

PARSHAT BERESHIT
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In his book *The End of Greatness – Why America Can't Have (and Doesn't Want) Another Great President*, Aaron David Miller writes that he is very concerned that not only in the United States of America but, indeed, throughout the world there is a lack of great leaders. Written in 2014, he offers this statement: "Today, if I were pressed to identify a potentially great leader, I might offer up not a traditional head of state at all, but rather a religious figure: Pope Francis I, whose greatness as well as goodness may well be defined by the irony of his anti-greatness, commonness, and humility."

Only two weeks ago, Pope Francis I visited the East coast of the United States and took it by storm. He was treated as a head of state and as a man who could relate to people from the President to the common folk. A man of great faith, he spoke out on those issues that are important to the Catholic Church and to humanity in general. While not everyone agreed either with these statements or Catholic doctrine, he was greatly honored as a man who allows his faith to motivate his activities and to surround his life with meaning. His faith permeates his thoughts, his actions, and his entire life.

This morning we begin anew the first book of the Torah. Rendered for us in the first few verses is the Bible's view of the creation of the world. The first verse, with which we are so familiar, is a most difficult one. It has been translated in many different fashions. The Jerusalem Bible translates it in the manner with which most of us are familiar: "In the beginning G-d created the heaven and the earth." However, there are other translations as well, as the words in Hebrew, though understood, are quite difficult to adequately translate. The New English Bible translates the words: "In the beginning of creation, when G-d made heaven and earth." The Art Scroll translation understands it this way: "In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and the earth." And, our own Etz Hayim, which follows the new JPS translation, offers these words: "When G-d began to create heaven and earth."

While all the translations understand the verse a little bit differently, one thing is clear and, that is, that G-d created the heaven and earth. In the Bible's understanding the entire creation story is one about G-d and G-d's activities. It is assumed, and it is present in all translations, that G-d existed before the chaos and the creation story. Thus, according to this view there is a G-d and that G-d was a creator who formed the world as we know it. The rest of the Bible, from that first verse on, is concerned not merely with the fact that there is a G-d, but how that G-d interacts with the world, and how we interact with G-d.

David Gregory, who for many years was the moderator of NBC's *Meet the Press*, was also a reporter at the White House. In his new book entitled *How's Your Faith? – An Unlikely Spiritual Journey* he writes that he was covering the White House for NBC News in the terrible days and months after 9/11. He informs us that “during that time I had the unusual experience of being asked by President George W. Bush, ‘How’s your faith?’ It was startling and memorable to be asked that question by a president of the United States, especially because, as a White House reporter, I was known for asking tough questions of that president and pushing him hard in press conferences. But President Bush was aware that I’d started down a path of religious exploration. He’d heard about it from a friend who was part of a study group I met with from time to time. And, he was curious about it, maybe because it seemed a little unlikely for the person he knew me to be: a TV guy, a politics guy, a little aggressive about my career.”

Gregory was intrigued by the question and was forced to think about it. He writes that he had to admit that he was something of an empty page. The question from President Bush reminded him that no matter where you are in life, that question may be the most important one you can ever be asked.

David Gregory was raised by a Catholic mother and a Jewish father. His father originally Don Ginsburg, changed his name to Gregory as he became involved in the entertainment industry in California in the 1950's. His father, although not religious, possessed a great sense of Jewish cultural and ethnic identity, having grown up in New York City. David assumed this identity from his father and always considered himself Jewish, going to the High Holidays with him at the Synagogue for the Performing Arts in Hollywood. He writes that his mother, with whom he had a difficult relationship, was an alcoholic and did not convey her Catholic faith to him.

Gregory pursued a career in journalism and TV and, through reporting on the Oklahoma City bombings, met his wife, Beth. Beth was a Protestant who had a strong faith. She was a very spiritual person and this framed her entire life. When Beth and David married they agreed that should they have children they would be brought up in a Jewish framework.

