

Parshat Bereishit

The fulsome description of Gan Eden may seem obscure. It is introduced by the words Va'Yita Hashem Elokim Gan Be'Eden Mi'Kedem – the 'Merciful-Kingly' One planted a garden in Eden in the East or, per Malbim, in a garden planted in Eden previous to Man's creation. There follows 5 pesukim (2:10-14) providing a lengthy, seemingly pointless, description of its location and its characteristics:

A river goes out from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four distributaries: The name of the first is Pishon. It encircles the whole land of the Havilah where there is the gold. And the gold of that land is good. There is the Bedolach and the Shoham stone. And the name of the second tributary is Gihon. It encircles the whole land of Cush. And the name of third tributary is Hidekel. It flows towards the east of Assyria. And the fourth tributary – that is the Phrat (Euphrates).

Why do we need to know where Gan Eden is in relation to anywhere else? Why is it located where the Torah tells us? Why the characteristics mentioned?

Commentators translate the difficult words:

Bedolach is crystal (Rashi). Bedolach is bdellium (Malbim). Bedolach is pearl (Ibn Ezra). Pishon is the Nile (Rashi). Pishon is the Ganges (Josephus and Abarbanel), and Havilah is India. Gihon is near Eretz Yisrael (Ibn Ezra). Pishon is nearest to Gan Eden and therefore it had the good gold and precious stones (Radak). Gihon is the Nile (Josephus). Gihon suggests tributaries (Radak). Hidekel is the Tigris (Malbim). Gold and precious stones can often be found of the banks of rivers (Ramban).

The Malbim says that the river issues from Eden because when searching for new lands to settle, people naturally follow the water pathways. The four tributaries were pre-prepared for this contingency, namely that Man could fail the test associated with the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Bad and in consequence would incur mortality over immortality, expulsion from Eden instead of permanence there, and dispersion in place of idyllic confinement. Each of the tributaries encircled a different country in the sense of its natural characteristics and influences. The children of Man, who had eaten of the tree, would thus be subdivided into 4 main branches each having distinctive character traits as follows:

First, a group of people seeking wealth believing that that is man's ultimate purpose and happiness. They follow the path of Pishon which symbolises envy - the root of a passion for wealth. They need fine gold to buy precious stones coveted by man. "The gold of that land is good" and why?, because the most desirable rarities are present "Bdellium is there and onyx" for the purchase of which fine gold is needed.

Second, a group seeking sexual experimentation, gratification and excess. They are symbolised by Gihon which encircled the land of Cush - a region whose inhabitants, indulged themselves in this way.

Third, a group who rant and rave, and are mighty warriors. They are symbolised by "the third tributary" the Tigris – "the one that flows east of Assyria". This is the same Assyria which angered the earth with the roar and quake of its wars.

Fourth, is the Euphrates. The two definite articles stress this is the well-known Euphrates from which the others branched and therefore did not need to be prefaced by "And the name of..." (Malbim and Radak). Malbim holds this to be the initial river that "issues from Eden to water the garden" (2:10). While most of mankind travelled along the other tributaries, only a handful of the most noble, the fourth group, made their way along the Euphrates.

Malbim comments that those who lived beside the Euphrates sought to regain pure knowledge and aspired to find again the perfect knowledge which was extant prior to man eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Bad. They merited to find the other tree, the Tree of Life, for "Pri Tzaddik Etz Chaim - the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (Proverbs 11:30). Perhaps the message is that the peoples bounded by Pishon (Gematria 446), Gihon (77) and Hidekel (142) together need to find God - Yud, Heh (15) – and join with Him to attain the beneficence of Phrat (680).

Perhaps that is why the mystics recommended that, when tragic and dire circumstances overwhelm us, we might do well to recite these 5 Torah Pesukim at Havdalah and Kiddush - the transitions between the Kodesh and Chol. They suggest that we give up envy and covetousness, forsake pursuit of wealth and ostentatious riches, and eschew the sexual excess and warrior outlook. Simply- we should just go back to the source.

P.S. On Photosynthesis ; "And God said, Let the earth bring forth" ("Tadshe ha-aretz"). "Why," asked R. Pinchas ben Ya'ir, "did Hashem decree that grass and herbs and fruits should grow upon the third day, while light was not created until the fourth? To show His infinite power for even without light He caused the earth to bring forth [Midrash Tadshe on Bereishit 1.11].

P.S. On Gematriot: Section 6 of Midrash Tadshe states that twenty-two varieties of things were created in the world—7 on the 1st day; 1 on the 2nd; 4 on the 3rd; 3 on the 4th; 3 on the 5th; and 4 on the 6th—and that these twenty-two varieties correspond to the 22 generations from Adam to Jacob and to the 22 letters of the alphabet. Perhaps that coincides with the concept of the Hebrew alphabet being composed at (or before) B'riat HaOlam, and hence gives some foundation to the authentic use of Gematriot.