

What We Can Learn from the Creation Story ***Shabbat Bereishit 5778***

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Most people who read the first chapter of the Bible have one of two reactions. Number one: They believe that the creation story recounted in Genesis is exactly how the world came to be. Therefore, they reject all scientific theories such as the Big Bang and evolution. The second group, assuming that the scientists have it right, dismiss the Genesis narrative – and with it, often, all of Scripture – as a fairy tale at best or maybe even junk altogether.

Some believers, though, including Reform Jews, aren't literalists. Along with progressive Christians, we assume that the scientists know their business, while still affirming that the Bible, including the Creation story, has much to teach us. Scientists can explain how the world came to be as it is. Religion helps us understand why.

Tonight, I would like to share three important lessons from the Genesis creation story: the mystery of creation, God's ownership of the Earth, and the radical equality of our diverse human family.

If you're like me, you occasionally find yourself thinking about how and why anything exists at all. As Descartes taught, we are all aware of our own consciousness – "I think, therefore I am." If we know nothing else, each of us perceives, "I exist." In the dark of the night, though, when we're all alone, we may wonder whether the universe could truly be real. And if so, why? How?

The ancient rabbis found a hint in the fact that the Torah begins with the Hebrew letter *bet*. They raise the question, because starting the Torah with *alef*, the first letter in the alphabet, seems so much more logical. Our sages pointed to the shape of the letter itself. The rabbis taught: "Just as the *bet* is closed at the sides, but open in front, so you are not permitted to talk about what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is behind. We can only talk about things from the days from the day of the creation of the world and onward."ⁱ

Most ancient creation myths begin with battles between gods, and perhaps also the births of gods, preceding creation. By contrast, as Torah begins, God is. And God begins by creating. Moreover, a close examination of the first verses, as they are now correctly translated, we read: "In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the Earth, the Earth was unformed and void, with darkness over

the face of the deep. And God's presence hovered over the face of the waters."ⁱⁱ Earth and water seem to exist already. Then, if we read further, we see that God's creative acts include creating light on day one, while the sun, moon, and stars come later.

The muddled message is clear: We humans are not God. We do not, and perhaps cannot and should not, know how God came to be or exactly how the Earth began. We may accept the Big Bang Theory, but then we may ask, "What banged? And how?" Our sages suggest that the answers properly remain shrouded in mystery. We are moved to look upon the world in wonder, for even our magnificent human minds cannot fully grasp it.

Perhaps the most important message of the creation story is its most basic: God is Creator. We are not. The rabbis refer to God as having "acquired" the Earth by making it. God is Earth's Owner. We are not.

We live in a nation that reveres private property ownership rights, as if those were God-given. Nothing could be further from biblical truth: "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."ⁱⁱⁱ

The notion that Earth or portions of it can belong to individuals or nations brings us to a troubling reality. Human hubris, imagining creation to be our own, carries horrific risks. We live in an era of disastrous human impact on the Earth. Rapid climate change. Devastating storms. Imperiled wildlife. And rising sea levels, threatening the world's most vulnerable populations. Just this week, the Environmental Protection Agency ended the Clean Power Plan, which had offered incentives to generate electricity utilizing cleaner fuels, including renewables, while moving away from coal and its extraordinary greenhouse gases.

Earth is indeed offered to each generation as our birthright, but it does not belong to any one of us, or to any group. Taking care of the Earth requires sacrifices in the present. Let us not spurn the birthright, like Esau, for a mess of pottage.

Finally, the creation story teaches us about human equality and diversity. Scientists tell us that humans are the result of millions of years of evolution, with the first group of *homo sapiens* arising in Africa's Great Rift Valley. Still, the spiritual message of Genesis is crucially important. The first human being, male and female, is one being. The rabbis ask why, and they answer: "So that no human being may say to another: My ancestry is greater than yours. Also: To demonstrate the greatness of God. For a human metalsmith strikes many coins

from the same mold, and all are identical. God, though, creates each human being on the model of the first human, and each one is entirely unique.”^{iv}

The sages’ message is profound. God ordains the equality of all humans, who are magnificently diverse by Divine design. In this age of resurgent white supremacy, we know that this message will always be important. A week after our United States Department of Justice unjustly ruled that religious freedom justifies discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, we must remind the world: Our faith teaches that diversity is God’s desire. In this week of realization that a supposedly great liberal and champion of women’s rights nevertheless used and abused women for his own power and gratification, we may remind the world: The Genesis 1 story, in which God creates male and female simultaneously, is our primary creation story, not the tale of the woman taken from the man’s rib in Genesis 2.

Each year, at this season, we recommence our reading of Torah with the first words of Genesis. We read the same words, the entire Torah, every year. Our people read these words for centuries before scientists learned and taught that the Earth revolves around the sun, and for still more years before Darwin or the Big Bang. Through all the advances of science, the religious truth of Torah has endured. Torah never was a science or history text book. Instead, Torah teaches that all creation is a mysterious miracle, wondrous to behold. Torah reminds us to take care of our planet, for it is of God’s making, not our own. And Torah teaches us that all humanity was created equal, each and every one of us in God’s image, our diversity a testament to God’s infinite wisdom and power. Science will continue to advance, but the religious messages of Genesis will never change. May we ever strive to be worthy of God’s magnificent creation.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis Rabbah 1:10.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 1:1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalms 24:1.

^{iv} Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.