

## Is the World a Mirror?

Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses, (RS '95), Adjunct Instructor, JTS and Associate Rabbi and Director of Lifelong Learning, Romemu



The God of the Torah is driven by loneliness, by a desire to be in relationship with humanity and to God's chosen people, Israel. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says (quoted by Michael Lerner in his book *Jewish Renewal*), "God's dream is not to be alone, but to have humankind as a partner in the drama of continuous creation" (vi). Out of a great loneliness God emerges from royal solitude to create a world and within it humanity as a partner for God.

After all it is people who are created *betzelem elohim* (in the divine image), a divinity that some commentators say is reflected in our souls, and others say is reflected in the very contours of our bodies. As creatures with reflective capacity, human beings are at the apex of creation. We are the creatures with whom God enters into a full covenantal relationship, satisfying that deep yearning on God's part for connection.

But are we the only ones? In a close reading of the first few verses of Genesis we discover that human beings are not, after all, the first creation to mirror God. Reflection begins at the beginning of creating as we read in verse 3 of chapter 1:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר:

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The world takes shape by reflecting God's words perfectly in the verse's symmetry: God says *יהי אור* (*yehi or*), Let there be light. And the universe responds with *וַיְהִי־אֹר* (*vayehi or*), And there was light.

And it's not just that the universe is mirroring God, and in so doing begins to relieve God's solitude. It's more than that: what is created at the beginning of creation is dialogue itself. God calls, and the world responds—a supremely generative

call and response. Thus the creation of light signifies the free response of the universe to the divine call. In the beginning, God created a dialogue partner.

And, as if to underline the freedom of this newly created other, God is surprised by what the world does. As we can see from the Torah's next words:

God saw that the light was good. וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב.

Like any serious artist, God beholds God's work and evaluates it, and finds it pleasing. If God were in complete control over creation, God would not need to "see" anything. There would be no surprise. God would already know everything God needed to know about God's creations.

This unfolding relationship between God and the world is dynamic and radically relational: dialogical and surprising; characterized by freedom, reciprocity, and reflection.

Being human, we understand how essential it is that the world reflects who we are. A child seen by their parents survives and thrives; friends and lovers look to each other to know who they are in the world. Perhaps the God of the Torah continually seeks reflection in God's universe to assuage God's original loneliness.

Indeed, mirroring is found throughout the Torah in God's relationship with humans. Here's a prime (and timely) example. Before God visits a flood on the world in the portion of Noah, the Torah tells us that that God sees that the world has been corrupted or destroyed:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה נִשְׁחָתָה כִּי־הִשְׁחִית כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר אֶת־דְּרָכָהּ  
עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth. (Gen. 6:12)

In the next verse God tells Noah that God will do to the world exactly what humanity has done to it, using a verb with the same root: **וְהִנְנִי מְשַׁחֵתֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ** (I am about to destroy them with the earth). The three words in these two verses (bolded) that derive from the root *shin-het-tav* can be translated as corrupt or destroy. What's instructive here though, is what human beings do to the earth, God will in turn mirror by destroying the earth.

The Rabbis identify a principle that deeply informs the literature of the Torah, measure for measure (*midah keneged midah*), which is a reflective principle. Essentially it refers to a kind of Jewish karma. Just as one relates to the world and behaves toward it, so the world responds. A most painful example of this principle at work is the way Jacob deceives his father, pretending to be Esau, his older brother. In turn, Laban, his father-in-law to be, deceives him on his wedding night and gives him Leah, his older daughter, instead of the younger Rachel, with whom Jacob is in love. This episode becomes a mirror through which Jacob can see his earlier misdeeds (that is, if he chooses to do so).

Through these examples of a much larger pattern, the Torah is a kind of literary house of mirrors. Maybe this continual reflective process embedded in Biblical literature is a unique feature of our sacred literature.

Or maybe it's something else. Maybe there's something about mirroring itself that is intrinsic to the workings of the universe—and this is what the Torah is teaching us.

In the '90s neuroscientists discovered mirror neurons, neurons that fire not only when someone is performing an action, but also when a person witnesses someone else performing the same act. In other words, we mirror one another in our very nervous systems through neurons that fire sympathetically. And not only do we do so, but animals do as well. Mirror neurons of various kinds have been identified throughout the animal world. Scientists believe, for example, that this process explains how birds learn their songs. There is

something about God's creatures that is essentially reflective; mirroring is itself at the very heart of creation.

What does this radical mirroring principle, so deeply embedded in the Torah's literary artistry, teach us about the moment that we are in?

We are in the midst of a climate crisis. The crisis shows us that we did not reflect the earth appropriately. The earth has called, and we've responded by exploiting and destroying her. And so, with a tragic symmetry, the earth is mirroring back to us what we have done to her. She is destroying us with fire, flood, drought, heat. She is dysregulated, angry, even furious. We're the ones who have abandoned, if not God this time, then the earth itself. We might imagine her sitting ashamed, and alone, waiting for her *shomer*, her steward, to return to her.

How can we re-enter our relationship with the earth with integrity? We can only do so with respect. With humility. With care and compassion. The earth's majesty is inescapable. Either that fact will be reflected in our actions or she will destroy us.

That is our task. It was outlined from the very beginning of God's creating the world.