



Timeless Wisdom

Sefer Bereishit and the Ethics of Technology

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We live in turbulent times when the only constant is change. Epoch-defining technologies and digitization are overturning the economy, media, and culture, creating extraordinary wealth for some while leaving others behind. At a time of exceptional flux, it is even more important to literally start *MiBereishit*, from the beginning, by examining the Torah's original protagonists and their fundamental principles.

We are not the first to encounter a technological change that is simultaneously productive and destructive. The Sages teach us that Noah invented the plow, a transformational invention that dramatically improved the lot of mankind. The Torah tells us that Noah waited 500 years to have children. We can almost hear the Thomas Malthus of his time or the New York Times of today saying, "Do not have children because there will not be enough food to feed them all!" However, Noah, the innovator, changed everything with the plow, dramatically increasing the food supply and allowing humanity to procreate in droves. "These three were the sons of Noah, and from these, the whole world branched out." (Bereishit 9:19)

Along with great prosperity, Noah's invention also brought decadence. As the Torah warns throughout Sefer Devarim, prosperity can bring haughtiness and spiritual decline. So it was during the time of Noah. The emergence of the plow was not accompanied by principles that would clarify the principled framework for its use. And so, the blessing of innovation was dimmed by unforeseen consequences.

In our own time, innovations in Artificial Intelligence raise similar challenges. AI opens up many possibilities

for creating wealth and prosperity. But what are the ethical principles that must guide this technology? Similarly, the commercialization of space travel is a vast industry that may open up riches from mining, manufacturing, and farming. Yet, the principles that should govern this remarkable and aspirational development remain dangerously unclear.

Sefer Bereishit is preoccupied with innovation, enterprise and the wealth it brings. Noah invents the plow and winemaking, while Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are highly successful farmers and shepherds. The Ibn Ezra, himself a poor man, suggests that Esav spurned the rights of the first-born and sold it to Yaakov because Yitzchak was poor, leading Esav to believe that his first-born status was worthless. Responding vehemently to this suggestion, the Ramban says Ibn Ezra was "blind" in offering this interpretation. Yitzchak could not have been poor, for G-d's blessing to our forefathers included material wealth! As Ramban makes clear, the value of financial success is ingrained in the book of Bereishit.

At the same time, Bereishit is deeply concerned with the ethical principles that must accompany business pursuits. When describing Avraham's move to Canaan, we are told that he brings his nephew Lot along with him. At this point in the story, all we know about Lot is that he is an orphan. Avraham was wealthy, but he used his wealth to take responsibility for his orphaned nephew. Moreover, by contrasting Avraham and Lot after they both became wealthier in Egypt, we see that Avraham embarked on spiritual pursuits without Lot, building altars and calling out in G-d's name. Lot, on the other hand, pursued

even more wealth without principle in Sodom and Gomorrah. In Bereishit 13:1, Avraham's possessions are described between the listing of Avraham and Lot's names, implying that their different approaches to wealth came between them.

Avraham is a paragon of the proper use of wealth, using his material blessings to call out in G-d's name and care for those less fortunate in his midst. He is a model for the affluent men and women of our generation.

Yitzchak was also wealthy but acquired his wealth by transitioning from the shepherding business of his father to agriculture. Times change. Industrial economies become technology and digital economies, while professions such as law and accounting become less valuable than computer programming. Those who adapt to the new economic culture like Yaakov can continue the family lineage, whereas those who ignore or reject change end up like Esav.

Though communities of faith are all challenged by change, change is constant. Because it's not unexpected, we can, to some degree, plan to deal with it. Fortunately, Bereishit teaches us that we can and should embrace change by looking to our ancestors' timeless traditions and wisdom.

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