

## Between the Lines

### Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Abigail Treu

תלמוד בבלי מסכת עבודה זרה דף ח עמוד א

ת"ר: יום שנברא בו אדם הראשון, כיון ששקעה עליו חמה, אמר: או לי, שבשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי ויחזור עולם לתוהו ובוהו, וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים, היה יושב [בתענית] ובוכה כל הלילה וחווה בוכה כנגדו, כיון שעלה עמוד השחר, אמר: מנהגו של עולם הוא, עמד והקריב שור.

Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

Our masters taught: When Adam on the day of his creation saw the sun sinking in the sky before him, he said, "Woe is me! Because I acted offensively, the world is darkening for me and is about to return to darkness and desolation—indeed, this is the death that Heaven has decreed for me." So he sat down to fast and to weep throughout the night, while Eve wept beside him. But when the dawn began slowly rising like a column, he said, "Such is the way of nature," and then proceeded to offer up a bullock.

The shock of the unexpected, the fear of change, the guilt at having done something irreversible: feelings we know all too well. When things go badly, our gut response is often, "Why me?" We then probe our actions to discover the trigger that caused it all, and bemoan our fate with those closest to us.

With the passing of time, however, we learn: it's not all about us. This unfolds on two levels: as children, we grow up to learn that the world does not revolve around us, and as adults, we learn with each new twist of life that, while we might feel responsible for certain things, in reality we have little control. As Adam HaRishon, the first man, put it, "Such is the way of nature." We learn to shrug and say, "That's the way the world turns."

What we see in this midrash is the call to turn from fear and guilt to acceptance. We see Adam and Chava react with fear to the setting of the sun, worrying from an overblown sense of personal responsibility that is at once immature and deeply sage, about their role in such a matter. As the dark night is brightened by the first rays of dawn, however, they realize: this was not our doing. They move from fear and guilt into relief and gratitude.

This, I think, is an important message for us as we begin the new year. We move from the guilt and overblown sense of personal responsibility that marks Yom Kippur into a place in which we can cope with the ups and downs—the sunrises and sunsets—of daily living. In gratitude, we offer up our daily prayers of thanks, as Adam offered up a bullock. And with the sun rising on a new day, we remember the ultimate lesson of Bereishit (Beginnings) as put so eloquently by Elie Wiesel: "God gave Adam a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again."

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**Rabbi Marc Wolf**  
Vice Chancellor and  
Chief Development Officer  
(212) 678-8933  
[mawolf@jtsa.edu](mailto:mawolf@jtsa.edu)



# Torah from JTS

Parashat Bereishit

Genesis 1:1–6:8

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24 Tishrei 5771

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Dr. Jonathan Milgram, Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS.**

This week we begin, once again, the cycle of the yearly Torah reading. Although the book of Genesis is exceedingly familiar to us, there is not a year that goes by when most of us are not struck by one aspect or another of the text, as if reading it for the very first time. It is the universal and profound message of Genesis that enables us to look at the parashah, year after year, and find in it something new, fresh, and even inspirational. One of the central themes of the reading, Bereishit, is that God created humankind in God's own image.

This column will focus on the idea of the divine image in humankind and its theological significance, drawing on the treatment of the subject by the late Professor Nahum Sarna in his popular commentary to Genesis (JPS, 1990). I will highlight Sarna's presentation specifically because, in reading it, we get a feel for his essential religious impulse, which draws inspiration from the timeless text of Genesis, and because he buttresses his readings with significant comparisons to the literature and culture of the ancient Near East. In so doing, Sarna shows to what degree ancient Israel's contribution to the history of humankind can be better appreciated by applying the methods of classical *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (scientific study of Judaism). Genesis 1:26 states, "And God said, 'Let us make humankind *in our image, after our likeness*' [*be-tzalmeynu ki-demuteinu*]." Engaging in the comparative approach, Sarna explains the context of the terms used and shows to what degree ancient Israel was distinct from other ancient peoples:

The words used here to convey these ideas can be better understood in the light of a phenomenon registered in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, whereby the ruling monarch is described as "the image" or "the likeness" of a god . . . Without doubt, the terminology employed in Genesis 2:26 is derived from regal vocabulary, which serves to elevate the king above the ordinary run of men. In the Bible this idea has become democratized. All human beings are created "in the image of God"; each person bears the stamp of royalty (12).

