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TORAH LIGHTS

BERESHIT: CONFRONTING LIFE, LOVE & FAMILY

Maggid Books

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Bereshit

What is Torah?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

GENESIS 1:1

Why does the Torah, the word of God given to Moses as His legacy to the Jewish people, begin with an account of creation, going off into gardens of Eden and towers of Babel? It could, and perhaps should, have begun at the point when the Jews are given their first commandment as a nation after departing from Egypt: ‘This month shall be unto you the beginning of months’ [Ex. 12:2], referring to the month of Nissan, when Pesah, the uniquely Jewish festival commemorating our emergence as a nation, is celebrated. After all, is not the Bible primarily a book of commandments? So asks Rashi at the beginning of his commentary on *Bereshit*.

I would like to suggest three classical responses to this question, each of which makes a stunning contribution to our opening query, What is Torah? Rashi’s answer to this question is the Zionist credo. We begin with an account of creation because, if the nations of the world point

their fingers at us, claiming we are thieves who have stolen this land from the Canaanites and its other indigenous inhabitants, our answer is that the entire world belongs to God; since He created it, He can give it to whomever is worthy in His eyes. From this perspective, Rashi has masterfully taken a most universal verse and given it a nationalistic spin. He has placed our right to the land of Israel as an implication of the very first verse of the Torah!

It is also possible to give Rashi's words an added dimension. He concludes this particular interpretation, 'and He (God) can give (the land) to whomever is worthy in his eyes.' These words can be taken to mean to whomever He wishes, i.e., to Israel, because he so arbitrarily chooses, or they can mean to whomever is morally worthy of the land, which implies that only if our actions deem us worthy, will we have the right to Israel. Jewish history bears out the second explanation, given the fact that we have suffered two exiles – the second of which lasting close to two thousand years. If this is indeed the proper explanation, Rashi's words provide a warning as well as a promise.

Nahmanides also grapples with this question. For him, it is clear that God's creation of the world is at the center of our theology, and so it was crucial to begin with this opening verse.

After all, the Torah is a complete philosophy of life. The first seven words of the Bible most significantly tell us that there is a Creator of this universe, that our world is not an accident, 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,' a haphazard convergence of chemicals and exploding gases. It is a world with a beginning, and a beginning implies an end, a purpose, a reason for being. Moreover, without the creation of heaven and earth, could we survive even for an instant? Our very existence depends on the Creator; and in return for creating us, He has the right to ask us to live in a certain way and follow His laws. The first verse in the Torah sets the foundation for all that follows.

First of all, there is a beginning. Second, there is a Creator who created heaven and earth. Third, everything in heaven and on earth owes its existence to the Creator; and fourth, in owing one's existence to the Creator, there could very well be deeds the Creator wants and expects from His creation. According to Nahmanides, the opening verse of the Torah is the one upon which our entire metaphysical structure rests!

After all, the Creator has rights of ownership: He owns us, our very beings. He deserves to have us live our lives in accord with His will and not merely in accord with our own subjective, and even selfish desires. He deserves our blessings before we partake of any bounty of the universe and our commitment to the lifestyle He commands us to lead.

In addition, Nahmanides further suggests that the entire story of the Garden of Eden teaches us that the punishment for disobeying God's laws will be alienation and exile, just as Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit. This process is experienced by Israel during our difficult exile. This too is a crucial element in Jewish theology.

The Midrash [Gen. Raba 12] offers yet a third explanation. Implied in our opening biblical verse is a principle as to how we ought to live our lives. 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth.' In this sentence, 'created' is the verb; the world reveals to us the creative function of the divine. And since one of the guiding principles in the Torah is that we walk in His ways, our first meeting with God tells us that, just as He created, so must we create, just as He stood at the abyss of darkness and made light, so must we – created in His image – remove all pockets of darkness, chaos and void, bringing light, order and significance. In effect, the first verse of Genesis is also the first commandment, a command ordained by God to all human beings created in His image: the human task in this world is to create, or rather to re-create a world, to make it a more perfect world, by virtue of the 'image of God' within each of us.

The Midrash sees the human being in general, and the Jew in particular, as a creative force. Our creative energies – religious, ethical, scientific and artistic – must work in harmony with the Almighty to perfect a not yet perfect world, to bring us back to the peace and harmony of Eden.

All too often, Bible critics make two fatal errors. They divest the Torah of context and subtext, losing sight of what the Torah really wants to say. They take apart the grammatical mechanics of the words, disregarding the majesty and the fire, the vision and the message.

