

Parashat Bereshit

The Creation of Man

Bereshit describes the beginning of our world. Some would like to view the creation chapter as describing the world's inception from a geological or biological perspective. However it would be more accurate to say that the Torah narrates the story of creation from a spiritual vantage point. The biblical depiction of creation directs the reader not towards HOW things came into being and the mechanics of the creative act, but rather, to the MEANING of their being.¹ [1] We shall examine the story of the creation of man in an attempt to glean some insight into the spiritual nature of man and his role on this earth.

ADAM AND ADAMA.

The creation of humankind is a complex process and is described in a mysterious way in the Torah. In Chapter 2, we see the creation of man described in the following manner:

“The Lord formed man (ADAM) from the dust of the earth (ADAMA) and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”

Two unique building blocks form the basic elements of man: earth - “*afar min ha-adama*”, and the breath of God. Man is both physical and spiritual, earthly and Godly.²

But man is called Adam. What is established here is an interesting connection: Adam and Adama - man and earth. They are the same word, the same root. Just by virtue of his name, it would appear that of the elements which form man, it is Adama rather than the Godly element, which would seem to be the primary ingredient.

DESTRUCTION

The ‘earthy’ make-up of man and the adam-adama inter-relationship is highlighted again later in Bereshit. In the final verse of our Parsha God decides to destroy mankind. There we are told:

“The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness ... and the Lord said “I will blot out (*emhe*) men

¹ See Rashi 1:1 and 1:14. In both cases he tells us that the order of events in the creation narrative of Bereshit Ch.1 do NOT reflect the historical order or geological truth as to the genesis of the planet we know as earth and its surrounding universe. In that case, what does this account teach us? It would seem that there are certain religious truths about man and the universe, spiritual, moral dimensions of the creation story that might form a more accurate focus. For more on this, see the first comments of the ShaDaL (R. Shmuel David Luzzato - Italy 19C) on the opening pesukim of Bereshit.

I also recommend reading Nahum Sarna's perspective in his Understanding Genesis, who clearly articulates the spiritual messages of Bereshit ch.1

² Animals too are created from “adama” but the elements of “afar” (dust) and the Divine breath are absent. Compare Bereshit 2:7 with 2:1.

(adam) who I created, from upon the face of the earth (adama)... for I regret that I made them” (6:5-7)

Once again we find the adam-adama pair. In addition, an unusual phrase is used here in the verse. The word used here to denote destruction is ‘*emhe*’. This is a phrase usually meaning eradication or blotting out and indeed, that is the traditional translation of this verse. But RASHI chooses to read this verse within a deeper context. This phrase can also be translated as ‘to dissolve’. RASHI, noting this added meaning, comments (6:7):

“ *EMHE ET HADADAM* : I will dissolve mankind - He is but dust. I will bring upon him water (the flood) and he will simply dissolve.”

Here, in an almost crude way Rashi stresses the earthly composition of man. If man is made from earth, he must surely share its properties. Pour water on him and he will cease to exist.

Thus far, we have noted the emphasis on “earth” in the description of man’s creation and existence but what meaning may be found to this Biblical description? What does the Torah wish to teach us about man by describing his very coming into being in this way?

THE DUST OF MAN

RASHI draws our attention to the origin of the dust out of which Adam was formed. He brings two very different midrashic explanations:

“DUST FROM THE ADAMA: He gathered his (Adam’s) dust from the four corners of the globe so that in whatever place he may die, the ground will absorb him in burial.

AN ALTERNATIVE READING: God took his dust from the place of which it is said “ You shall make an altar of earth (adama) to Me” (Shemot 20:21).. I only wish that he may gain atonement ...”

Let us examine the images that Rashi presents to us here. It is difficult to understand what these colourful interpretations are trying to suggest. What do we mean when we talk about the raw materials for man coming from the entire globe? Apparently, we are suggesting that man somehow encompasses the entire world. This first interpretation of Rashi’s is expanded upon by The NETZIV (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin - Volozhin 1817-1893) in his commentary, HaEmek Davar.

