchasing produce on Shabbat (Nehemiah 9:1–3; 10:1–32).

Tuesday, October 6, 2026
25 Tishrei, 5787

Passing of R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1809)

Passing of the great Chassidic leader and advocate for the Jewish people, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1809). Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was a close disciple of the second leader of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi DovBer, the Maggid of Mezritch. He is best known for his love for every Jew and his impassioned words of advocacy on their behalf before the Almighty.

Thursday, October 8, 2026
27 Tishrei, 5787

Passing of R. Yitzchak of Dampierre (C. 1190)

R. Yitzchak was a great-grandson of R. Shlomo Yitzchaki, the seminal Biblical and Talmudic commentator commonly known as Rashi. R. Yitzchak and his three uncles—R. Shmuel (Rashbam), R. Yaakov (Rabbeinu Tam), and R. Yitzchak (Rivam)—are among the earliest and most well-known Tosafists. Their comments and explanations, which appear on the outer margin of all classical prints of the Talmud, are vital to any serious student who wishes to properly understand the Talmud.

Friday, October 9, 2026
28 Tishrei, 5787

Arrest of R. DovBer of Lubavitch (1826)

R. DovBer of Lubavitch was arrested due to trumped-up charges fabricated by a jealous relative. Among his alleged "crimes" was that he was sending money to the Turkish sultan, who was at war with Russia at the time. R. DovBer was released six weeks later (see calendar entry for 10 Kislev).