

## **What Proceeds Torah**

### **Rabbi Joseph Radinsky**

The rabbis ask the following questions: Why is it that the Torah starts with creation?

Why doesn't the Torah start with the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people: to the leaders to declare when the new month would be, and to the individuals to take a paschal lamb? The answer given by Rashi is because G-d wanted to establish that He was the ruler of the heavens and earth, but He could have established that in the first few sentences of Bereishis, and then He could have gone on to Abraham. Why didn't the Torah just start with the birth of Abraham? After all, the Torah does not tell us much of the history of the world before Abraham.

The truth of the matter is that Abraham did not discover monotheism, Noah was alive until Abraham was 58 years old. Our tradition teaches us that there was a Yeshiva headed by Noah's son Shem and his grandson Ever which existed at least until Yaakov went to Mesopotamia. What Abraham discovered was that you couldn't approach G-d unless you were first moral, ethical monotheism. It's hard to practice ethical monotheism. We first have to learn how to control our tendency to be excessively jealous, excessively lustful after things and our passions and excessively desirous of honor & respect. In other words before we can be ethically monotheistic we must be a mentch. As the Sfas Emes states we can't learn about ethical monotheism, about Abraham until we first realize that we can destroy ourselves and others by falling into the clutches of three basic sins unless we are careful, even after we have accepted the Torah.

We all know that ambition, jealousy and the pursuit of honor can wreak havoc on a society and bring down even very talented people. We have to learn how to control these impulses even before we start to learn Torah. From Cain, we learn the terrible results of jealousy. He was jealous of his brother because G-d turned to his sacrifice, not because, according to many commentaries, Cain's sacrifice was not worthy; rather, because Cain only brought his sacrifice. He did not bring himself, too. As the text reads, "Havee Gamhu - Hevel brought also himself." Jealousy made Cain kill his brother.

The people of the flood were guilty of the terrible crime of lusting after things and lusting after their passions. They would steal and act violently to get anything they wanted. Everything was fair game for them. If they could get what they wanted, they did not care how they got it. It was lusting after things which caused their downfall. We also learn about the Tower of Babel, how the people said, "Let's make for ourselves a name." They were interested in honor. How many people have been done in by their excessive zeal to achieve honors at the expense of others? The Sfas Emes says that we all know the famous saying, "Derech Eretz Kodmo L'Torah - proper behavior mentchlikeit even proceeds Torah," that unless you have this proper behavior, Torah will not help you. He goes on to say, as we learn in the Pirkei Avos, where Rabbi Eliezer Kapar says that Kino, jealousy - Tava, lusting after things and passions and Kovod, the excessive pursuing of honors take a person out of this world.

Let us all remember the lesson of the Sfas Emes. We won't be able even to learn Torah and most certainly we won't be able to be elevated by it unless we're a Mensch.