

Shabbat Shalom

So, here we go again! We begin again. No sooner did we finish the “good book” and we start all over. Haven’t we done this enough? Have we not gone through the text enough so that we can actually sit back for a while and pray and enjoy this religious experience? Why not feel the comfort of being together as community and rest in our faith in God and the future? Why do we continue to almost compulsively read and study the word?

This is Parshat Breishit. This is the parshah describing “the beginning.” It is as real today as the day it was written. The meaning and significance of these words have even entered into the debate over who will be the next President.

I find various moments in the cycle of the Jewish year jump out at me and say: “This is what you need to think about and what you need to consider and what you need to speak about.” As soon as we finished Devarim on Simchat Torah, we jumped in a flash to Breishit and I realized that it is there I find a particular message and one that I want to share with you.

When looking at the parsha I often wish we could spend weeks and weeks in Breishit so that we can truly take apart the nuance of every word and every thought. For in it there is so much. Ben Bag Bag in the Mishnah said, “Turn it and turn it again for everything is to be found in it.” I think there is some degree of truth. There is so much to be found in it.

When God began his work of creation and we note that is the intent of our translation. We no longer read “In the beginning God created.” Through the gifts of biblical scholars who truly understand language, we learn the subtle difference in meaning. “In the beginning” would imply that there was nothing until God began to create. But “when God began to create” implies that there was always something and in the middle of these processes, creation of the world we know starts. God was before creation. So, what was that something? That something was confusion. It was “*tohoo vavohoo*.” It was void and unformed. It was meaningless. It was chaos. Out of that meaninglessness and out of that chaos God enters the moment and he speaks: “*yehi ohr* ... let there be light and there was light.” God as the creator is not mixing chemicals, he is not lighting a match. He is not creating an explosion; no not in this story, not in this narrative. God is using the word. By the word God is the creator. It speaks to God’s incomparable power. It speaks to the fact, which we learn as the text progresses, that we won’t see God, we won’t feel God. We will experience God. We will experience through wonder and nature and meaning; through a text, the word and that capacity that makes us uniquely human. It is through the ability to ascend to higher realms of thought and consciousness through language. That’s what makes us human beings. So, out of chaos, out of confusion and out of darkness, the word comes and the universe radically shifts. And he said: “*Yehi Ohr* – Let there be light!” Light was created by the word. The word begins the process.

Two issues that came to me from other traditions. One from Radical Islam and the other Christian Fundamentalism.

This week I was inundated with information from organizations claiming to speak in the name of the “Judeo Christian” tradition, which in these cases are a fallacy. And the issues refer to our voting in this coming election. The first is Proposition 2. Proposition 2 is an attempt to limit domestic partnerships. The fundamentalists, basing themselves on literal readings of a text developed a highly sophisticated campaign in our state which is part of something bigger nationally. The “religious right” attempts to steal the civil liberties of gay people and elderly people who live together in domestic partnerships based on literal understandings of ancient texts. I assert that this parashah teaches, amongst many other things, that it is not meant to be that way. The text is not a literal text. And we have learned that our capacity to interpret the text is the basis for its survival and longevity. It continues to inform through our relationship to it as a living document. And furthermore, we see the fundamentalists take particular sections from the text that promote their political agenda and disregard other obligations noted in the text. So, Leviticus passages dealing with sexuality are embraced and sections dealing with economic justice are ignored. Proposition 2 will affect many of you, many of us and many of our children. Though I am not allowed from this bimah to tell you how to vote. I only tell you that I will vote against it.

To understand the messages that are found in the creation story is to understand that it is nuanced and leveled. Beyond the issue of Creation being a narrative that demands conversation and interpretation as all scripture does there are the specifics. One example is that we have two indicators about the “main” character. On one hand creation is the work of God and on the other hand, we human beings are given dominion over the earth and given responsibility to take care of this world. We see the challenges presented and we are obligated to continue to study in order to understand more. We find two creation narratives; two different visions of how man was created, how men and women were created. We find two different ways to look at the world and understand the first human beings. Who has absolute truth?

