
Bereishit – Bereishit/Genesis 1:1-6:8

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

1:11 And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.

2:9 And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

3:17-19 To Adam He said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground – for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

The Context – The verses in plain English

In Bereishit, God creates the world in six days. As part of His creation, He calls forth greenery from the earth, including trees that bear fruit. One of those trees offers great wisdom; it is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God instructs Adam not to eat from the tree. Adam and his wife, Eve, violate this commandment.

As a result of this disregard for his instruction, God decrees that man will experience death, and that all gain will only result from hardship and struggle.

For Discussion – What this means for advocates

- 1) Bereishit suggests a world in which food can reasonably be expected to result from labor. How does this apply to our work as advocates? What are the benefits – and the limiting factors – of hard work in trying to achieve policy goals?

- 2) In what ways does knowledge help (or hinder) our attempts to make progress on difficult issues like improving global health and reducing poverty?
- 3) God created fruit with seeds; in other words, with the potential to replicate itself. Why is sustainability important as we seek global solutions to pressing challenges?

Noach – Bereishit/Genesis 6:9-11:32

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

6:21 For your part, take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them.

9:3-5 Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it. But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man!

9:20 Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.

The Context – The verses in plain English

In this parasha, God tells Noah to build a wooden ark and fill it with food of every type in preparation for a great flood. The ark protects Noah, his family and two members of each animal species.

After the water recedes, Noah goes out, at God's instruction, to repopulate the earth. God decrees that Noah – and all mankind – may eat meat, but commands him regarding the sacredness of life; man is not permitted to eat the flesh of a living animal, and murder is to be considered a capital offense. Noah soon plants a vineyard.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) God anticipates the nutritional needs of Noah, his family and the animals on board the ark. What are strategies we might employ to meet the needs of hungry families around the world?

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- 2) Noah is allowed a diet that includes meat, the first provided since God prescribed the vegetarian diet of Adam and Eve. But this privilege comes with certain responsibilities. How does our respect for the sanctity of life inform our commitment as advocates for the promotion of human and animal welfare?
 - 3) In planting a vineyard, Noah leaves a legacy for future generations. How do we balance the pursuit of lasting change for our children and grandchildren against our own, current needs?

Lech Lecha – Bereishit/Genesis 12:1-17:27

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

12:10 There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

14:18-19 And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.”

The Context – The verses in plain English

A famine forces Abram (soon to become Abraham) to leave Canaan for Egypt.

In Canaan, Abram’s nephew Lot is taken captive by the mighty armies of King Chedorlaomer. Abram comes to Lot’s rescue, defeating the superior forces of Chedorlaomer and his allies. With bread and wine, King Melchizedek of Salem blesses Abram for his impressive victory.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) At great risk to himself and his wife, Sarai (Sarah), Abram leaves the land God has given him to look for food in points unknown. How is this risk mirrored in the struggle currently facing hungry and ailing families across the world? What does it suggest about the chances we should take as advocates to help meet people in need?
- 2) King Melchizedek blesses Abram with food and drink – the very things that help sustain life. How are we, as Jews and global citizens, affected when other people lack these blessings?

Va'yera – Bereishit/Genesis 18:1-22:24

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

18:3-6 He said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on – seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said." Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three seahs of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!"

21:14-16 Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

21:18-19 "Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

The Context – The verses in plain English

In Va'yera, Abraham shows himself to be a consummate host, preparing a meal for three guests who appear in the desert.

Abraham casts Hagar and their son Ishmael out of his house and into the desert; he packs bread and water for their journey. Hagar is despondent when the water runs out, and is certain young Ishmael will die. God saves Ishmael's life by revealing a nearby well to Hagar; he also tells her that Ishmael will thrive.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Abraham's hospitality is the model by which we, as advocates, measure our own commitment to caring for people in need. What are some modern-day tools we employ in our quest to follow his example?