“ God gathered earth, a little from here and a little from there, unlike the way that he created animal and beast. Human existence differs greatly from that of the animal kingdom. Animals will live only in a specific climate, each according to their specific nature. Each animal is born and thrives in a particular climate. Man is different, living throughout the world, in hot and cold climate, adapting diet and nutrition in accordance with the local conditions. This is the result of God gathering the materials for man from all over the globe.

In addition... certain lands breed certain temperaments ... but man has no defined temperament due to his diverse origin."

So the unique aspect of man is his adaptability and universality. His versatile, portable, robust nature is encapsulated in this image. Man lives everywhere in the world. There is nowhere where man is a stranger. Because man is a creation of all places, he is at home in all places. The first Midrash emphasises the universal nature of man.

EARTH FROM JERUSALEM.

But what of the second midrash? The second midrash plays on the word 'adama', knowing that the altar in the Temple is described using that selfsame word: "*mizbeach adama*" (Shemot 20:21). On this basis the midrash proposes that man's origin's lies in a single spot - the site of the future Temple in Jerusalem. Why? Why does man need to be created from this hallowed place?

According to Rashi, this particular ingredient is vital to grant man the future opportunity of atonement and forgiveness. In this very daring reading, the midrash notes an inherent 'flaw' within the blueprint of man - the inexorable tendency towards sin - a devastating imperfection. Man, if he is to exist as man, is going to sin, and thus the very fact of his existence necessitates atonement. Thus forgiveness must precede his very creation. Indeed, this Midrash suggests that this is a critical element of every fibre of his being.

But why does Rashi need to offer two interpretations? These interpretations would appear to be very different if not conflicting.

INFINITY AND HUMILITY

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in a powerful essay, demonstrates why Rashi needed to bring both explanations. He argues that each reading expresses an alternative side of the human condition:

" Man was created of cosmic dust. God gathered the dust, of which man was fashioned from all parts of the earth, indeed , from all the uncharted lanes of creation. Man belongs everywhere. He is no stranger to any part of the universe. The native son of the sleepy little town is, at the same time, a son of parts distant and unknown.... Man is cosmic through his intellectual involvement. His intellectual curiosity is of cosmic , universal dimensions. He wants to know, not only about the things that are close to him as for example, the flowering bush in his backyard , but also things far removed from him, things and events millions of light years away.

...Let us examine the other interpretation of the verse in Genesis: man was created from the dust of a single spot. Man is committed to one locus. The creator assigned him a single spot he calls home. Man is not cosmic, he is here-minded. He is a rooted being, not cosmopolitan but provincial, a villager who belongs to the soil that fed him as a child and to the little world into which he was born.

.... Both cosmos-conscious man and origin-conscious man quest for God, although they are not always aware of this quest... Cosmic man finds God (if ready for Him) in the vastness and boundlessness of the cosmic drama, in the heavenly galaxies billions of light years away. Home-bound, origin-minded man finds God in the limitedness and narrowness of finitude, in

the smallness of the modest home into which man was born and to which he willy-nilly returns. He discovers God in the origin, in the source, in the center of the burning bush. Either infinity cannot contain God, or God, if He so wills it, addresses man from the dimensionlessness of a point. What is the centre of a bush if not a point! And out of that point, God spoke to Moses." (Majesty and Humility pg.27-31)

What Rabbi Soloveitchik demonstrates here is two dramatically different dynamics of relating to God, two opposing conceptions of the man-God relationship. And they are both contained within this double-edged comment of Rashi. If man is dust, Rashi has shown us the two dimensions of dust creating two very different souls.

Rav Soloveitchik continues :

"... cosmic man beholds the vision of God in infinity, in the endlessness of the DISTANCE which separates him from God, while origin-minded man experiences God in His CLOSENESS to man.

As a rule, in times of joy and elation, one finds God's footsteps in the majesty and grandeur of the cosmos, in it's vastness and it's stupendous dynamics. When man is drunk with life, when he feels that living is a dignified affair, then man beholds God in infinity. In moments of ecstasy God addresses Himself to man through the twinkling stars and the roar of distant heavens.