What we must remember is that essentially the Bible is not merely a book of laws, no matter how important they may be, and is certainly not written by man in his feeble attempt to understand creation and

Bereshit

God; it is rather the Book of Books emanating from God, which gives instruction and life direction.* It reveals not only what humanity is, but what we must strive to become; it teaches us that we must not merely engage the world, but attempt to perfect it in the majesty of the divine.

* The root *yrh* of the Hebrew, Torah, means to instruct or direct.

The Copernican Revolution and the Place of the Human Being

*And God saw everything that He had made and
behold it was very good.*

GENESIS 1:31

A sensitive reading of the biblical description of the creation of the world forces the reader to come to some understanding of the relationship between Judaism and scientific discovery. Contrary to popular opinion, Judaism does not balk at modernity, especially if it furthers God's honor. For example, the invention of the printing press more than 500 years ago changed the nature of reading and literary transmission. The rabbinic leadership at the time welcomed it as a way to make sacred texts available to everyone. Now we're living in the midst of another communications revolution, and many Jews are involved in the development of the computer and Internet, allowing almost instantaneous call-up of a specific passage in the Talmud or a difficult area of medical ethics in

our Responsa literature. The challenge is not to reject inventions but to refine them, not to censor modernity, but to sanctify it.

Commenting on the opening verse of Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,' the Seforno demonstrates how to place Torah insights into the context of scientific developments. He points out that the word *shamayim*, (usually translated as 'heavens') is the plural of the Hebrew *sham*, meaning 'there' or 'two theres,' and writes: 'therefore the word *ha-shamayim* indicates a distant object in relation to us, the distance being equal from each side, which cannot be unless it is situated in a wheel that is revolving in a completely circular fashion.' Thus every point on the planet is equidistant from the heavens (*ha-shamayim*) and for this phenomenon to be true, the world must be moving in a spherical pattern. Two 'far-aways' that are the same distance can only exist if the planet is a revolving sphere.

Interestingly, Seforno lived approximately at the same time as Copernicus (1473–1543), the famed astronomer who spent considerable time in Italy pursuing his studies before returning to his native Poland. Before Copernicus, the center of the universe was the earth; his new scientific theory, suggesting that the earth revolves around the sun, clearly demotes the earth from its formerly exalted position as the center of divine concern.

It stands to reason that a rabbi of Seforno's stature, who was also a doctor by profession and a respected intellectual of his day, had heard of Copernicus' theories and had apparently accepted his vision of an earth revolving around the sun. But especially noteworthy for us is how Seforno interprets the ramifications of a scientific theory rejected as blasphemous by most Christian theologians of the period. Not only does Seforno accept the Copernican position, which we now know to be scientifically accurate; he deduces a crucial moral lesson from an earth constantly revolving on its own axis, as it revolves around the sun. This lesson is that the human being is placed squarely at the center of the earth, equidistant from the two 'theres' or 'far-aways' of the heavens, which can only happen if the earth is constantly revolving.

The medieval sages speak of four levels of creation: the inanimate level of earth and rock, the vegetative level of plants and trees, the locomotive level of roaming animals and beasts, and finally the commu-

nicative level of humans who speak. Each level receives its sustenance from the previous level: vegetation depends on earth and water, animals receive sustenance from the vegetation, and humans gather food, drink, garments and tent-skins from the animals. If the human being communicates both horizontally and vertically with the world and with God, he has the capacity to uplift and ennoble the world, to redeem the earth; if he short-circuits his relationship to the divine, if he poisons rather than perfects the physical environment all around him, the entire earth will fall and fail with him.

With this in mind, the human being stands at the center of the universe. Only the human being has the gift of free choice. Our planet earth depends on proper human exercise of his free choice if it is to be redeemed and not destroyed. This is what I believe Seforno meant to extract from a constantly revolving earth. Interestingly enough, Rashi deduces a similar lesson from a later verse. At the end of our portion of *Bereshit*, after human conduct disappointed the Divine Creator, the Bible states:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth....
And God said, I will blot out the human being whom I have created... both human and beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air...

Gen. 6:5-7

The obvious question asked is, why blot out the innocent animals and the silent beasts if the sin belongs to human beings? Rashi explains:

Everything was created for the human being, and if he is to be destroyed, what need is there for the rest?!

