We human beings tend not to see something that doesn’t fit our preconceived notions, including when we read the Torah. A banner example occurs at the end of this week’s portion:

Then it happened, as humans began to procreate throughout the world, and daughters were born to them, that divine beings saw the human girls, and noticed that they were beautiful. They married them as wives—whichever ones they chose. Then Hashem said, “The life-breath I bestow will not dwell in a human forever, insofar as they, too, are flesh; a human’s time will be one hundred and twenty years.” The fallen giants were on earth in those days, and afterwards, too—when divine beings had relations with human women, who bore their offspring. These giants were the might ones of old, men of fame. (Gen. 6:1-4)

If we were reading polytheistic literature such as the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh or Homer’s Iliad, we wouldn’t be surprised to hear this sort of story, in which gods procreate with humans to produce a race of giants.

But what is a story like this doing in Genesis? The Torah is a monotheistic work. Why, then, does it include this fragment of what sounds like a polytheistic tale? The answer lies in the way that God reacts to this event. God decrees that mixing of this sort should not occur, and that humans, including the offspring of these divine-human unions, cannot live forever. The two opening parashiyot of Bereishit (Gen. 1—11) hammer home the message that there is an essential difference between humans and God. Humans are made in the image of God; they are called on to be like God, and they are privileged to interact with God. But they are not divine—and a core idea of biblical literature is that God is utterly unique. One way the Torah emphasizes this idea is by reminding its audience of stories from the ancient world that portray a mixing of divine and human realms, and then introducing a crucial difference.

Polytheistic stories of the sort that Genesis 6 alludes to assumed that humans could, sometimes, become divine and that immortal beings could also die; this points to a fundamental similarity between humanity and divinity in these ancient texts. The very core of polytheism is not simply that there are many gods, but that gods and humans are made of the same stuff. Conversely, the Bible does not claim that God is the only heavenly being; after all, there are angels. The core of biblical monotheism, rather, is that God is unique. Even as scripture demands that human beings attempt to imitate God, it also stresses they need to realize they will never fully succeed in doing so.

When we stop to notice, we see that the relationship between monotheism and polytheism in the Bible is much more complex than we initially assume. So is humanity’s relationship with God. It was hard for ancient people to admit it, and it’s even harder for moderns, but the Torah teaches that humanity has limits—and it’s not our role to play God.


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incontrovertible is that the woman is a latecomer, an afterthought. The man is at the pinnacle of creation; the woman is clearly depicted as inferior. He is whole; she is made from secondhand materials—a mere part, almost an appendage.

A closer look at the Hebrew word tzela leads us to different conclusions. The word appears 40 times in the Hebrew Bible. In 23 of those, it means a “side,” not a “rib”; in 15, it means a “side room.” The only places that it is translated as “rib” are the two occurrences here in the story of the creation of woman. That makes “rib” an unlikely translation, and transforms our mental image of what happened. Woman was part of the original adam, which had two sides. She was incorporated into the divine plan for the creation of humanity from the very beginning. As such she was not an afterthought, not secondary, but equal to its other part, which became a man.

But, there is certainly room to object that the woman was designated as an ‘ezel, a helper, for the man. As such, whenever she was created, she was not the primary actor; she was there to serve him. Again, a close look at the biblical text opens other avenues of interpretation that are probably more accurate. Let’s look again at the numbers. There are 21 occurrences of ‘ezel in the Hebrew Bible, including the two here in Genesis 2. Sixteen of those clearly refer to God. A memorable example is in Psalm 121:1–2: “I lift my eyes unto the hills, where does my help [‘ezel] come from? My help comes from God, Creator of heaven and earth.” Overwhelmingly ‘ezel comes from a source that is not inferior, but superior. One could argue that, based on these texts, woman is actually superior to man. I prefer to state simply that she is clearly not inferior.

Finally, let’s take a look at the word adam itself. God introduces it in Genesis 1:26: “God said: ‘Let us make an adam in our image, according to our likeness.’” This creature, the last to be created before the first Shabbat, will partake of the pinnacle of creation; the woman is clearly depicted as inferior. He is whole; she is part of his appendage.

As it is with our understanding of the words of the biblical text; so it is with our own words. Just a short time ago, we confessed our sins, many of them committed through the misuse of words. As Proverbs 18:21 reminds us, “Death and life are in the hands of the tongue.” Let us resolve to use the richness of our languages, of our words, to bring life to our sacred texts and to enrich our lives and those of others, women and men, with our careful usage.

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**A Different Perspective**

### Mortals and Immortals

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“Gilgamesh was named from birth for fame. Two-thirds of him was divine, and one-third mortal.” (Epic of Gilgamesh) (1)

“Alkmene [a human woman] gave birth to the wonderful strength of Herakles, when she and Zeus of the Storm Cloud had mingled together in love.” (Hesiod, *The Theogony*) (2)

“Semele . . . having mingled in love with Zeus, bore him a shining son, Dionysos . . . she, a mortal, producing a god; now both are immortals.” (Ibid.)