... However, with the arrival of the dark night of the soul, in moments of agony and black despair, when living becomes ugly and absurd; plainly nauseating, when man loses his sense of beauty and majesty, God addresses him, not from infinity but from the infinitesimal, not from the vast stretches of the universe but from a single spot in the darkness that surrounds suffering man ... in such moments humilitas Dei which resides in the humblest and tiniest of places, addresses itself to man." (Majesty and Humility pg.31-33)

For Rav Soloveitchik then, these two midrashim do not simply represent two different models of man which can be found in different people; some conforming to one type and others, to the other type. Rather, he proposes that BOTH models are present within each and every one of us 'surfacing' at different moments along with varying moods. Man is indeed all encompassing, spanning the entire world and at the very same time, rooted, humble. Rashi, by citing both texts, tells us much about the complexity of man and the intricacies of the religious personality.

A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

Let us return however, to our ADAM-ADAMA pairing. The man-earth union is not only restricted to the account of man's creation and destruction. It is a theme which runs like a thread through Parshat Bereshit, and beyond. We will soon see that it acts as a barometer of human sin in an untainted world. Let us examine this connection.

THE CURSE OF THE ADAMA

As we read through our Parsha, we begin to notice that every new sin and its ensuing punishment has a corollary. Each punishment issued to man in the wake of sin is accompanied by a blow to, or a diminishment of the earth itself. Maybe it is not simply the earth which suffers. Maybe more precisely, the

man-earth relationship is suffering, coming under strain and becoming distorted and weakened.

After Adam sins, eating from the tree of knowledge, God issues a curse. The curse is directed not at Adam but at the Adama!

“Cursed be the ground because of you; By your toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you, but your food shall be grasses of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat until you return to the ground from which you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17-19)

What we witness here is a dual curse. Adam is now going to be forced to work the land, in sweat and difficulty. In the Garden of Eden he could simply pick fruits from the tree. Now he will have to contend with thorns, thistles and back breaking labour. In addition we should note that Adam’s curse was accompanied by a concomitant order of exile. Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden “to till the soil (adama) from which he was taken.” (3:23)

Both curses; that of agricultural hardship and that of exile, indicate a straining of relations, an estrangement, between Adam and the earth which formed him. He is now in conflict with the earth which gave shape to his very body. Ironically, this tension will exist in life only. After death, Adam returns to dust.

THE CURSE OF CAIN

Cain kills Abel. The first homicide. The Torah is strangely silent and unclear about the motives of the crime, but the message of human responsibility sounds loud and clear throughout the story. This episode, once again, contains strong traces of the ‘adama’ motif. God’s accusation to Cain indicates that not only has he sinned but that he has also defiled the ‘adama’. His punishment reflects a new stage of degeneration of the man-earth relationship:

“ Then God said “What have you done? Hark, Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground (adama)! Therefore you shall be more cursed than the ground which opened up it’s mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the soil (adama) it shall no longer yield it’s strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on the earth.” (4:10-12)

Here once again, sin is punished in a dual dimension. First, the difficulty of agricultural labour and second, a sense of exile-not being allowed to stay in the place one is in, and in Cain’s case, an inability to remain in ANY place for a reasonable time period.

NOACH AND THE FLOOD

Each sin has been accompanied by deterioration in the adam-adama connection. It would seem that there is a growing tension, an animosity between earth and man. The earth will not comply with the man, will not submit to the human controlling hand. It resists cultivation. Man in turn, has to work increasingly hard to grow the food he needs to live. It is perhaps not surprising then that Noach, born soon after the death of Adam, is named (Noach means comfort and rest - Ibn Ezra) with a prayer:

“May this one provide us relief (yeNaCHamenu) from our work and the toil of our hands out of the soil (adama) which the Lord placed under curse.” (5:30)

The hope is that after the death of Adam who caused the initial curse, maybe agricultural labour will become a less arduous process.

This was not to be the case. Mankind continues to sin and we have already seen the end result above : “I will blot out men (adam) who I created, from upon the face of the earth (adama)... for I regret that I made them” (6:5-7). The flood comes to destroy both adam and adama. Rashi comments (6:13) : “Three handbreadth depth of topsoil, the depth of a plough, were dissolved and destroyed (in the flood)”.