Rashi on Gen. 6:7

A central biblical dictum proclaims that 'human beings must walk in God's ways.' Yet, how do we determine God's ways? When Moses requested of God: 'Now therefore I pray Thee, if I have found grace in Your eyes, show me now Your ways, that I may know You ...' [Ex. 33:13], God's answer is that Moses cannot hope to see Him completely, but can

receive a partial glimpse into the divine – His back, as it were: ‘And God passed by before him, and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth’ [Ex. 34:6]. Maimonides insists that God is not merely informing us of a description of His conceivable essence, but He is presenting us with a divine injunction as to how we humans ought to live:

Just as He is gracious, so ought you to be gracious; just as He is compassionate, so ought you to be compassionate; just as He is called holy, so ought you to be called holy.

Laws of Knowledge 1:6

This divine description, as it were, is not as significant for its theology as it is for its anthropology; it is less a definition of God and more a guide for human morality. Once again, humanity is the central concern even of a definition of the divine!

After each creation, there is a biblical value judgment, ‘And God saw that it was good.’ There is but one exception: the creation of the human being, after which the Bible does not give its usual afterword, ‘And God saw that it was good.’ Seforno explains the reason: the human being is not functional but moral. Whether or not his creation will turn out to have been good depends on his free choice. This is the sense in which the human being stands smack at the center of the earth. Will he sanctify and redeem it, or plunder and destroy it? Will he realize his potential to act in God’s image, placing God’s attributes as the measure of all things and thereby perfect the world, or will he idealize his own frailty and ultimately drown in his weakness, bringing the entire world down with him? The jury has not yet come in with the final verdict. Until that time, the human being remains at center stage, to a great extent holding the whole world in his hands and in the grip of his free will.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

*And these are the generations of the heavens
and of the earth when they were created, in the
day that the Lord God made the earth and the
heavens.*

GENESIS 2:4

I

Undoubtedly, Judaism believes in one absolutely invisible deity who cannot be grasped by the imperfect human intellect. Nevertheless, God does reveal different aspects of his ineffable being to his human creations – and these must be understood and even acted upon. These practical, but important facets of the divine essence are expressed in terms of the different names by which the Almighty is referred to within the biblical narrative. Rashi was very much aware of this descriptive function of the various appellations of the deity, and comments upon

it – Julius Wellhausen notwithstanding – in his opening commentary on this first verse of the Bible.

Rashi writes:

It does not state Lord [YHWH, *Hashem*, the four-letter name] because at first God (*Elohim*, Judge) intended to create [the world] under the attribute of strict justice. However, the Almighty realized that the world could not endure in such a mode, and therefore gave precedence to divine mercy (*rahamim*), uniting it with divine justice, and that is why we find one chapter later: ‘And these are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God [*Hashem Elokim*] made the earth and the heavens [Gen. 2:4].’

Rashi on **Gen. 1:1**

What does Rashi mean? Why could the world not endure under the rule of divine justice?

A world run in accordance with divine justice would mean that as soon as someone does wrong, punishment is immediately meted out. We would never have the question of why bad things happen to good people because an evil act would be stopped in its tracks; after all, any innocent person’s suffering would violate the principle of divine justice. The Nazi’s hand would wither in the process of his even lifting the knife to hurt a hair on the head of a Jewish baby. The individual’s voice would be silenced before he even was able to articulate the slander he had planned to spread. What kind of world would this be? If evil could not exist because of the all embracing powers of divine justice, how would a human being differ from a rat in a laboratory experiment that is conditioned to move down a certain tunnel, jolts of electricity guiding its choices?

Simply stated, the human being, a creature who makes choices and either learns from his mistakes or is ‘doomed to repeat them,’ either succumbs or does not succumb to temptation, could not exist as anything more than a pawn if divine justice ruled the world. There would be no room for the wavering personality torn between two equally compelling choices. In a world where a human being could not possibly make

an immoral choice, he/she would be no different from an animal ruled by instinct, albeit in a positive way.

