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The Purpose of the Book of Genesis The Book of Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch, tells the stories of creation, early man, the Divine covenant with the Hebrew Patriarchs, and the descent of the Israelites to Egypt. Rashi opens his Bible commentary by questioning the inclusion – or possibly just the prominent placement – in the Torah of such narratives. “Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have commenced with ‘This month shall be unto you the first of the months (Exodus 12:2)’ which is the first commandment given to Israel. Why, then, does Scripture begin with an account of creation? Because of the idea expressed in the text ‘He declared to His people the strength of His works in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations (Psalms 111:6).’ For should the people of the world say to Israel, ‘You are robbers, because you took by force the land of the seven Canaanite nations,’ Israel may reply to them, ‘All the earth belongs to God; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.’” The plain meaning of Psalms 111:6 is best explained by Radak. Although God showed some of His might in bludgeoning the Egyptians and liberating Israel from bondage, He showed even greater strength by announcing that Israel would soon defeat and dispossess the seven powerful Canaanite nations. God’s strength is in His ability to defy the naysayers (see Deuteronomy 9:28) by boldly predicting Israelite military victory and then successfully following through on that promise by facilitating Israelite territorial conquest. In Rashi’s homiletic reading, the strength of God’s works is the long-ago act of creation, mustered as an intellectual argument in the war of words over Israel’s territorial claims. Gentile opposition to Jewish possession of Eretz Yisrael is an important theme in rabbinic literature, just as it continues to be a serious problem in modern times. The Talmud has a legendary account of the “sons of Africa” contesting Jewish claims to Eretz Yisrael in the court of Alexander the Great. They argued that the Land of Canaan is legally theirs because Canaan was their ancestor. Geviha ben Pesisa represented the Jews and cited the verse, “Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers (Genesis 9:25).” Since the law mandates that any property acquired by a slave is automatically acquired by the master, the Land of Canaan rightfully belongs to the Semites (Sanhedrin 91a). Ramban was troubled by Rashi’s opening comments, asserting that there is good reason for the Torah to begin with an account of creation. It teaches that there is a Divine Creator and that the earth did not pre-exist Him. Nonetheless, Ramban conceded that the Book of Genesis, as composed, does raise a fundamental question. That Book does not fully explicate the facts of creation nor does it reveal the secrets of the natural world. Such knowledge is available only through an oral tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, beginning with Moses on Sinai. Moreover, knowledge of the Flood and Dispersion stories is not essential to Judaism. Accordingly, it would have been sufficient for Scripture to have offered merely a passing mention of creation, such as the verse in the Ten Commandments justifying Sabbath rest. “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day (Exodus 20:11).” Ramban answered his version of the question by offering his own version of Rabbi Isaac’s idea. God created the earth and controls who may live where. Adam sinned and was expelled from the Garden of Eden. The generation of the Flood sinned egregiously and was expelled from the face of the earth. The Canaanites sinned; accordingly, it was inappropriate for them to maintain possession of the choicest spot on earth. That land was reserved for a people devoted to mitzvot. Implied is a warning for Israel to remain committed to the covenant lest it, too, be expelled.

In this view, Genesis functions as a moral lesson for Israel. Another difficulty with Rashi's view is the seeming assumption that literary evidence marshaled from Jewish holy books will somehow be accepted by anti-Jewish heathens as persuasive. Since that viewpoint is not remotely justifiable, we should infer that, instead, what Rashi rationally intended was that Genesis is worthy of its position in Scripture because it can be used to convince Jews of the righteousness of their own cause. A close reading of Psalms 111:6 supports this approach: "He declared to His people," not to "His people's opponents." In 20th century terms, then, Genesis exists not so that David Ben-Gurion might convince Ernest Bevin to support Jewish Statehood, but for weak-kneed non-Zionist Jews to feel less guilty about supporting the Yishuv. Rashi's opening comments on Genesis 1:1 are borrowed from disparate sources in rabbinic literature. Rashi combined elements of Genesis Rabbah 1:2 and Tanhuma Bereshit 11. A closer look at the original sources leads to other views regarding the purpose of the Book of Genesis. Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin quoted Rabbi Levi: Why did God reveal to Israel what was created on day one and day two? So that if the heathens accuse Israel of being a nation of conquerors and despoilers, Israel can retort, "You, the present occupiers, were once conquerors and despoilers. As the verse teaches, 'So too with the Avim who dwelt in villages in the vicinity of Gaza: the Caphtorim, who came from Crete, wiped them out and settled in their place (Deuteronomy 2:23).' The entire world belongs to God. When He wanted He gave the land to you, and when He wanted He took the land from you and gave it to us." To give them the heritage of nations, God revealed to Israel the stories of all the generations (Genesis Rabbah 1:2). The above Midrashic passage makes no assumption about with which literary genre -- legal or narrative - the Torah ought to begin. It merely addresses why God deemed it advisable to provide Israel with information about the origins of the world: Not so that Israel would have a literary record of the covenant or of its title to the Promised Land, but to emphasize that, for both Israel and its adversaries, human history is one long tale of dispossession. It is bootless to complain that one's land was stolen because likely one's own ancestors violently ousted the previous inhabitants thereof. Military might and territorial possession do not make right; they are merely manifestations of temporary Divine favor. This Aggadic exposition serves a useful purpose when Israel's armed forces are on the verge of dislodging enemy populations from their settlements in Eretz Yisrael. The brutal lessons of history provide convenient moral cover. Ironically, however, this very lesson would have had a demoralizing effect when Rashi quoted it in the late 11th century, just as the Crusaders were conquering Jerusalem. Rabbi Isaac expounded: The Torah should have commenced with "This month shall be unto you the first of the months." Why was "in the beginning" written? God wanted to reveal to Israel His great strength and for them to know how the world came to be (Tanhuma Bereshit 11). Rabbi Isaac's basic assumption is that the Torah is a book of laws. Although the Book of Genesis does include several commandments -- be fruitful and multiply, circumcision for members of the Abrahamic household, the ban on eating the sciatic nerve -- the first commandment given to the nation of Israel was the calendar regulation set forth in Exodus 12. In Rabbi Isaac's view, some special justification needed to be advanced for the inclusion in the Torah of a) all of Genesis and (b) the early narrative (pre-Chapter 12) portions of Exodus. What is clear from Rabbi Isaac's exposition is that God wants Israel to know more than just the Law. God wants Jews to have an awareness of His great strength as well as basic knowledge of how the world was created by Him. There is no practical reason for gaining this knowledge, such as Rabbi Levi's concern for Israel's ability to argue its territorial claim. Rather, God wants us to have certain knowledge for its own sake. Moreover, it is a virtue to be intellectually curious. And for the avid pursuer of knowledge, access to information can be a gift. In this respect, the Book of Genesis is a precious gift given by God to Israel. As we begin the annual Torah reading cycle, let us

recognize the virtue of an expanded intellectual horizon. While a Jew is obligated to maintain a regular course of study in Talmudic and halakhic literature, those staples of Torah learning should not come at the price of complete ignorance in other areas. The Book of Genesis can be a point of departure for expanding one's knowledge of philosophy, cosmogony, cosmology, epistemology, ancient history, linguistics, etc. We will not reach Exodus Chapter 12 for many weeks. The stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses can, with advantage, be viewed as sources for a broadly-defined multi-disciplinary "Torah."