

Parashat Bereishit 5769
Rabbi David Englander
Cats and Dogs

While we most often look at the Torah as the source of truth and of God's interaction with our ancestors and how that message still resonates today, the midrash, concerned with all of that as well, took license to go in all sorts of directions to try to get to an understanding of what is going on 'behind the scenes' that are described in the Torah's narrative. The Torah tells us that God created the moon and sun and stars, the midrash tells us about their purpose and how they go about fulfilling that purpose. The Torah tells us that God created the heavens, the midrash fleshes it out into its distinct parts. And, the Torah tells us God created animals, but it doesn't tell us why cats and dogs fight. But don't worry, the midrash does. It is a fanciful attempt to assign purpose to all of creation. We hear often that the world itself is God's design and so everything in it has a purpose, but with the Torah silent or hiding that purpose, it was up to the rabbis of the midrash to try to explain how things became the way they are. This is what they say even about cats and dogs.

Originally, cats and dogs were friends. They were partners and shared what they had. But it happened that for three days they couldn't find anything to eat. So they decided to dissolve their partnership. The cat went to live with Adam where she could find mice to eat. The dog saw bad times. He spent a night in the cave of the wolf, but was sent away when he was found to be a rather bad guard dog. The monkey wouldn't take him in. he went to the sheep and when the dog heard steps in the middle of the night he started barking. Turns out the steps were those of his old 'friends' the wolves and his barking gave away the location of the sheep, who were eaten by the wolves. Finally, he showed up at Adam's house and he tried to make peace between the dog and the cat. When that didn't succeed, the dog moved out into Adam's son's house, and as the midrash reports, "that enmity between the first dog and the first cat was transmitted to all their descendants until this very day." (Told in *The Legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginsberg.)

Aside from being an engaging narrative, what is the point of rather traditional rabbis spending their time coming up with creative accounts of why things are the way they are? A few ideas:

First, if God created the world and everything in it, the rabbis seem to be asking why is there strife and conflict? Seeing, or imagining, the origins even of the conflict between cats and dogs as the natural outcropping of their 'personalities' underscores the message that the world and everything in it is capable of providing a platform for peace and goodness or war and unkindness, and if the animals can make a choice as to which traits to exemplify, it goes without saying that people can as well.

Second, there are lessons within the lessons. Take the part of the story about how the dog inadvertently alerts the wolves to the presence of the sheep. There is an old joke about the guy who wakes up thinking that there is someone else in the room and he remembers what his mother taught him – when you are afraid, just whistle a happy tune. So he does

and he feels a hand close around his neck and a voice saying thanks, I thought I'd never find you in the dark! Do you think the rabbis just told the dog/sheep/wolf story to be cute? Or did they do it to teach the immutable laws of unintended consequences and to be extremely careful so that words and actions don't wind up having a more hurtful outcome than we originally intended? My guess is the latter.

You have no doubt benefited from great teachers. I know I have. One such teacher was the rabbi who first introduced me to serious Talmud study. And I remember commenting to someone that I thought it was amazing that a person of his talent and scholarship would spend time with shlubs like me – he could have taught advanced Talmud shiurim anywhere in Israel and probably the world, but he chose to spend most of his hours with rank beginners. And I'm sure the answer to that query was that he loved what he did. I certainly hope it was.

I like to think of the rabbis as some of the original master teachers. What defined their work? Not one but three loves. A great love of the text they were working with. A love of the God they believed implanted within this text multiple messages and meanings which their task was to flesh out. And, I like to think, a great love of the students who would benefit from their work, which is why they went out of their way to focus not only on academic minutiae or writing philosophical treatises but on telling the stories that would stick in the minds of their students, causing them to reflect on them and to apply their lessons to their own lives. And we are all their students.