For the world to exist with human beings granted the choice to wield either a murderer's knife or a physician's scalpel, with human beings not as impotent puppets but rather as potential partners with the divine, God must hold back from immediate punishment. Compassion must be joined with justice so that the Almighty will grant the possibility of the wicked to return, the opportunity to those who have fallen to rise once again, and offer the challenge to a fallible humanity to perfect an imperfect world.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Why were they called the 'Men of the Great Assembly'? Because they restored the crown to its place of glory. Moses came and said, 'the great, powerful and awesome God.' Jeremiah came and said, 'Gentiles [the Babylonians] are uprooting His Temple, where is His awesomeness?' He did not say 'awesome' [in his praise to God in the Amida]. Daniel came and said, 'Gentiles are subjugating His children, where is his power?' He did not say 'powerful.' The [Men of the Great Assembly] came and said, 'The opposite is true! This is His powerfulness, that He conquers His will [to immediately destroy the wicked before they can perpetuate evil against God] and He grants a tolerant, long-suffering reprieve to the wicked [to enable them eventually to repent]'; and this is His awesomeness, that were it not for God's awesomeness, how could the one [powerless] nation Israel have survived among the nations of the world?

Yoma 69b

The price we must pay for this divine compassion and human freedom of choice is the phenomenon of the innocent who suffer. Indeed, God's only guarantee or promise is that the Jews will continually survive and ultimately redeem this world. A major school in Rabbinic theology even reinforces the position that 'there is no reward for the righteous in this world' [*Kiddushin* 39b], apparently leaving divine reward (and punishment) for the next dimension of existence, for the life after life,

where our divine soul continues to live even after our physical bodies are united with the earth. In effect, argues this school of Jewish theology, divine compassion allowing for free will and ultimate repentance must enable individuals to do even what God, in a perfect world, would not allow them to do!

II

In accordance with this theology, a Hassidic teaching provides an alternative way of reading the first three words in the Torah, '*Bereshit bara Elohim*,' usually translated, 'In the beginning God created...' Since there is the *etnachta* ('stop' sign; semicolon) cantillation underneath the third word in the phrase, the words can also be taken to mean, 'Beginnings did God create.' This reading provides hope and optimistic faith even in a world devoid of the reward of the commandments. Anyone who has experienced significant lifestyle changes, 'born again' Jews, reformed alcoholics, or even second or third marriages between widowed and/or divorced people, understands the significance of the challenge and opportunity of 'another chance.' Free will, the concept of making your own choices, implies that sometimes mistakes will be made and tragedies will occur. But instead of divine justice descending as a bolt of lightning, divine mercy emerges to absorb the lethal voltage. Holding off divine justice is saying we always have another chance to better ourselves, to redeem the tragedy, to try again. And isn't this what 'beginnings' are all about!

True repentance means carving out a new beginning for oneself. Beginnings, therefore, go hand in hand with divine mercy, and divine faith in the human personality to re-create him/herself and to forge a new destiny. To make a new beginning!

In fact, if we forget for a moment the account of Adam and Eve as an esoteric tale of a primordial world of gardens and snakes and trees of good and evil, but instead concentrate on the basic outline of the events, we find that we are in the middle of a domestic tragedy. A man and a woman had two sons: to their growing horror, one son turned out to be a murderer, and the other son was his victim.

What happens to such parents? How do they go on with their lives after this double tragedy? Clearly, they could be in mourning for the

rest of their lives, brooding about what went wrong, the sheer waste of it all. But instead these two first parents have a third son, Seth. In effect, they created the opportunity of a new beginning.

This idea also fits well with that reason we previously offered as to why the Torah begins with the creation of the world rather than the first commandment given to Israel. We suggested that the opening of the Torah also reflects the most fundamental commandment in the Torah, the commandment to emulate the divine: 'And you shall walk in His ways' [Deut. 28:9]. Just as God created, so are we commanded to create. And what is it that He created? First and foremost He created a beginning, a starting again, a possibility of redeeming oneself from failure and tragedy and making another effort. The sinner isn't shut out forever; he is always given another opportunity through repentance, another possibility of re-creating himself and his immediate environment, a new beginning. Perhaps this is what our sages meant when they suggested that the Almighty had previously created and destroyed worlds before He created our world. This is why the history of humanity begins with Adam's and Eve's fall – and their subsequent rise. And this is God's message to Cain and all future generations: 'Sin may crouch at your door, but you can conquer it' [Gen. 4:7].

Thus it turns out that in the Torah's opening word, *Bereshit* (beginning), we find not only the theme of the Torah, but of the entirety of existence: God created an imperfect and sometimes unjust world to allow the possibility of change and growth. If change weren't possible, if human behavior were as fixed as that of all other mammals, then there would be no need for, and no uniqueness within, human beings. The glory of God and humanity is to be found in the opening phrase of the Bible: 'God created beginnings' – new opportunities, manifold re-awakenings.