



SECRETS OF THE BIBLE

Iconic Stories, Mystical Meanings, and Their Lessons for Life
A new, six-session course from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Noah's Ark. Joseph and his brothers . . . We've all heard these stories; some of us grew up on them. But what do these stories really mean? How should they be understood? And what do they mean to us, living our lives in the here and now?

Many of us heard these stories for the first time as children. So, obviously, we understood them with a child's mind. And that is, more or less, how they remained with us. But the Torah is certainly much more than a collection of children's stories—or even stories for adults.

Secrets of the Bible explores the deeper meanings of six iconic biblical stories. Each of these stories raises questions and mysteries that have challenged the minds of students of the Torah for many centuries. Every generation, and every genre of Torah commentary, has addressed these questions, each in its own way. In this course, we explore the unique approach taken by the masters of kabbalah and Chasidism—an approach that ties the deepest mystical secrets of Creation with practical, down-to-earth applications to daily life.

LESSON ONE

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

The story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge is one of the most well-known of the biblical stories. It is also one of the most puzzling. Even a cursory reading of the Torah's account raises many baffling questions.

Why was the Tree forbidden? Isn't knowledge a good thing? How did eating the fruit of a certain tree impart "the knowledge of good and bad"? And if Adam and Eve did not possess this knowledge before partaking of

the Tree, does this mean that they didn't have Free Choice? What, then, would have been mankind's role in Creation? How did partaking of the Tree introduce death, the pain of childbirth, and the struggle to earn a living into the human experience? What is the role of nakedness, clothing, and shame in the Tree of Knowledge story?

An exploration of the mystical narrative that underlies the biblical story doesn't just resolve these mysteries; it also exposes the story's relevance to our own lives, by shedding light on the disillusionments and inconsistencies that we grapple with in our everyday existence: Why are we drawn to habits and practices that we know are harmful to ourselves and others? Why is it that people whom we admire, and causes that we believe in, will often turn out to be tainted with selfishness, fallacies, moral failings, or worse? Do we just accept the fact that the world we live in is a moral and spiritual mess, or is there some redeeming quality in its "messiness"? If our lives were more orderly, would they also be more superficial?

LESSON TWO

NOAH'S ARK

Rain falls for forty days and forty nights, until the waters cover the highest mountains. The floodwaters churn for months on end, while a small remnant of earthly life survives in an ark floating above the waters. Finally the waters subside, the ark comes to a rest on Mount Ararat, the surface of the earth dries, and the people and animals whom the ark sheltered for twelve months are summoned forth to build a new world. G-d vows that never again will the world be destroyed on account of His creation's failings, and sets the rainbow as the sign of this inviolable covenant between Creator and creation.

This, in a nutshell, is the familiar—and baffling—story of Noah's Ark. Can G-d's plan for His world fail so catastrophically that the Creator regrets its very creation? And if it can, why can't it happen again? Why did Noah have to labor for decades to build his ark, and spend a full year suspended above a flooded world, when G-d could obviously have destroyed the world in an instant and created it anew, if such was His desire? How does the rainbow symbolize the uniqueness of the new world generated from Noah's Ark?

Exploring the answers to these questions reveals the inner dynamics of the relationship between the Creator and creation—a relationship

that is the very essence of life on earth. In doing so, we gain insight into the web of relationships that form our own lives: the relationships between parent and child, between teacher and student, between employer and employee, and between G-d and us.

LESSON THREE

JACOB AND ESAU

The seemingly endless struggle between Esau and Jacob begins when the twin brothers are still in their mother's womb, and continues throughout their lifetimes and beyond. The Torah's account of the brothers' lives, particularly the story of the "stolen blessings," raises a number of mystifying and disturbing questions: Why does the saintly Isaac prefer the unruly Esau over the studious Jacob? Why are the patriarch's blessings dependent on the delivery of tasty "delicacies" prepared from game hunted in the field? Why do Rebecca and Jacob resort to subterfuge and trickery, instead of simply revealing to Isaac the prophecy that "the elder will serve the younger"?

