

Parashat Bereishit 5768
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When, in Parashat Noach, God wants to put a check on the people who are building the tower of Babel, He says, “Let us go down there and confuse their speech, so that no one understand what the other is saying.” After the creation of the first human beings, and after they ate of the forbidden fruit of the tree that they were commanded not to eat, God expresses His concern like this: “Look, the humans are like us, knowing all things.” And, still moving back toward the beginning of the Torah, when God decides to create those same humans who would shortly disobey Him, what does He say? “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness...” By now the similarities between these three verses might be obvious – in all three God utilizes a plural “we” when it seems that He is acting alone. The first two verses we’ll leave for another time, but for the moment I want to revisit this much-discussed verse of ‘na’aseh adam b’tzalmeinu kid’muteinu’ – let us make man in our image. What possibilities of interpretation do you remember?

The most straightforward is offered by Sa’adiah Gaon, who says that God is referring to Himself in the so-called ‘royal we’, a majestic plural, and he cites other biblical proof texts for this. God as King is an image that is still ringing in our ears from Rosh Hashanah’s Avinu Malkeinu, also recited each day between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is also a theme from yesterday’s completed book of Deuteronomy, which is itself a statement of the terms of a covenant between a king and the king’s servants, containing well-known formulas (at the time!) of the protection by the King of the subjects in return for their loyalty. So before we dismiss the ‘royal we’, note that if we applied the scientific principle of Occam’s razor, which teaches one should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything – or to paraphrase, All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the right one,” we might indeed have a winner here. But on the other hand, we are Jewish, and tend to hold less by Occam’s razor than Goldberg’s third law: “if there is an easy way and a hard way to do something”... you know how it ends.

Second is a Rashi which is most often quoted in connection to this troubling verse. A great word to know – anavah – modesty – in this case – inv’tanuto shel ha kadosh-baruch hu lamadnu mikan – We learn from here the modesty of the Holy One Who is blessed. How does the use of the plural “we” teach us God’s example of modesty? In this image, God knew the angels would be jealous if He just went ahead and made him – in part because there is some similarity between man and angels, and that could create jealousy. So instead of shutting them out God brings them in (that other midrashim indicate that they tried to convince God not to make man at all is beside the point at the moment), and someone who feels included in the discussion has less of a reason to be upset with the result of that discussion. In its context this might seem like a stretch – who is God talking to really, and why? But the next verse, which Rashi cites as well, says “God created the man in His own image” – there is no plural here.

So did God just ignore the angels and do whatever he wanted to anyway? Not necessarily. Metaphorically, God took the opinions provided Him and then “made the

call” – and it strikes me that although the opening chapters of Genesis are not often used in business school, the notion of a c.e.o. getting the best advice he or she can and then taking responsibility for the decision on his or her own is pretty good and consistent with the ‘teamwork’ approach that is in vogue now. While it’s true that there are many things we can do well if we do them ourselves, it is also true that when people put their heads together whatever idea comes out of that discussion could become a donkey (a horse designed by a committee) or, more likely, a better idea will emerge than anyone could have thought of alone. This is the basis of the havruta model of study which (speaking of in vogue) educators are pushing in classrooms Jewish and non-Jewish alike. We’re simply not as good on our own as we sometimes like to think we are.

A last possibility of who God is talking to, and this is an answer I hadn’t seen before but which is quite approachable is to look at the verse in its context, a context that doesn’t mention angels and which doesn’t mention kings, but which does talk mostly about what had been created to that point – and what was about to be created, and out of what it was about to be created. Recall – what was man – in one of the creation narratives – made out of? The dust – the dirt – of the earth! Who is God speaking to when He says “let us make man?” Possibly – the earth itself. Spiritually there is something lovely to this as well – man, from the Biblical perspective unlike any other being, is a combination of the physical (represented by his literally earthly origins) and the spiritual (represented by God breathing breath and soul into him). We can’t live on a purely spiritual plane and we shouldn’t live in the purely physical one. Allowing – and more than that, striving for – the intersection of the physical and the spiritual, by reaching beyond ourselves to others and to God, by not going it alone, by living up to the expectations God has of us as human beings created in His own image, this is our opportunity and our challenge – not yours or mine, but ours.