Thinking Torah
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Parshat Bereshit: **The Decline of Man.**

We read the creation narrative, the story of the beginnings of all things; of man, and of the entire universe as we know it, and we are filled with a sense of awe and wonder. We read Chapter 1 of Bereshit and watch our world gradually unfold before our very eyes. First there is light (or maybe energy) itself. Then the world emerges, the continents, trees and plants, and the solar systems, the stars, sun and moon. Then, fish, birds, insects, all the fantastic variety of the animal kingdom. It all comes into being and develops by the very word of God, day by day, step by step.

MAN

At the very pinnacle of this new world is Man, formed by the very hands of God, and brought to life with His very breath. Man's uniqueness lies in that he is the only being to be fashioned in "the image of God". We read of the creation of this man, so small amidst the vast expanses of the world, and we are somehow optimistic. We know that this man is ourselves in some way. Created and given life by God, we imagine that his heart is good, his intentions are pure, and that he will set his life to the task of the preservation and perfection of the world around him.

God himself demonstrates his care for man and his belief in him. He shows feelings of closeness to man caring for his welfare; sensing when Adam is in a state of loneliness, he finds a suitable partner for him (2:18-23). He has a strong interest that this human creation should succeed and be happy. God also expresses has faith in man's ability vis a vis the world itself. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that man is given a role of responsibility.

> "God blessed them (man and woman) and God said to them 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.' God said, 'See I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.... And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good..." (1:28-31)

And later in the story when we read of Man's task in the Garden of Eden; "to serve and preserve" it (2:15), we see once again how man is trusted and entrusted with a position of care and authority. The world - pristine, untouched - lies before him, untainted and perfect. Man is allowed to have unlimited benefit from the bountiful treasures that nature offers, to harness its natural resources. But as master of living things he has an awesome responsibility; for the balances in the ecology, for the moral fabric of the society that will spring up. He must learn how to "subdue" nature and yet to "serve and preserve" it. .

The atmosphere that pervades the pages of the creation narrative is a strong feeling of confidence, of optimism, that man will take this world and use it for the best. We have high hopes for this gentle, lonely man, so sensitive and yet so capable. He has an awesome responsibility, formed as he is as an "image of God" on earth, with his own creative capability and moral sense.

What will become of him?

THE DECLINE OF MAN

> "The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every thought of his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, ' I will blot out from the earth man whom I created - man together with beasts, insects and the birds of the sky ...'" (6:5-7)

These are the closing lines of Parshat Bereshit. Man has sinned so seriously that God is willing to wipe him out. The world is filled with violence, lawlessness. Society has lapsed into chaotic anarchy. The family and judiciary have collapsed. God decides to destroy the world. (For more on the moral degradation of the "flood generation" see 6:2 and10 and the commentaries there)

These verses express one of the most severe feelings of anti-climax, of disappointment and failure, in the Bible. From deep optimism we now have sadness and regret. God regrets ever having brought man into the world. In almost no time - only 4 chapters on - our great hope has become a deep feeling of disillusionment. In place of the strong sense of faith in man and mankind, we now have a heavy feeling of a failed mission, of destiny betrayed and unfulfilled. Man has corrupted his sensitive soul. He now thinks only of evil "all the time". Our hearts, together with God's, are saddened, as we read these tragic lines that represent the death of a great vision. And as we read of the death sentence delivered to mankind in the form of the Great Flood, we cannot help wondering, how this transformation, this collapse, occurred.

THE STRUCTURE OF PARSHAT BERESHIT

Reading Parshat Bereshit along the axis created by these two poles - the creation and the hope, against the degeneration and sin - gives us a central theme of the parsha and a structural framework for understanding it. Usually, we see Parshat Bereshit as a collection of stories that chart the beginnings of the world. But if we see the parsha as linking between man's creation and man's destruction, we begin to notice how every chapter of the parsha forms another link in a chain that becomes a tragic narrative of human failure. In this context, Nechama Leibowitz z"l speaks of Bereshit as a detailed chronicle of "the decline of man" (See her article. Studies in Bereshit pg.53-58.)

Nechama Leibowitz asks a simple question. According to the Torah, the time span from the Creation to the Flood is approximately 1500 years. (It can be calculated from the lifespans listed in Ch.5.) In this 1500 years, we read of only four or five episodes. Why only five stories in such a lengthy time span? The obvious answer is that every one of these stories is in itself monumental. They each represent landmarks in the development of the world, or possibly in the history of man. Nechama Leibowitz reads Parshat Bereshit as listing four specific steps which each played their part in the collapse of the human enterprise. Each story of the parsha represents a new level of man's self-corruption.

"The decline and fall of man is recorded in four stages, each of

them replete with symbolism, epitomising the iniquities of each successive epoch and representing a continuous picture of human fallibility.

Stage 1 Ch.3	Adam's sin.	Defiance of God's word.
Stage 2 Ch.4	Cain's sin.)	The first murder
Stage 3 4:17-22	Lemech's sin.	A violent society
Stage 4 6:1-4	The collective sin of the "Sons of God"	Societal breakdown

Nechama Leibowitz proceeds to detail the incremental deterioration in the moral behaviour of mankind, outlining the nature of each sin, and the essential moral "leap" of each stage. Bereshit then, is a chronicle of the uniquely human capacity to sin, of humankind's deterioration, of the immorality and evil that lies within.

Bereshit then, opens with a new world, a perfect world. We expect a grand future to match the magnificent vision that we see before our eyes. Instead, we witness the decay of the human race about which we had so much hope. The vision becomes one of corruption, violence, murder and evil. From this perspective, Bereshit - the story of the failure of mankind - is a most depressing story.

