

PARSHAT BERESHIT  
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Henry Ward Beecher, the U.S. Congregational Minister and author of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, possessed a beautiful globe depicting the various constellations and stars of the heavens. Robert Ingersoll, visiting Beecher one day, admired the globe and asked who had made it. "Who made it?" said Beecher, seizing the opportunity to attack his guest's well-known agnosticism, "Why, nobody made it; it just happened." Clearly, Beecher commenting on the biblical reading of this morning did not believe that the world just happened. There was a grand design and behind that design was G-d.

As we begin again the reading of the Torah, we recount the story of Creation and listen very carefully to the way the biblical authors understood, in the first chapter of Genesis, the materialization of the world. By the word of G-d the world is created *ex nihilo* – out of nothing, or at least out of *Tohu Va'vohu* – out of chaos, an unformed and void mass. In six days G-d puts order into the world and the globe as we now know it begins to take shape. Finally, on the sixth day, man himself is created in the image of G-d and nothing is ever the same again. It is a story familiar to all of us that continues to raise many questions.

Dr. David Hartman in his book *From Defender to Critic* writes that "In the beginning, G-d says 'Let us create man in our image,' and G-d creates man in that image. But soon enough G-d learns that it is not possible to make humanity fully in G-d's image because G-d cannot make humanity moral. So the story in Genesis is, in a sense, a story about failure: G-d's failure to create a moral human being. Yet, at the same time, it is the story of G-d's realization that human beings possess the unique ability to play an active role in self-governance, and, consequently, in the governance of the universe."

The closing of the first chapter of Genesis informs us that G-d wanted a partner and thus created man, according to the Midrash against the better judgment of the angels, to find a place on this earth and to live by certain dictates. Unfortunately, the first man and woman living in the Garden of Eden could not live up to a singular dictate. After ten generations, towards the end of our Torah reading this morning, G-d wants to destroy all creation and begin once more. Next week we will read the story of Noah and the flood. Noah is the new Adam and G-d hopes that with Noah's understanding of his place on earth this experiment will be successful. Unfortunately, that experiment failed as well.

Hartman writes that "The G-d of the Bible is a G-d who constantly manifests G-d's will by shaping the environment. In fashioning a finite being that is free, G-d creates a being in G-d's own image. Humanity's ability to structure the social and natural environments and create a human home in the midst of hostile or indifferent conditions are hallmarks of the dignity of the religious person conscious of having been created in the image of G-d. Passive acceptance or contemplation of nature is not the desideratum of the biblical tradition."

In other words, Hartman believes that our religious sensitivities, which have been nurtured by the biblical creation model, cannot allow us to simply accept things as they are. He writes that "We must reject the myth that hunger, sickness, and exploitation are the inevitable fate of a significant part of the population of the world. Biblically inspired human attitudes cannot tolerate the appeal to some divine immutable law to justify social or economic deprivation. Feelings of responsibility and the efficacy of human efforts characterize a central thrust of biblical anthropology."

Hartman believes that we have a significant task and that is not to accept the world as we see it, but to work to better it. Unfortunately, man's first foray in this world did not

succeed in that realm. In fact, he failed miserably. One commandment he was asked to keep and he could not even live up to that low standard. The next generation brought fratricide and violence to the world and by the tenth generation moral depravity was the scene throughout the known world.

It is clear, at least according to Hartman, that if we understand G-d's plan behind placing the human form on the face of this earth, then we have a mission. We must learn to be moral, ethical individuals. We must portray the goodness that G-d wishes us to bring to the world. And with our free will we have the ability to do so.

When the world was created, G-d brought order to the world. What had been unformed, void and full of chaos now followed a certain order. There was night and there was day. There was darkness and there was light. There were seas and there was dry land. There were the heavens and there was the earth.

A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" The students thought for a while about the question knowing there are certain laws in Jewish tradition which pertain to the nighttime and others to daylight hours. The brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields and I see a house and I can tell it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

A third student offered another answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A fourth student responded: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that is when night has ended and the day has begun."

The Rabbi frowned. "No, not one of you understands. You only divide. You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another; you separate one color from all the others... Is that what Torah is for? No, my dear students, it is not that way, not that way at all."

The students were shocked and looked into the sad face of the Rabbi. One of them ventured: "Then, Rabbi, tell us: how we can know that night has ended and day has begun?" The rabbi stared back into the faces of the students, and responded: "When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun."

The rabbi understood that the world that was brought into being was not simply one that would be subject to scientific principles; the laws of physics or those that pertain to biology. The world that was created also had moral conditions attached to it. We know when day is separated from night. The question is can we truly separate light from darkness? One of the worst plagues that the Egyptians encountered just before the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was that of darkness, total blackness. The Torah tells us that for three days darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt: "People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was." The Torah defines darkness as not being able to see one another, or to be more literal, "not being able to see your brother." In fact, the Talmud in defining how early one may recite the morning prayers, states that, "dawn" may be defined as "when one can recognize the face of a friend." When one can see other people and recognize them as friends, the darkness has begun to lift.

This is the challenge that G-d has presented to us with the ordered structure of creation. Man is the crown of that creation and has the ability to create goodness in this world and also to effectuate evil. We are challenged to be partners with G-d in creating in this world a place of ethics, morals and justice. We are bidden to attempt to eradicate illness, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick. We are entreated to emulate G-d's measure of generosity of spirit to each and every human being for G-d has created all of them in His image. As the Mishna in Sanhedrin states: "For this reason was man created alone, to teach that whosoever destroys a single soul (in Israel), Scripture imputes guilt to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul (in Israel), Scripture ascribes merit to him as though he had preserved a complete world. Furthermore, he was created alone, for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, 'My father was greater than yours.'"

In other words, every soul is precious. Each person is an entire world. No one is more important or less important than another. We all come from Adam and Adam comes from G-d.

As we read once more this great lesson taught to us in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, let us take its message to heart. We may not believe that the world was created exactly as recounted for us in this chapter. Frankly, it makes no difference if we do or if we don't. What is significant is that man was created and it is our belief, at least, that this creation was in the image of G-d. Each time we create goodness in this world, we enhance that image, but each time we do not live up to our potential we diminish it.

The great lesson, as David Hartman teaches us, is that we are presented with a world waiting to be shaped by human action. History that is yet to be written will be decided by you and by me. The stories of the first part of Genesis remind us that deeds have consequences and our actions must be held up to very high standards.

As the prophet Micah taught us: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your G-d."

May we live by these high standards.