**PARAHAT BERESHIT**

**(middle portion in triennial cycle)**

**Bereshit/Genesis 2:4-4:26**

**Etz Hayim 13; Hertz 6; Plaut 29**

My d’var this morning presents an overview of the whole parashah of Bereshit from Chapter 1:1 through 6:4, effectively the creation story up to, but not including the flood. That is Part 1 of my d’var, but it extends so directly into the flood story that, with Leslie’s agreement, I will be back next week to present Part 2, which does include the flood.

Whether thinking of Part I or Part II, the text is a mixture of mythology with bits of history, as imagined by the early Israelites. Moreover, but inevitably, it reflects the views of the interpreter who wrote it down rather than just telling it aloud. And to be clear biblical scholars for the first couple of millennia did not care much about history in a modern sense. They were not at all bothered if they wrote two or even three creation stories.

Therefore, before we read the Jewish creation story, or better the Jewish creation stories, the story of Gilgamesh emerges in about 4,000 BCE. In that story, a man is created from the earth by one of their gods, and a woman is created from his rib. She tempts him with forbidden fruit that is promoted by a snake, and so forth. Obviously, that story should remind us of our Adam and Eve, but it predates any written text of Parashat Bereshit by hundreds—probably thousands--of years. Therefore, let’s ignore Gilgamesh and any other group’s creation story, and pretend that our own text is the first one.

There are many significant points to draw from this story. I will choose four of them. First, Chapter One is a stark creation story--ultimate, remote, limited mythology. There are no people or geography as such in the story: no rib; no garden; no apple; no serpent. All that anthropomorphism comes next in Chapters 2 and 3. Consider the creation of human beings in verse 27. It says God created: "et ha-adam" (small letter "a"), not Adam (large "A"), and to emphasize the point, the text goes on to say: male ("zachar") and female ("n'kayvah") He created them. These beings are not Adam and Eve but archetypical human beings of the appropriate design to procreate. Indeed, the first of the 613 commandments follows immediately: Be fertile, have lots of kids, and populate the earth. If you will excuse a bit of humour, some scholars suggested that male and female were joined back-to-back, but, unless they were physically more proficient than people of today, I don’t see how such people could have created children.

The second thing to note is that Chapter 1 offers a complete creation story. It begins with light itself, moves to inanimate objects, then to animate ones. The days get progressively more complex, culminating in the sixth day when not only human beings but all land animals are created. A very busy day indeed, which is perhaps why it is "yom **ha**shishi" whereas all other days are simple ordinals, as with “yom rivii” for the fourth day.

In contrast, Chapter 2 (after v. 3) focuses on the creation of real people and naming of animals, and people are no longer called male and female but man and woman ("ish" and "ishah"), a second creation story and very different from the first one.

Third, are there then two creation stories? Hertz says absolutely "no"; Plaut's says definitely "yes"; and *Eitz Hayim* avoids the question. According to the documentary or historical theory, our portion of the Torah is assigned to source P, the rigidly monoth-eistic priests, who wrote after the Exile. At some time, this text was merged with the folksier creation story from source JE, which probably comes from the southern king-dom of Judah. By the time centuries later that the Hebrew Bible was being compiled, one can suppose and was, one can suppose the folksier JE version was so well known that the priests could not simply eliminate it.

Is there a problem with having two creation stories? I think not. It is helpful to have one that is archetypal and another that is human; one that is remote and another that is closer to us. In verse 26 God announces His intention to create "adam" who will be superior to other creatures. The root of the verb is resh-dalet-hay, and it carries a heavy meaning: to rule, subjugate, even tyrannize. In verse 27 God carries out the idea, and then in 28, just after telling people to procreate, He compounds our power by adding another verb, khibshah (caf, bet, shin), meaning to conquer or subdue. The tone is a very different in Chapter 2. In parallel with the shift to "ish" and "ishah", people are told to work (ayin bet dalet) and to protect the earth (shim mem resh) -- just the concept of stewardship that environmentalists promote (Br 2:15).

Fourth, though I said that the first chapter of Genesis is a complete creation story, that is not quite true. God and whatever the words “tohu and bohu” may be (commonly translated as chaos) existed first. However, there is not the least suggestion of a divine battle among the god-like creatures or of some cosmic event. To quote from Nahum Sarna (*Eitz Hayim*, 2), “The God of Genesis is the wholly self-sufficient one, absolutely independent of nature. He is the unchallenged sovereign of the world, who is providentially involved in human affairs, the God of history.” Put another way, the creation myths we start with in the Hebrew Bible create the paradigm for ethical monotheism together with its corollaries of justice and righteousness. Human beings may be animals in a biological sense, but there is a purpose to life, as will be explored more fully later in the Torah.

In sum, our Parashah is ultimately saying, and saying unapologetically, that human beings are powerful, are in control, and are the measure of what happens. Admittedly, this creates enormous dangers—***just think of what humans have done to planet earth--*** but it is reality, and it is qualified in Chapter 2 by adding the responsibility that goes with the power. If we need any further evidence of the importance of this last, very busy day of creation, God says that the work was not just good but very good (Tov me'od). And, perhaps even more important, fauna are also blessed by God (bet resh caf)--first the fish and the birds (1:22), later land animals, and human beings (1:28). (I have no understanding why flora, which had been created on Day 3, are not blessed.)

There is much more to be said in Parashat Bereshit. I have said little about Adam and Eve, and nothing about Cain and Abel. I have only touched on the process by which a few individuals procreated until they were all humankind. There is so much in these early chapters that it takes a whole course to explore them, which is just what several of us did about eight years ago in a course taught by Shawna Dolansky.

Before concluding, I cannot ignore four verses that appear near the end of Chapter 6. To start with my conclusion, those four verses are—more than any other part of Torah—the words that I wish God, or Moses, or some Biblical scholar had deleted from the Hebrew Bible. Let’s read them:

When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and they took wives from among the ones that pleased them.--The Lord said, ‘My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh, let they days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.’—It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared one earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.

Please put to one side the sentence about God putting a limit on human life. It appears that it was stuck here after being originally located in a different place. The remaining three verses of sudden, irrelevant, sexist, and totally inappropriate mysticism have no place in my view of Torah. Indeed those divine beings—Nephilim, as they are called--deny the ethical monotheism that we are trying to create.

Finally, to make a clear link to Part 2 of my d’var next week, the final sentence of the full (annual cycle) Parashat Bereshit is: “But Noah found favor with the Lord.”

Shabbat shalom,