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- 2) Hagar's experience in the desert mirrors that of millions of poor men, women and children worldwide. How do we balance our obligation to alleviate suffering against our faith in God's ability to provide?
 - 3) In promising to make the lowly Ishmael into a "great nation," God acknowledges that no person is without intrinsic worth. How do we move beyond seeing impoverished individuals as victims and objects of pity? How do we empower them to see themselves as change agents in their own lives?

Chayei Sarah – Bereishit/Genesis 23:1-25:18

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

24:42 I came today to the spring, and I said: O Lord, God of my master Abraham, if You would indeed grant success to the errand on which I am engaged!

24:43 As I stand by the spring of water, let the young woman who comes out to draw and to whom I say, "Please, let me drink a little water from your jar,"

24:44 and who answers, "You may drink, and I will also draw for your camels" – let her be the wife whom the Lord has decreed for my master's son.

The Context – The verses in plain English

In these verses, Abraham's servant, Eliezer, embarks on an errand to find a wife for Isaac. He asks God to send him a sign in the form of a woman who will pass his "test" – agreeing, when asked, to offer him a drink from a nearby well. When Rebekah appears and does just that, he knows he has located Isaac's future bride.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Eliezer determines that the true tests of character for any potential match for Isaac are gracious hospitality and willingness to share a precious, life-giving resource (water) with a complete stranger. How does this inform the ways in which we, as Jews, approach the broader global community?
- 2) What do Rebekah's actions suggest about our ability to transform small, everyday actions into lasting, meaningful change?

Toldot – Bereishit/Genesis 25:19-28:9

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

25:28 Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game.

25:29-34 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. And Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished” – which is why he was named Edom. Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esau said, “I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.

27:6-10 Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, ‘Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord’s approval, before I die.’ Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies.”

The Context – The verses in plain English

Of his two sons, Isaac prefers Esau; Rebekah favors Jacob.

One day, returning hungry and tired from a day of hunting, Esau bargains away his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a pot of lentil stew.

Rebekah helps Jacob obtain his father’s blessing by preparing Isaac’s favorite food and instructing Jacob to take it to him. She also covers Jacob’s arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother; Isaac, who has grown old and blind, is taken in by Jacob’s deception.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) In this parashah, food is more powerful than the people who crave it. How does this uneven relationship limit our ability to advocate (for others and for ourselves)?

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- 2) The struggle for resources (food, drink, etc.), as well as efforts to ensure their equitable distribution, presents a wide variety of ethical challenges. How do we accomplish our goals as advocates while, at the same time, adhering to a strict ethical standard?

Va'yetzei – Bereishit/Genesis 28:10-32:3

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

28:12-13 He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

28:15 "Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

28:20 Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house – the Lord shall be my God."

The Context – The verses in plain English

It is in this parasha that Jacob has his famous dream: a stairway connects the earth to heaven, and angels go back and forth between the two realms. In the dream, God promises Jacob that the ground upon which he rests will be given to his descendents.

When Jacob wakes up, he transforms the stone he had used as a pillow into an altar dedicated to God. He then makes a pledge to God, saying that, if He watches over him during an upcoming journey by providing him food and clothing, Jacob will indeed reaffirm his commitment to Him.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Jacob defines God's protection in very concrete terms: helping him meet basic needs such as nutrition. How do we, as people of faith, reconcile our continued belief in God's justice with the severe need that exists across the world?
- 2) Communicating through Jacob's dream, God and Jacob enter into a partnership – God promises that Jacob and his descendents will thrive, and Jacob rededicates himself to God's service. In what ways do we work in partnership with God today?

Vayeshev – Bereishit/Genesis 37:1-40:23

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

37:23-25 When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

40:9-11 Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, "In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms and its clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

40:12-13 Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: The three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer."

The Context – The verses in plain English

Jealous of Joseph's favored position in the eyes of their father, Jacob, Joseph's brothers throw him into a ditch and eventually sell him into slavery.

