

Dvar Shabbat Bereshit – October 24, 2008 / 26 Tishrei 5769 – Marvin Levin  
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Shabbat Shalom,

What a crazy Jewish world we live in! We celebrate the New Year at the beginning of the seventh month. Our most important book is written without vowels, and it starts with an outrageous baseball pun: In the big inning.

Well, actually it doesn't do that any more. If you look in the Plaut Chumash, you'll find that the more modern translation of *Bereshit*, the first word of this week's Torah portion which gives the *parsha* its name, is "When God began to create the heaven and the earth." I have more to say about wording in my President's column in the November bulletin, but tonight I'd like to discuss what *Bereshit* teaches us.

On the first day, God creates light and darkness. *V'ahyahi or* – Let there be light. Of course, here we might want to say, *V'ayahi Or Chadash* – Let there be a New Light.

On day 2, God creates water and separates it into an expanse below and an expanse above, which God calls **sky**. Day 3: God gathers the water below into one area which is called **sea** and exposes dry land called **earth**. "And God saw that this was good." Then God creates vegetation - plants and trees – and again "God saw that this was good."

Day 4: God creates the sun, the moon and the stars, declaring, "they shall serve as signs for the set times — the days and the years." And once more, "God saw that this was good."

Day 5 gives us sea monsters and other creatures of the water as well as birds. Day 6: - God create all the other living things. God says, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind." Finally, we read, "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ... And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good."

Chapter 2 starts by telling about Day 7, a day on which God rested.

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But before the narration goes on to other things, the Torah now tells a second story of creation – and it’s not quite the same as the first. In this narration, creation is not divided into marked days. There’s none of the poetic “and it was good.” Instead, we read, “A flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth. The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” Just Adam, no Eve yet. A man – *a-dam*. Only after man is created does God “plant a garden in Eden” and place the man there. Then God “caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.” God creates “all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky.” God realizes that “for Adam no fitting helper was found,” so he takes a rib from the man and fashions it into a woman.”

Today’s readers of this section may be bothered by what appears to be sexist about this account, and of the usage of the phrase Lord God. Plaut, the author of this commentary remarks that “the Torah tradition is frankly male-oriented.” But Rabbinic interpretation notes that *adam* comes from the word for earth – *adamah* and that a more correct interpretation would be earthling – simply a human being. Rabbi Edwards tells me that such interpretation goes on to say that the “rib” story is about separating the human into male and female. Gender issues notwithstanding, I have a different question.

What’s going on here? Why does the Torah have two different descriptions of creation? It’s questions like this that led Bible experts to conclude that the Bible was written by more than one hand. (Note that when I use the word **Bible** in this context, I’m referring to just the – quote – Old Testament – the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*.) In fact, as those of us who took the “Who Wrote the Bible?” class last year know, scholars have identified 5 separate styles of writing and believe they can identify – at some level – who these various writers were. Now this, of course, seems to negate that concept that the entire Bible is the literal word of God.

Let’s continue through the rest of this week’s Torah portion. Chapter 3 relates the story of Adam and Eve being coerced by the snake to eat a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. “Fruit” – no specific mention of an apple. Very similar to Jonah, which we read during the holidays: Jonah is swallowed by “a great fish” – no specific mention of a whale. To make sure Adam and Eve do not eat from the Tree of Life and gain immortality, God banishes them from the Garden.

Chapter 4 gives us the story of Cain and Abel, and ends with the birth of a 3<sup>rd</sup> son, Seth. Chapter 5 is the first of many **Begot** chapters in the Torah: genealogical listings of human progeny. We learn that Adam begot more sons and daughters, and we’re given a lineage down to Noah: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech and finally Noah and his three sons.

Chapter 6, however, tells us “The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created — men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.’” But then comes the final line: “But Noah found favor with the Lord.” Now **that’s** a final line which reminds me of the old movie serials. To learn more about Noah, be sure to come back next week for the next installment in our story.

Some other things I found in Parsha Bereshit: Up until Chapter 6, men lived for several hundred years, with Methuselah topping the list at 969. Only then did God declare a maximum lifespan of 120 years. The Tree of Knowledge wasn’t a tree that just provided wisdom, rather the main effect of its fruit was to impart a knowledge of the difference between good and evil. Some of our most common recollections from Bible stories ( such as Eve and the apple) cannot be verified when you go back to the original sources. After God banishes Cain from his presence, Cain travels to “the land of Nod – east of Eden,” and marries. Hmm, where did **those** people come from?

How do we take this narration and incorporate it into our modern life? If we all have knowledge of good and evil, must we constantly be aware of our actions? Can we assume that all the stories we hear and believe to be authentic really come from where we thought they did?

It’s an interesting story and an interesting start to trying to learn. But we’ll continue throughout the year until we come back to Simchat Torah next year and begin the journey all over again. May **your** journey this year be good and filled with health.

Shabbat shalom.