CHOICES

But is this the man we know? Is man really so filled with evil that "his thoughts are evil all the time"? What about the "image of God" within man? And from where does this evil originate? Is man at fault? After all, if God created man, and then man fails, is not the Creator at fault?

Many thinkers have grappled with these questions. We will present a few approaches to the problem that is man. The first will be that of the Meshech Chochma - R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843-1926).

> "LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE: The "image of God" finds its expression in man's freedom of choice: his control of himself exclusively by choice and the free reign of the intelligence. It is not predetermined by natural tendencies or behaviour patterns.... Even though we fail to grasp the inner workings of God mind - if we did we would be He - we know this. Man's free choice is a product of God's self-retraction (tzitzum) whereby God makes room for his creatures to act on the basis of their own choices. They are not restricted by higher controls. This is the meaning of creation 'in God's image' - that man is in no way predetermined. He is free to act for good or for evil as he desires. He can even perform acts which go against his own nature, or which defy God's will. The image of God is expressed with the name "Elohim" meaning a judge or an authority.
> ... thus the Torah does not state in reference to the creation of man, "And it was very good" as it does with all other creations. Instead, this statement is related to "all that he had made" (1:31) ... With all other life forms we can say that "God saw them" because they have certain laws of nature and thus they can be "seen" ie. perceived according to their fixed behaviour patterns, and they will remain that same way for all time. But man is not open to definition through any innate characteristic or predisposition. He defines himself through his choices...." (1:26 and 31)

God granted man a special gift. Man is like God; he is his own authority. God is 'Elohim' meaning a judge - a decision maker as to what is right and wrong - and man is in His image. Man too can determine his actions. Man can choose the path of good and the path of evil. He decides. Animals have fixed pre-programmed behaviour patterns; for what they hunt and when, for organising their packs, for relating to their mate. Man defines himself. Man is unpredictable, and thus, says the Meshech Chochma, we cannot even talk about a realistic assessment of man. About man, we cannot say "God saw it and it was good" because at some level, God cannot "see" man. With man, we must wait to observe the outcome of his choices to judge whether he is good or bad.

Why did man fail? Because he chose to fail. We can argue that Bereshit sets up the devastating paradigm of man as decisor of his own fate. If man listens to God, if man chooses God's word, God's way, he will find harmony and prosperity. Sin, however, brings destruction upon oneself.

> "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life! ... by loving the Lord .. heeding his commandments..." (Deut 30:19)

The various "stages" of deterioration of man as described by Parshat Bereshit are all choices. At each moment we make a choice. Do we follow our curiosity, and eat from the forbidden fruit and defy God, or do we listen to the divine word? Do we let our anger control us and murder our brother or do we follow the ethical option and swallow our pride? These are all choices.

Bereshit is a story of the wrong choices. It is a deep lesson to man in that it teaches us how our choices can become chain - reactions that lead to the pollution of oneself and the breakdown of ones society. Man can adopt lifestyles that destroy others, which affect society detrimentally and eventually destroy man himself.

If man is at the pinnacle of the universe, man matters. The world does not continue to exist unchanged despite the actions of man. In the view of the Torah, God did not decide what would happen to man. When man acted, he had decided for himself. God only destroys man once man - through his own choosing - has already destroyed himself.

NOAH, ABRAHAM

We can suggest that the Book of Genesis offers a counter-narrative. In the forthcoming chapters, we meet a group of favoured characters; Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. These figures are not perfect, they all sin in some way at some time, but their good actions and fundamental orientation is such that they are classified as "righteous" - Tzaddik. Noah is described by the bible as righteous. Why? Because he follows God's word. Because he follows the moral path. Abraham bursts onto the scene as the man who responds to God's call. God tells him "Lech Lecha - Go!" and Abraham responds travelling many miles to fulfil the divine command. Abraham is obedient to God even when listening to the divine command is excruciatingly difficult, and Abraham is the upholder of truth and Justice. There are two paths open to man in the Book of Genesis. One is paved with rebellion and sin. The other is a way which follows God and morality.

Man has a side of him that is attracted powerfully towards rebellion, total independence. Maybe that too is our creative side, our Godly side. But man can decide if he wishes to be the master of his desire or his desires master him. Man has

choices. He is a choosing being.

Was man bound to "fall" from the very start? Can the human enterprise succeed, or will the human way always be one of decline? That is a difficult question, but let us see what Rashi - the most basic, but the most complex of all Torah commentators - has to say. Rashi (6:6) writes the following:

> "A gentile approached R. Yehoshua Ben Korcha. He asked him 'Do you not believe that God knows the future?'. 'Yes', He replied. 'But does the Torah not state that God "was saddened" (as to the fate of man)?' The Rabbi replied 'Have you ever had a child?' - 'Yes'. "Did you celebrate his birth?' - 'Yes'. 'And did you not realise that he will eventually die?'. He replied 'We celebrate at the appropriate time and mourn at the appropriate time'. The Rabbi then said, 'God too. He knows that man will sin and be destroyed, but nonetheless he does not refrain from creating man for the sake of the righteous amongst them.'".

It would appear that despite the fact that God knows that man will sin, he does not refrain from creating him. I leave you to think about the image that Rashi gives us. Rashi presents us with our image: Joy at the birth of man, sadness at his fall. And we have the alternatives that we have discussed: sin and death, righteousness and life.

But some questions linger:
Is man indeed as sure to sin as he is to die?
Are the righteous the only purpose in the creation of man? And who are those "righteous"? - Can it be you and me? … All of us?

Shabbat Shalom.