“Noach opened the cover of the ark, and he saw that the face of THE EARTH HAD BEEN DESTROYED.”³

The earth itself is destroyed along with man.

THE ABOUT-TURN

“ Noah came out , together with his sons, his wife ... and every animal The Lord said to himself : “NEVER AGAIN WILL I CURSE THE EARTH (ADAMA) BECAUSE OF MAN (HA’ADAM) since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever destroy every living being as I have done.”” (8:18-21)

In the aftermath of the flood, the adam-adama relationship is broken. God promises that the land itself will no more be affected by the sins of man. Man has a propensity to sin which is potentially devastating. Man will continue to sin since “the devisings of man’s mind are evil” and if the earth is to be linked to man the earth will continually fall in a downward spiral. Rather than let this happen, God decides to discontinue this sensitive relationship.

But we now find that there are some questions which are just begging to be asked. Why does the ground become cursed for man’s sins? Why is there a linkage between the earth and every transgression of man? And why is the entire inter-relationship dismissed after the flood?

We can suggest an answer on many levels. At the most basic, man is ‘descended’ from earth. There is a connection between the creation and that which formed and crafted that creation. In the same way as a parent suffers at the shame or difficulties of a child, the earth is the ‘parent’ of Adam! (See Bereshit Rabba 31:7) The earth is eternally connected to man and that connection means that with every sin of man , the earth falls accordingly. Despite the truth in this suggestion, we are far from explaining why this would stop after Noach.

BETRAYING ONE'S PURPOSE

Maybe we can propose a different perspective to this problem. We might suggest that the earth is there as a warning to man. It tells man when he is following God’s path and when he is failing.

Man’s starting point is both the earth and God. In the ideal state of being, man is true to his origins. He lives up to the expectations that are made of him. Man exists in harmony with the foundation of his creation. Man then is in harmony with the earth and God.

But as man sins, man betrays his origins. Man betrays God, his creator and teacher. Man also betrays himself - his destiny. He betrays his destiny as a moral being, as a being in the “image

³ According to the translation of the Abarbanel

of God” with all the creativity, spirituality and responsibility that follows; man has fallen short of that which he was created for. And when this happens, the way God signals to him is through the ground. Let the adama indicate to Adam where he stands and how far he has moved.

The adama is a barometer. The greater the friction and lack of harmony between man and God, the greater the distance will be between adam and adama. The tension between man and his primary ingredient is a measure of the distance between man and his original purpose. The distance between man and his origins is a reflection of the distance between man and his destiny.

In a spiritually sensitive world, in the world before the flood, such indicators exist. The earth sends us a Divine message: “Do not betray your origins, do not betray yourself, do not betray your creator”. In a post flood world, God assesses that the human desire for sin is too great. Man is going to sin, and there will be ways to correct man’s actions, but the method of the adama is too subtle, maybe too cruel. Man is already too distanced from his origin to learn the lesson. It will fall on deaf ears. Adam is incapable of perceiving the delicate message of adama.

CONNECTION RENEWED

There is one place, however, where the adam-adama connection exists even after the flood. That place is Eretz Yisrael, the Promised Land - land of connection between a people and their God.

We read in the second paragraph of the Shema:

“If you follow the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day ... I will give rain for your land in season...you shall gather in your new grain , wine and oil....Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them, for the Lord’s anger will flare up ... and there will be no rain and the ground (adama) will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land (adama) that the Lord is assigning to you.” (Deuteronomy (Devarim) 11:13-17)

In the Land of Israel, the adam-adama connection is alive and well. If we do not obey God, we are threatened with both difficult agricultural conditions and exile. It all sounds a little familiar. We are witnessing the recurrence of the adam-adama relationship.

The Land of Israel then, is a spiritually sensitive land, a place which connects land and spirit. It holds in store a deeper connection with God and indicates to the Jewish people, through it’s very adama, God’s pleasure or indignation. This connection, this barometer offers enormous blessings for good but frightening destruction for evil.

Our hope is that our land can give us the vantage point of our origins, assisting us in seeing our true spiritual destiny, so that we may once again find our way back to the Garden of Eden.

Shabbat Shalom.