Sarna points to the theological import of the difference between Genesis and ancient Near Eastern sources. Unlike her neighbors, ancient Israel viewed each

person as bearing the stamp of the divine. From here we derive an enlightening and fundamental theological principle: since all humans are created in the image of God, all humans are equal. In light of Sarna's use of the scientific study of Bible in his popular commentary, it is surprising that his son, Professor Jonathan Sarna, in a recent article entitled "Goodbye *Wissenschaft*, Hello Relevance" (*The Jewish Daily Forward*, June 4, 2010), invokes his father's legacy of teaching and scholarship at The Jewish Theological Seminary during the 1950s to imply that the senior Sarna saw a polarity between *Wissenschaft* and relevance:

Dad had been asked to teach the school's [JTS's] traditional course on the Book of Psalms. Looking through past syllabi, he came up with a new idea that he proposed to his senior colleagues at a faculty meeting. "How about revamping the class so that we teach those psalms that appear in the Siddur," he suggested. "That will make the class more relevant to rabbinical students. Down the road, they will be able to use what we teach them to instruct their own congregants in the meaning of the prayers." The members of the faculty, my father reported, were aghast. The very idea that the content of JTS courses should be influenced by what might be relevant to rabbis greatly troubled them. Besides, a senior faculty member pointed out, "We have taught the course this way since Schechter's day." Evoking the name of Solomon Schechter, the legendary scholar who reshaped and reorganized the seminary during his tenure as its president from 1902 to 1915, effectively ended the discussion. Dad's proposal was tabled.

A careful reading of the story shows that Nachum Sarna's innovative idea at that faculty meeting so many decades ago was not to change the *methodology* of the course, but rather to change the *content*. Accordingly, the story teaches the opposite of what the author writes. Teaching the Psalms from the liturgy would have given the professor the opportunity to teach psalms in light of ancient Near Eastern literature and culture. It would have given him the opportunity to have his critical methods and their theological significance eventually reach the masses of Jews to whom the students, later as pulpit rabbis, would preach.

This story does not teach that Nachum Sarna believed in a polarity between *Wissenschaft* and relevance; rather, it teaches that he believed that *Wissenschaft* was relevant. Nachum Sarna clearly understood that historical context yields meaning and that meaning plus educational outreach equals relevance. In identifying the context and therefore the theological import of "*in our image, after our likeness*," Nachum Sarna showed us, yet again, the relevance of *Wissenschaft* for our time. Without a critical methodology, we would not fully appreciate ancient Israel's contribution: as opposed to other gods, the God of Israel crowned *all* of humankind. With all of us being created in God's image, all of us equally represent the image of the divine on earth.

The rabbis of the Mishnah saw the concept of equality affirmed by the common ancestry of all humankind (a point also noted by Sarna). Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 teaches that, in Genesis, all humans come from the same parents, "for the sake of peace among humans, that none should be able to say to his fellow, 'My parent was greater than your parent.'" How much more relevant a lesson do we need to learn than that?

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## **A Taste of Torah**

### **A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS**

This coming Shabbat, we return to the beginning of the Torah with Parashat Bereishit. The Jewish calendar's narrative cycle dovetails well with the spiritual renewal celebrated during this season. Having commemorated Rosh Hashanah (the beginning of the new year and celebration of God's kingship), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and Sukkot (the final of the three pilgrimage festivals), we begin whole and fresh. And part of this commencement is reading Torah anew—discovering new messages through new lenses.

Parashat Bereishit places us, once again, in the Garden of Eden—a paradise of fullness and ideal balance: "From the ground the Lord 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" (Gen. 2:9). Yet, just a few verses earlier, humans are blessed by their Creator and told, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it" (Gen. 1:28). How are we to understand this notion of "mastering" or conquering the earth?

Professor Zeev Falk, of blessed memory, who taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, notes that this phrase of "mastering it" does not repeat itself in the blessing given to Noah after the destruction of the world. God repeats the same blessing of Genesis 1:28, but the omission is glaring: "God blessed Noah and his sons saying to them, 'Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth . . .'" (Gen. 9:1). Why the abandonment of "mastery"? Professor Falk explains that the notion of mastery was an ideal by which the first humans were blessed in the Garden of Eden. Once they perverted their ways and spoiled the earth, "this uncategorical merit was stripped from them." Falk goes on to write, "Ecology teaches us today that the freedom of man upon the earth is bounded and therefore this concept of mastery is no longer tenable" (Falk, *Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 4). In a post-Eden world, we must learn to recognize the limits of our power, embracing a healthy dose of humility.

Interestingly, Falk also points out that the next time the notion of mastery appears in Torah, it is in the context of the Israelite conquest of the Land of Israel. He sensitively writes that in coming to the Land of Israel, the Israelites return to a special status of Adam HaRishon, the first human. Dwelling in the land entails subjecting oneself to special conditions. Falk enumerates: "Caring for the stranger, accepting a servant who requests refuge, being vigilant not to contaminate the land, not destroying trees, and recognizing the rights of Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and perhaps others who dwell in the land" (ibid, 4). Clearly, Professor Falk's reading of mastery encourages us all to vision and to aspire to an ideal of harmony in our relationship with the earth (ecology) and with the Other (seeking peace and pursuing it).

May this coming year be one of constructive mastery as we conquer wasteful drives and indifference on the way toward building a better Israel and a better world.

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