

ומעשה שבה מין ואמר לר' עקיבא העוה"ז מי בראו א"ל הקב"ה, א"ל הראיני דבר ברור, א"ל למחר תבא אלי, למחר בא אצלו א"ל מה אתה לובש, א"ל בגד, א"ל מי עשאו, א"ל האורג, א"ל איני מאמינך הראיני דבר ברור, א"ל ומה אראה לך ואין אתה יודע שהאורג עשאו, א"ל ואתה אינך יודע שהקב"ה ברא את עולמו, נפטר אותו המין, אמרו לו תלמידיו מה הדבר ברור, א"ל בניי כשם שהבית מודיע על הבגד מודיע על האורג והדלת על הנגר, כך העולם מודיע על הקב"ה שהוא בראו.

"God created" (Gen. 1:1) It happened that a heretic came to Rabbi Akiva and asked: "This world—who created it?" Rabbi Akiva replied: "The Holy One, blessed be He." The heretic said, "Show me clear proof." Rabbi Akiva replied: "Come back to me tomorrow." The next day, when the heretic came, Rabbi Akiva asked him, "What are you wearing?" The heretic replied, "A garment." Rabbi Akiva asked, "Who made it?" The heretic: "A weaver." "I don't believe you," said Rabbi Akiva. "Show me proof." The heretic: "What can I show you? Don't you know that the weaver made it?" Rabbi Akiva then asked, "And you, do you know that the Holy One made this world?" After the heretic departed, Rabbi Akiva's disciples asked him, "But what is the clear proof?" He replied: "My children, just as every house proclaims the builder, a garment its weaver, a [door] its carpenter, so does the world proclaim the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He created it."

If the ancients worried to prove God's existence, the challenge of Darwinian evolution posed an even greater threat: counterevidence to the biblical account of Creation. In the postmodern era, we Jews-in-the-center find ourselves oddly caught in the middle of a debate portrayed in the news media as between those who insist literally on the biblical account and those who reject it altogether. What the mainstream media misses is the nuance that distinguishes liberal Judaism: our willingness to embrace science and faith, to be intellectually honest and spiritually open.

Rabbi Arthur Green makes a bold claim in his recent theological work *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*. Opening with the claim that "the evolution of the species is the greatest sacred drama of all time," he writes:

With regard to "Creation," I understand the task of the theologian to be one of *reframing*, accepting the accounts of origins and natural history offered by the scientific consensus, but helping us to view them in a different way, one that may guide us toward a more profound appreciation of that same reality . . . We would understand the course of evolution, from the simplest life forms millions of years ago, to the great complexity of the human brain (still now only barely understood), and proceeding onward into the unknown future, to be a *meaningful* process. There is a One that is ever revealing itself to us within and behind the great diversity of life. That One is Being itself, the constant in the endlessly changing evolutionary parade. Viewed from our end of the process, the search that leads to discovery of that One is our human quest for meaning. But turned around, seen from the perspective of the constantly evolving life energy, evolution can be seen as an ongoing process of revelation or self-manifestation. We discover; it reveals. It reveals; we discover. (p. 20)

The reason-versus-faith construct is a false one; as Conservative Jews we should feel intellectually challenged by the former and spiritually inspired by the latter.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Bereishit

Genesis 1:1–6:8

October 22, 2011

24 Tishrei 5772

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, rabbinic fellow, JTS.**

Shortly after Rosh Hashanah this year, Jewish extremists torched a mosque in an Arab-Israeli village in the Galilee, damaging the building and destroying its holy books. Two days later, a rabbinic statement condemning this desecration of a house of worship on Israeli soil garnered the signatures of more than a thousand rabbis of all denominations within 36 hours of the document's publication. One of my former JTS classmates, however, explained with great disappointment why he did not add his name to this effort. This young rabbi sincerely wanted to express his Zionist support for a Jewish homeland defined by pluralism and tolerance, yet he feared that right-wing congregants would accuse him of aiding the "delegitimization" of Israel. I wonder how many other rabbis chose to remain silent in order to avoid an ideological conflict with community members regarding Israel.

In truth, religious and political debates over Jewish claims to the Land of Israel predate modern Zionism by many centuries. Some even find indirect reference to this issue in the very first word of Genesis. Rashi commences his classic 11th-century biblical commentary by quoting an earlier rabbinic tradition that asks why the Torah starts with the story of Creation rather than with God's first commandments to the Israelites, specifically those regarding preparations for the Exodus. This is because God "revealed to His people His powerful works, giving them the heritage of nations" (Ps. 111:6). Rashi then explains this verse as evidence to which Jews can refer if challenged about the Torah's narrative:

If the nations of the world should say to Israel: 'You are robbers, as you seized by force the lands of the seven nations (of Canaan)! They can reply to them: 'All of the earth belongs to the Blessed Holy One, who created it and gave it to whoever was right in His eyes. Of His own will He gave it to them, and of his own will He took it from them and gave it to us.

In order to understand this comment, one must appreciate Rashi's historical context as well as the practical and theological concerns that inform his approach to biblical interpretation. First and foremost, we must recall that Rashi lived in France during the First Crusade, the decades preceding which saw increased persecution of Jews that fomented the Crusader Massacres of 1096. In addition to threats of violence,

Christian animosity towards Jews in Western Europe often employed polemics disputing the legitimacy of Judaism's origins, including efforts to undermine Jewish claims to the Holy Land. Rashi's comment above responds to those physical and spiritual threats by reminding his audience of traditional Jewish beliefs that God's role in human affairs is not arbitrary, that God created the world with a plan to choose Israel for a special purpose and then led them to the Promised Land to dispossess nations unworthy of inhabiting it.