As we delve deeper into the meaning of the Esau-Jacob story, we discover the many forms—both personal and cosmic—of their iconic struggle: the contest between sword and word, between matter and spirit, between self-realization and self-transcendence, between power and structure. We learn that Creation itself comes in two forms: a powerful yet unstable "World of Chaos," and a moderated and focused "World of Correction." In every area of life—our creative output, our relationships with others, our religious lives, our efforts to improve the world—we straddle both realms. Our ultimate yet often elusive goal is to achieve the "best of both worlds"—to be structured and focused without curtailing our intensity and passion.

We also encounter some of the personally pertinent questions raised by the Torah's narrative. Should we care about material success? Do we degrade our spiritual values when we invest our minds and hearts in the pursuit of such success? Is it possible to accomplish anything of value in a material world without this investment? How do we tap the power of our inner "Esau" without compromising the integrity of our "Jacob"?

LESSON FOUR**JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS**

The story of Joseph and his brothers begins long before the brothers' jealousy was provoked by the exquisite multicolored coat that Jacob gifted his favorite son, and it continues long after the brothers' dramatic reconciliation in Joseph's Egyptian palace. It traces back to deception perpetrated on Jacob when Laban substituted the elder sister, Leah, for Jacob's chosen bride, the younger Rachel. That act of trickery, in turn, has its roots in Jacob's impersonation of his elder brother, Esau, in order to obtain the blessings intended for Esau. This string of deceptions led to a series of schisms dividing the Jewish people throughout their history.

Our exploration of the spiritual roots of this saga takes us from a history of Jewish leadership, to the structure of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, to the burial places of the founding fathers and mothers of Israel, to an enigmatic debate recorded in the Talmud on the question: Which is greater, learning or action? We discover that there are two parallel quests embedded in the human soul, each of which—as well as the tension between them—is essential to our mission in life.

LESSON FIVE**THE BROKEN TABLETS**

Seven weeks after their miraculous liberation from Egypt, the people of Israel assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard G-d proclaim, "I am G-d your G-d. . . . Do not have any other gods before Me." But scarcely had Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Torah from G-d that the people fashioned a calf of molten gold, worshipped it, and proclaimed: "This is your god, O Israel!" Beholding the scene upon his return from the mountain, Moses smashed the two stone tablets which embodied the newly forged covenant between G-d and His people.

Can it be that the greatest divine revelation in human history failed to communicate its most basic message? Obviously, there is more to the story of the Broken Tablets than meets the eye.

As we dig through the many layers of the Broken Tablets story, we discover the parallels with the Tree of Knowledge story, which we studied in Lesson One. We also examine the differences between the first set of

tablets, broken by Moses, and the second set, which G-d commanded Moses to carve to replace the first. Finally, we ponder some of the foundational underpinnings of the Jewish faith. What is a “divine revelation,” and what is its purpose? How was the Torah communicated to us, and why is so much of it open to human interpretation?

LESSON SIX

KORACH’S REBELLION

Korach, who led a rebellion against Moses’s leadership in the desert, has become a byword for conflict and divisiveness. But a close reading of the Torah’s account of Korach’s mutiny seems to imply the very opposite. Korach comes across as a champion of equality and spiritual emancipation, a biblical Thomas Jefferson fighting to overthrow an elitist hierarchy.

The path to unraveling the Korach enigma passes through a number of queries and paradoxes. If Judaism teaches that every individual can have a direct relationship with G-d without the need for any “intermediaries,” why does the Torah appoint the *kohanim* (priests) to perform the service in the Holy Temple on behalf of the people? If Judaism teaches that the purpose of Creation lies in the sanctification of physical life, why is the spiritual deemed “higher” than the material? How do we reconcile the self-evident truth that “all men are created equal” with the equally self-evident differences in resources, abilities, proclivities, and callings between individuals?