After being brought to Egypt and being falsely accused of adultery by his master, Potiphar, Joseph ends up in jail. While there, he interprets the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker. Joseph tells the cupbearer that he will soon be pardoned and will regain his former position.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) After Joseph is thrown into a pit, the parasha draws a clear distinction between his deprivation and his brothers' indulgence. The first thing they do after casting him into the empty well is sit down to a meal! What does this suggest about the relationship between food and power?

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- 2) In Joseph's interpretation of the cupbearer's dream, the ripening of the grapevine symbolizes the literal yielding of fruit: the cupbearer's eventual pardon by Pharaoh. In what ways, both literal and metaphorical, is food an instrument of redemption for poor and hungry people? How can we, as advocates, help "bear fruit" for people in need across the globe?

Miketz – Bereishit/Genesis 41:1-44:17

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

41:25-27 And Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. The seven lean and ugly cows that followed are seven years, as are also the seven empty ears scorched by the east wind; they are seven years of famine."

41:29-31 Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. After them will come seven years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe."

42:1-2 When Jacob saw that there were food rations to be had in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another? Now I hear," he went on, "that there are rations to be had in Egypt. Go down and procure rations for us there, that we may live and not die."

44:1 Then he instructed his house steward as follows, "Fill the men's bags with food, as much as they can carry, and put each one's money in the mouth of his bag."

The Context – The verses in plain English

Joseph curries favor with the Egyptian Pharaoh by proving himself to be an able interpreter of dreams. He tells Pharaoh that the king's dreams foreshadow seven years of abundance, followed by seven years of hunger, and recommends that Pharaoh make plans to stockpile grain during the plentiful years.

The famine predicted by Joseph takes hold beyond Egypt, in the land of Canaan. Jacob hears that rations are available in Egypt (thanks to Joseph's foresight), and sends his sons there to acquire some.

Joseph recognizes his brothers and, without revealing his identity, gives them food to take home to their father.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) Joseph's wisdom in advising Pharaoh to prepare for famine calls to mind our own efforts to store food and provide it to the hungry. Yet today, ample resources exist to provide for needy people worldwide. How do we balance offering emergency support to ailing communities against the need for a more sustainable approach?
- 2) In making rations available to his estranged brothers, who are not Egyptians and therefore did not contribute to Egypt's national grain reserves, Joseph establishes a precedent for helping people in need regardless of – and despite – their origin. How do we carry on this tradition today? In a global society, how do problems facing one country or group of people impact another?

Vayigash – Bereishit/Genesis 44:18-47:27

The Text – Key verses in this parasha

47:11-12 So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, giving them holdings in the choicest part of the land of Egypt, in the region of Ramses, as Pharaoh had commanded. Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones.

47:13 Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

47:23-24 Then Joseph said to the people, "Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children."

The Context – The verses in plain English

When Jacob discovers his beloved son, Joseph, is still alive, he comes to Egypt with his other sons and their families. Once reunited, Joseph gives his family excellent land and enough bread to keep everyone properly nourished.

Meanwhile, the famine in Egypt is very severe, and even extends beyond Egypt's borders. Hungry Egyptians come to Joseph, looking for food, in exchange for which they give him money and land. Now that the land officially belongs to Pharaoh, Joseph instructs the Egyptians to tithe a portion of their crops to the king.

For Discussion – What it means for advocates

- 1) By virtue of his relationship with Pharaoh, Joseph is able to take care of his family in style. Of course, this suggests a certain amount of bias, assisting some people while leaving others behind. In our pursuit of social justice, how can we work against this very human tendency? And how do we begin to prioritize from among so many pressing global needs?
- 2) Joseph's determination that Egyptians should remit a portion of their "profits" to Pharaoh is a kind of tax. The difference today is that we, as taxpayers, exercise ultimate authority over how our money is used. What tools are at our disposal to influence the disbursement of tax dollars? How do we benefit from sending some of this revenue to causes in other parts of the world?