Rashi reminds us of the crux of biblical theology regarding the fate of all nations. Because God, according to the Torah, collectively rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, Israel was exiled twice from its homeland due to various sins. Indeed, that became a chief point of rebuttal to the theology that Rashi espoused not just from Christian antagonists but from anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox Jews, many of whom still employ that rhetoric today and refer to biblical verses that portended exile as a result of Israel's failure to uphold their covenant with God and its own laws.

While that fundamentalist view is only slightly further, intellectually, from my Zionist philosophy than is Rashi's, the overlap between their conflicting perspectives actually highlights the very tension I have felt recently. In fact, one of the prooftexts for Rashi's opening comment to Bereishit also lends support to the anti-Zionist argument. On Yom Kippur afternoon, our Torah reading concludes with several verses that warn of the consequences that will follow violations of the covenant:

Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves . . . But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you . . . So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you. (Lev. 18:24–28)

This passage describes Israel's occupation of the Promised Land as contingent upon moral and ethical conduct rather than as simply a birthright. I understand this to mean that our support in the Diaspora for the State of Israel should involve less talk about our rights than attention to our responsibilities. Rather than seeing the Jewish homeland as something we deserve, perhaps we ought to embrace its statehood as a blessing that we must continuously earn.

I recognize that this language deeply challenges certain established Zionist views today, especially those of the "Israel right-or-wrong" camp. Some have even suggested that such opinions constitute a betrayal and an abandonment of our people's claims to a homeland. On the contrary, I know that I am far from alone in my thinking and that many of my colleagues express their Zionism similarly. As a recent extensive survey of JTS-trained rabbis revealed, my generation of Conservative clergy aligns, ideologically, as committed heirs to Labor Zionism, stressing the welfare of Israeli society and its citizens at least as much as security concerns.

In many ways, this debate reflects the dichotomy inherent in Rashi's own commentary. In response to the universal language of Genesis 1 describing the creation of the world, Rashi's opening comment addresses the particular concerns of his community. We would do well to follow his example in advocating for Israel through the lens of God's culminating act, the creation of humanity in God's own image. No other concept, to my mind, captures the Torah's aspirational understanding of what it means to be both a global citizen and a committed Zionist today.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*

## A Taste of Torah

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

With this week's celebration of Simhat Torah and Shabbat Bereishit, we return to the very beginning of Torah as we read anew the narratives of Creation, the Garden of Eden, and the tragedy of Cain and Abel. Not surprisingly, the book of Genesis opens in philological complexity. Much ink has been spilled in attempting to understand the unusual grammatical construct of "*bereishit bara Elohim*." Though these words are typically translated as "In the beginning God created," translators have wrestled with numerous other options. Rashi explains the problem succinctly: namely, that *bereishit* is a construct state and, therefore, another noun in the Hebrew should follow. It seems that a word has been omitted and rather than a noun, we have a verb (*bara*) in its place. Moreover, the word *bara* also sparks a plethora of commentary. As Nahum Sarna notes, "The Hebrew stem *b-r-'* is used in the Bible exclusively of divine creativity" and as such "it must be essentially distinct from human creation" (Sarna, *JPS Bible Commentary: Genesis*, 5). How else may we understand and mine the depths of this unique verb that begins all of Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that cognate roots of *b-r-'* (*bara*) found in Hebrew all suggest the meaning of "striving to get out." He continues that the "underlying conception of *b-r-'* is that of bringing something out into the open; in Chaldean, too, *b-r-'* means 'outside' . . . It is creating something purely out of one's mind and will and out of nothing else . . . The whole world is accordingly nothing but a materialized thought of God. The use of *b-r-'* to designate plump, corpulent, and healthy also comes from this meaning of the root of becoming visible, concrete, tangible . . ." (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, 3). The image Hirsch suggests in describing the divine act of Creation involves the freeing of potential—the releasing of that which hitherto had been constrained. His explanation dovetails well with the balance of the Creation narrative, which, far from suggesting that God creates *ex nihilo*, seems rather to allude to a very different portrait. God works with the building blocks of Creation—bringing things out into the open, employing powers of revelation as well as imposing order on the primordial chaos that exists. One need look no further than the *leitvort* (the word that repeats itself) in the Creation narrative: *va'yavdil* (and God separated). The essential act of creation then involves both liberation and separation.

Rabbi Jack Riemer, a dear colleague whom I had the privilege of learning from during my years of teaching in Boca Raton, Florida, opened my eyes anew to a fresh understanding of *b-r-'*. He explained that it is not surprising that the Hebrew word for being healthy, *bari*, or health, *bri'ut*, comes from the same root as *b-r-'* (to create). To be a healthy human being, Rabbi Riemer explained to me, in itself means that one must be a creative person. Creation and good health are intimately linked one to another. And, of course, as we celebrate Creation this week, my thoughts and prayers necessarily wander to the release of Gilad Shalit. I rejoice, wholly and fully, in his freedom. May his liberation speedily return him to health and creativity. And may this coming year continue to be a time of freedom, innovation, and good health.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*