

## Letter from Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein

The resurgence of the study of Tanakh in Israel – in *dati-leumi* Torah circles, in particular – has been justly welcomed as a most positive development. Constituting both an expansion of the horizons of *talmud Torah* and an expression of bonding with the cradle of most of Tanakh within the context of *shivat Zion*, this renaissance has unquestionably enriched and enhanced the spiritual life of a revitalized community.

Unfortunately, however, this enterprise has, at times, been accompanied by negative elements, as well. Perhaps most regrettable has been the tendency on the part of some scholars, students, or observers to constrict the content, scope and significance of much of Tanakh. Familiarity with the text, in one sense, has, in some circles, bred familiarity with the Scriptural narrative and the events and their protagonists presented therein, in another. The sense of reverential awe and the awareness of heroic stature may become jaded and replaced by what is cried up as “eye-level Tanakh study.” To be sure, in one respect, the eye-level approach is to be welcomed, insofar as it serves as a healthy antidote to the radical and sweeping idealization and etherealization – and, hence, dehumanization – which characterized some latter-day *parshanut*. Surely, recognition of the human and emotional dimension of even our greatest – so amply, vigorously, and imaginatively portrayed by *midrashim* – is critical for a proper understanding of their lives and their meaning. But when this reactive response to previous excesses goes overboard; when eye-level confrontation is taken to entail not only acknowledgment of overarching humanity but envisions the meeting, shorn of majesty, grandeur, and élan, at the plane of my own very mundane existence; and when, as sometimes occurs, this approach is accompanied by the benign neglect of much of the treasures of

traditional *parshanut* and the *midrashim*, to boot – the spiritual loss can be enormous.

Within this context, Rabbi Francis Nataf's *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Genesis: Explorations in Text and Meaning* constitutes a welcome and worthwhile contribution to the corpus of yeshiva-oriented elucidation of Tanakh. The volume is comprised of a series of independent and yet related essays, each dealing with a significant episode or personage, drawn from *Sefer Bereshit*. Above all, however, in the tradition of the Ramban and the Netziv, Rabbi Nataf fuses reverence for our greatest with awareness of their humanity; moreover, he recognizes that the human element does not compromise the greatness but, rather, ennobles it. I presume that some of his specific interpretations and judgments will draw criticism from the left or from the right; and the overall balance he has struck may likewise invite some variegated challenge. However, the serious and sensitive initiative to cope with the substantive issues as well as with their educational ramifications deserves the respect of a broad range of readers. Rabbi Nataf's fresh voice is one the Torah world will find well worth hearing.

בברכת התורה והמצוה,

*Abaron Lichtenstein*