



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# Creation Conversation

Anyone who has ever taught anything can confirm the adage of our Sages: “I have learned from all my teachers, but I have learned most from my pupils.”

It is especially true that one learns a great deal from his students if he does not limit himself to lecturing to them, but rather engages in face-to-face conversation with them. It is in candid and interactive dialogue that one learns most from his students.

The immense value of simple conversation between teacher and student was brought home to me many years ago in a conversation I had with two very different students.

They both attended a series of lectures I gave for individuals with very little prior exposure to the Jewish religion and its teachings. One of them was almost exclusively interested in what he called, “the rules and regulations” of Judaism. The other was far less interested in Jewish law. He was more of the “spiritual” type and had a plethora of questions about the nature of God.

The first individual, let’s call him Rick, was interested in a meaningful way of life. He wanted to be part of a congregation, to celebrate the holidays, and to learn how to live daily life as a Jew.

The other student, let’s call him Seth, was consumed by questions of cosmology and the origins of the universe. He saw God as an almost impersonal force behind nature. He wanted a relationship with God but questioned whether that was at all possible.

Both students had in common an interest in engaging me, their teacher, in conversation after class. Usually, those conversations took place in the local kosher pizza shop.

I vividly recall the evening I gave a lecture on the opening chapter of the book of *Genesis*, which is, of course, the beginning of this week’s Torah portion (*Genesis* 1:1-6:5). Rick and Seth appeared equally eager to corner me in the pizza shop after that lecture.

Rick began the conversation by firmly questioning why the Torah even bothered to give us details about the creation of the world and God’s role in it. “As a Jew,” he maintained, “I just need to know how to live my life. How to celebrate the holidays, what food is kosher and what is not, and what is right and wrong in the spheres of ethics and morality. I can satisfy my curiosity about the origins of the universe by consulting some scientific book on the matter. For me, this has nothing to do with religion.”

Seth, sitting across the table, was absolutely astounded. “What?!” he exclaimed. “This opening chapter of *Genesis* is precisely what I need to know as I begin my exploration of Judaism. I need to know about God, from beginning to end. And this is His beginning.”

I was fascinated by this conversation, because it helped me put into a new perspective the conflicting opinions of two of the greatest rabbinic commentators on the Bible, Rashi and Ramban.

Rashi, in the very first words of his magisterial commentary on the entire *Pentateuch*, asks the same question that was bothering Rick.

Rashi, whose actual name was Solomon the son of Isaac, begins by quoting a Rabbi Isaac, who some have maintained was none other than his own father. He avers that the Torah should have begun with the chapter in the later book of *Exodus*, which outlines the *mitzvot* which Jews were supposed to fulfill. Rashi struggles to find a reason for the Torah’s description of creation and the detailed narratives of early human history.

“Rick,” I was able to say, “your question was anticipated many centuries ago by a great man whom you never heard of.” I continued to introduce him to the man who was Rashi and to his indispensable commentary. Rick was gratified that Rashi too seemed to conceive of the Torah as primarily a book of “rules and regulations,” so that he felt compelled to seek a reason for its beginning with an account of the creation.

Seth was obviously hard put to restrain himself. But before he began to protest

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against Rick, and against Rashi, I attempted to placate him. “There was another great rabbinic commentator on the Bible,” I explained. “His name was Rabbi Moses Ben Nachman. Some call him Nachmanides. Traditionally, we call him Ramban and consider him second only to Rashi as a rabbinic commentator.”

I told Seth, and Rick who was listening reluctantly, that Ramban in his opening paragraph of his commentary on *Genesis* 1:1, contests Rashi’s very question. “Of course,” he asserts, “the Torah had to begin with a description of the creation. That is the root of our faith, so anyone who believes that the world always existed but was not created by the Almighty at one specific moment in time has no share in the Torah at all.”

Rick and Seth were gratified to discover

that their differing views on what was important in Judaism had precedents in the writings of two great medieval rabbis.

I hastened to disappoint them. I told them that it was incorrect to conceive of two mutually exclusive definitions of Judaism. It was not a matter of a “rules-based” religion versus a “God-based” one.

I quoted to them the marvelous passage in the writings of Maimonides in which he speaks of the *mitzvah* to love God, and he explains that there are two ways to achieve this. One way is by studying His Torah and its laws, and the other way is by contemplating His astonishing creation, the world of nature.

I admonished them to carefully avoid reducing our faith to one or the other conception. “Our faith is not a simplistic one,” I argued. “As you proceed in your study of Judaism in general, and of the *Five Books of Moses* in particular, you will come to realize that our religion emphasizes that our God is both Creator and Lawgiver. Any conception of Him as one but not the other is not authentic Judaism.”

I thanked them for once again demonstrating to me the great value of conversation between student and teacher. Before we parted that evening, I shared with them a story of another conversation between a teacher and a student that I had read about in philosopher Samuel Hugo Bergman’s memoirs.

Bergman recounts the story of Hermann Cohen, the German-Jewish philosopher who drew closer to religious Judaism in his later years. The climax of his life’s work was his book, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*. It seems

that the philosopher Cohen once entered into a long conversation with an old and old-fashioned Jew who resided in the university town of Marburg with him. The philosopher attempted to explain to the old Jew his elaborate and highly intellectual theory about the nature of God. The old man listened with the respect due to a university professor. When Cohen was finished with his learned and lengthy discourse, his elderly partner in conversation responded in Yiddish: “I understand everything you said, but something is missing. *Vu iz der Bashefer?* Where is the Creator?”

Cohen heard the old Jew’s response, and “got it.” His eyes welled up with tears, but he remained speechless.

The opening chapter of this week’s Torah portion assures that everyone who reads it will not make the philosopher’s mistake, but will realize, along with the old-fashioned Jew, that whatever else God may be, He is primarily *der Bashefer*, the Creator. ■

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