Gregory's book is about his exploration of a spiritual path. He writes that very early in their marriage they incorporated a Friday night experience into their lives. Using the six days of creation as a backdrop to his rationale for observing the Shabbat he informs us: “Our family practices Reform Judaism, which modernizes Jewish traditions, so we observe Shabbat in our own way: just for several hours on Friday night. I actually like the idea of expanding it across the entire 24-hour period, but my children are less enthusiastic.” His children, Max, Ava, and Jed became used to the Friday night Shabbat table experiences and it became part of their weekly home experience. He writes, “I

consider our Friday night dinners an act of love, a way to connect. These nights spent together will help protect us from the toughest experiences. For me, the ritual also represents my own ascent – the maturity of my spiritual life.”

As a journalist he decided to take President Bush’s question very seriously and to examine his own faith interviewing many religious leaders throughout the country. He informs us of his meetings with Evangelical preacher Joel Osteen; Mohamed Magid, an imam of a Northern Virginia Mosque; and Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic Archbishop of New York. He describes his meetings with Rabbi David Wolpe of Temple Sinai in Los Angeles, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, of New York; Rabbi Larry Hoffman of Hebrew Union College, and his own Rabbi, Danny Zemel in Washington. His spiritual mentor and teacher is Erica Brown, the Scholar-In-Residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, D.C., who has studied with Gregory on an ongoing basis.

While Gregory uses his journalistic skills both to interview these religious leaders and to report on those meetings, the purpose of the interviews was different than his *Meet the Press* duties. This one was for him. As he began to learn more about spirituality and religious faith, he explored his own soul and his need for a connection to G-d.

He writes of his personal and spiritual growth along the journey, of humility, of forgiveness, especially as he learned to forgive his mother for her bouts with alcoholism, and of the importance of having an attachment to something greater than one’s own self. In the epilogue he writes these words: “Faith matters to people. So many of us have a craving for a larger inner life, but we resist it. Maybe it feels too raw or vulnerable. Maybe we have trouble with the idea of a higher authority. Maybe it reminds us of a negative experience with religion. Maybe we simply do not have the answers and do not want to search for them right now. But just because we guard our spiritual lives carefully does not mean there isn’t a longing right below the surface.”

Gregory’s book challenges all of us. How’s your faith? is a question we all need to ask ourselves. How do we see ourselves in this world? What, if any, attachment do we have to a Divine Being? Does the relationship in anyway whatsoever inform our everyday lives? Are we so over-programmed and over-stimulated that we don’t take time to properly nurture our spiritual souls? It is a question we need to ask ourselves throughout our journey and not simply when things get tough in our individual lives.

Judaism, as a religion of faith, wants us to recall that there is a G-d in everything we do. Thus, the Shema, the affirmation of faith recited early in the morning, twice daily in our worship services, and when we go to sleep, reminds us that G-d is one and unique. The Mitzvot, the commandments, allow us to put our faith into action through rituals, holidays, life cycle events and everyday activities. When we eat we begin and end with blessings

recognizing that we should not take our food or its preparation for granted. When we celebrate a significant moment in our lives and recite the Shehecheyanu prayer, we acknowledge G-d's presence at that very special moment in time. And when we sit around the Friday night table, come to the synagogue over Shabbat, and experience the serenity, tranquility and sanctity of the Shabbat, we recall both G-d's creation of the world and our exodus from Egypt. The Mitzvot are nothing more and nothing less than opportunities to put our faith into action.

In the world in which we live it is not so commonplace to contemplate the meaning of faith in our lives, that is until we are faced with moments of difficulty, confronted with the question that President Bush asked of David Gregory, or come into the presence of a religious figure like Pope Francis I.

Gregory completes his book with a quote from theologian Fredrick Buecher: "If we are to love G-d, we must first stop, look and listen for Him in what is happening around us and inside us." He then continues by stating: "I believe G-d is working on me, helping me to stand in the flow of grace. But I am not done, by any means. The work doesn't end."

As we begin anew the reading of the Torah, with the accepted fact by the text that G-d created the world, President George W. Bush's question to David Gregory is one we should contemplate, meditate upon and continually struggle with: How is your faith? I hope that over the course of the journey of our lives we will be able to answer that question with conviction and honesty.