



Exodus Chapter 7

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including a JTS rabbinical student each Monday. Here is this past week's JTS contribution. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

This chapter opens with a most unusual verse: “Then God said to Moses, ‘Behold, I have placed you as [a] God (*Elohim*) to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother as your prophet.’” Even for God, this is a bold claim. How can a person be “as a god” to another person, or even be a god to another person? Can we learn from this verse what it means to be God?

Elsewhere in the Torah, what most distinguishes God from humanity is God's control over life and death. The God of the Torah has some human attributes, but cannot be born and can never die. God's power in the Torah comes from God's ability to control fertility, birth, and death for the people of the Torah. Yet in this brief interaction, God is sharing God's most distinguishing characteristic with Moses, and granting Moses the power to control Pharaoh's, and the Egyptians', life through his speech. Moses is burdened with an awesome and tremendous responsibility—should he fail to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites (and he will surely fail, for God will continually harden Pharaoh's heart), Moses will personally be responsible for the death of thousands of Egyptians. Hardly a balm to Moses's nerves, God's statement that Moses will be “as God to Pharaoh” teaches us what a tremendous breach of the human-Divine partnership it is to take another human life.

Ordinarily, only God is allowed to decide when a person will be born and when they will die—a common sentiment to anyone familiar with the High Holiday liturgy. Perhaps by granting Moses a limited access to this power, God is reminding us of this most Godly attribute. Even God's prophets can only communicate God's will. Ultimately, only Godself can make the decision to bring a person into the world or take them out of it, and it is our role as humans to respect God's decisions and relish in the time we are given.

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בראשית תשע"ט



Here We Go Again!

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What?! Starting Genesis again? We read it last fall. And we read it the year before that, and the year before that. How many times do we need to hear, “In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth” (or “When God began to create . . .,” or the even better known, but less accurate, translation, “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth . . .”)? Really, don't we already know that the first chapter of the Torah announces to all readers and listeners that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day? Don't we have a sense, from the outset, that Genesis portrays a divinely planned creation, one that is entirely deliberate and not at all haphazard or without intention? Of course we know all that—so why read it yet again?

First, let's assume that the Torah is a classic! I use that term not as it is sometimes jokingly described these days, as a book that you say you are re-reading, when you are reading it for the first time: “Oh, yes, I thought I would re-read Joyce's *Ulysses* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.” Rather, a classic is a work with timeless themes, rich structure, and compelling style, one that affords multiple levels of interpretation. It is a classic because it raises issues or problems important to people in different eras, different locations, and different situations. It encourages the reader to consider some of the existential questions posed by people with the luxury of time for contemplation.

A work of that sort deserves reading and re-reading because we understand it (and probably understand ourselves) better each time we go through the text. In fact, Jewish tradition offers this insight: “One who reviews (i.e., re-reads) his or her material one hundred times is not like someone who

reviews it one hundred one times!” (BT Hagigah 9b). In other words, each repetition of a text brings greater familiarity with the material and provides a more nuanced and more sophisticated understanding of its every detail. If the text is powerful and sustainable enough, one will find even more in studying it the 101st time than one did in the hundredth.

One suggestion of what we might see in our (re-)reading of the beginning of Genesis this year? We might notice a strikingly clear formula: God did something, and there was evening and there was morning, a first day. God did something else, and there was evening and there was morning, a second day . . . there was evening and there was morning a third day . . . a fourth day . . . a fifth day . . . the sixth day. Then the structure changes a bit for the seventh day. This creation is the unfolding of God’s plan, and the plan was quite orderly. As noted by many commentators, the works of Creation on days one, two, and three were the materials necessary for the works of Creation—respectively, day by day—for days four, five, and six. (Day seven, the one that changed the pattern, didn’t need materials created for it earlier in the week.) With enough readings of the chapter, one will also realize that its point isn’t to teach the order in which the components were made, but rather that there was an overall plan and an overall structure.

Those who claim that Genesis is a science lesson (about the creation of matter or about evolution) or an ancient history lesson (about the events of the first week of world history, or about associating each biblical day with a thousand years of human activity), miss the key theme of the chapter. They may even be mistaking its genre. It’s neither science nor history; it is theology. *The opening section of the Torah is not about the order of Creation; it’s about the creation of order.* God created order from a chaotic, messy world hodge-podge. The ongoing, religious message is that orderliness of our world is built into its very fabric. It is inherent in the system, and we need to protect that orderliness, not annihilate it.

All of that becomes more apparent every time we re-read the material and gain greater familiarity with it. Yet, something more is going on when we re-read Bereishit annually. Although the text is “the same” from year to year, we—the readers/hearers—are not. A 10-year-old will

understand the biblical narrative in one way, while a 20-year-old will read and understand it very differently, as will someone who is 40 years old, or 60, or 80. As we age, that is, as we integrate more and more of what we experience into our perspectives on life, we will comprehend events, relationships, and texts in ways very different from our previous perceptions.

Journalist David Denby, a former *New Yorker* magazine staff writer and film critic, captured this notion when he re-enrolled in two core Western civilization literature courses roughly 30 years after he had first taken those same courses at the same college. His volume *Great Books* (Simon & Schuster, 1996) explains how differently he understood the classic works the second time he studied them, with 30 years’ more experience under his belt. He reveled in re-reading volumes such as Homer’s *Iliad*, Plato’s *Symposium*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Dante’s *Inferno*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and more recent great books such as Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Oh, yes, Genesis was part of the early classics, too, although he noted that in a 1930s version of the two-semester sequence—before his time—the Bible failed to make it onto the reading list at all!

Now, we can recognize the two components of what happens with our re-reading—we see more in the text and we see it from a different vantage point. Even so, since there is so much else out there we haven’t yet read even once, we might be dissuaded from going back to Genesis, especially since “all beginnings are difficult” (Mekhilta, Yitro 19:5). However, don’t you envy David Denby’s opportunity to return to the books he read decades earlier? Then, think how lucky—how blessed—each of us is to return to a great book (actually to a great library, the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible) not only once, but every year.

Enjoy everything new you will find in reading Bereishit this year and every new perspective you will bring to it. Then, even more, enjoy re-reading it!

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