Of this I am certain: no one. I read in the text that each one of us is created in the image of God. Each one of us then has to be able to use our language to understand complexity and understand nuance.

It is no accident that the greatest period of Jewish creativity and understanding of a text since the time of the Talmud came during the period known as the enlightenment, Haskalah. Light was brought to this word and learning and religious understanding by virtue of the fact that knowledge continues to grow and continues to deepen. Our understanding includes a greater understanding of human nature and human desire and human fallibility and preciousness of life. The Haskalah brought the study of biology, philosophy, and sociology...all realms of human thought to religion. And, in so doing, it saved religious thinking.

I say to the fundamentalist; whether they are Christian or Jewish or Islamic, don't insult me with your simplicity. Know that those truly engaged in the text understand it has

great complexity. Understand that God himself created the world through the word. And the word is the critical component in our relationship between that which is human and our striving to connect to the Divine.

When a fundamentalist says about your daughter or mine, about your sister or mine, about your mother or mine, that her life can be sacrificed for a yet unborn child, that a pregnancy cannot be terminated under any condition, my response is in my understanding of this precious text. Outlawing abortion is NOT in my religious tradition. It's not in my reading of the text. And my reading also creates meaning, and value in this world.

It is only through the word, the nuanced understanding of the text and how it evolved through the generations, combined with our understanding of life and attempt to determine soulfulness and spirit that I come to my position. It is only through our developing understanding that comes through learning, comes through study and a realization of the holiness of the words.

There is a second area where this consideration of the word and the power of language brings me to a different subject in this politically charged environment. Just a few weeks ago, Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, again spoke at the United Nations. Again, he referred to Israel in the most debasing language. He again called for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people in the most frightening ways possible. He used his words but there were no words in response!

The famous theologian, Martin Niemoller, recounted the history of the destruction of populations in Germany and brought attention to the silence of others during the Shoah. You're all familiar... "First they came..." In some bizarre way, that seems to be repeating itself again. Where are the words of protest? Why aren't the leaders of the world screaming in protest to this man's venomous, hateful, genocidal language? The language of Radical Islam is grotesque. I cannot control their words, but I can encourage ours. We must speak louder. We must speak up against the threats of genocide against any people and all people. We must be actively engaged in the call for divestment. The message of the Shoah cannot be particularized. It's our job to bring it to the world.

We pride ourselves as an Or L'Goyim, a light to the nations. The light we bring is the light of language, the light of the word, the ability to educate and teach, to converse and debate. Through our experience of prejudice, anti-Semitism, we must use our words to bring light to the world. Destruction, violence, war do not bring light. Insight, understanding, dialogue and creation come from that type of light.

Finally, I think this narrative of God creating light from the very beginning is meant to express our sense of wonder about the origins of the world in which we live. It affirms our faith that there is and there will be a God, the God who formed and sustained all of cosmic existence and our belief that human beings are partners with God in advancing the preciousness of life. As God created light, we too have shown the capacity to create light. We have done it through science and through morality. This story that changed the world is not only a story of God, but it is a story about us. We, who are created in God's

image, have choices and can exercise freedom. We who are the partners of God can shape and preserve the world.

God's creation is a mystery. As the psalmist says, "As I behold your hands, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you set in place. What are human beings that you have been mindful of them, mortals that you have taken note of them? You have made them little less than divine and adorned them with glory and majesty. You have made master over your handy work laying the world at their feet." The psalmist gives voice to our belief that the choices we make make a difference. Our ongoing learning and studying of this text and the ongoing text that come from here, should give us the confidence and the strength to know that we have ability to continue to bring light to the world. First and foremost, we do it through the word. We must be vigilant in our protection of human freedoms and human rights and peace. This is just one reason why the story of creation continues to inspire from the very beginning.

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