

# Parshat Bereshit

## A living creation

### Chavruta

#### 1. Study Bereshit Ch.1

Who is the primary "actor" in this perek?

How does the world function in response to God's command?

Does the world have an independent role vis a vis God?

#### 2. See the following comments by Rashi:

(i) 1:11 " *etz pri* " & 1:12 " *l'emehehem* "

For what was the earth punished?

What textual detail is this comment by Rashi (or more

accurately, the midrash) based upon?

- How does the second Rashi fit (philosophically) with the first?

(ii) 1:16 " *Hameorot hagedolim* "

- Why was the moon diminished?

- How does this explanation fit with the words of the Torah text?

(maybe a clue which links to the previous Rashi: look at the

word *me'orot* and examine its spelling. Now see Rashi on

passuk 21 and note the spelling of the word "gedolim" there)

- Does this midrash fit into the p'shat here? (The answer might

be that it does not)

(iii) 2:7 " *vayipach be'apav* "

- On what basis - according to this Midrash - does God create

man of earthly dust and of his own divine breath?

- see also Rashi on 1:26 which picks up upon a similar theme.

Why is it important to God to have this "symmetry" in creation?

How do the ideas expressed in these comments by Rashi fit

with your impressions of Bereshit perek 1 on your initial

reading?

3.. If you are interested in a challenge, see Rav Kook's Orot

Hateshuva Chapter 6 , section 7.

### Shiur:

Bereshit Chapter 1 is characterised by an atmosphere of strict obedience and total surrender before the divine word, the command of the Almighty.

"By the word of God the heavens were created and by the spirit of his mouth all its hosts ... He spoke and they came into being, he issued a command and they stood." (Tehillim 33).

Reading the chapter we witness an immediate response to each creative statement : "And the Lord said, let there be light ... and there was light" (Bereshit 1:3) God creates the world by the "ten utterances" (see Avot Ch.5) through which He commands his world to come into being, and each order is directly followed by it's execution. A mood of submission animates the chapter. It is its hallmark and theme. God is the all-powerful creator, commanding and demanding by his very will and the world responds subserviently.

And so, it is surprising to see the Midrash paint an opposite image of Chapter 1. In place of an servile world without independent will, responsive to the command and desire of the architect of all creation, the Midrash prefers to talk of a world which springs into life empowered by an identity and will of its

own. The Midrash portrays the creation as if it were independent of God, and even more extreme, it presents a world that is rebelliously defiant of God's will!

II

Rashi in his commentary brings just a few examples which give us a representative sample of this line of thought:

1:11 " *etz pri* - God intended (and commanded) that the wood of the trees would taste like their fruit (*etz pri*). But, defiantly: 'The earth brought forth trees that bore fruit' (*etz oseh pri*) and not trees that were fruit (*etz pri*). Because of this, when Adam was cursed for his sin, the earth was punished too ... "

2:7 "God made man of a combination of the higher worlds and the lower worlds; a body from the lower worlds and a soul from the upper worlds. This because the first day's creation was heaven and earth (upper and lower). On the second day: the sky - the upper world; on the third day: the continents - the lower world; on the fourth day: the planets (upper); on the fifth day: the fish (lower), thus on the sixth day **God was forced** to create man of both the upper and lower worlds. Were this not the case, there would be **jealousy and competition within the creation...**" (1)

The earth defiant? Jealousy within the creation?

Clearly the theological challenge presented by these comments is enormous. First, what is the meaning of this resistance on the part of the world to God? Can the inanimate creation resist its creator? And is God powerless to prevent the independence of His creation?

Secondly, are we claiming that the world came into being in a way that is different to God's plan? We might cast our minds to the Rashi at the end of the opening passuk of the parsha:

"God had intended to create a world in the mode of "din" (strict justice), but that he 'realised', that a world of this type could not remain in existence, so he created a system that incorporated 'rachamim' (mercy) in coalition with 'din'."

What is this? Does God lack the ability to plan appropriately? Is God incapable of effectively implementing His creation? (2)

And maybe, most importantly, we must ask something about the text itself. The text of Bereshit Chapter 1 conveys a sense of total order and obedience. The Midrash gives an impression of disarray, rebelliousness, restlessness. How are we to understand this dissonance between *pshat* and *drash*?

iii

An idea: What about man's obedience and rebelliousness towards God? Of all creations, Man has the greatest spiritual awareness and intellectual perception of God! Man resides in the Garden of Eden where God "walks in the garden with the daily breeze" (3:8) Adam HaRishon would seem to have the potential of dialogue with God, to have an intimate relationship with his maker.

How could this man sin? How could Adam defy the word of

God in a world where God is all-pervading, where the divine presence is so evident? How could he disobey the very being that breathed the breath of life into his lungs?

But apparently this potential exists within man. We can easily forget about God, remove him from our consciousness. Despite being fully aware of the Almighty and His expectations, His restrictions, Adam has no problem with shutting God out. Biblical Man has the capability to disobey and transgress in the same way that in our lives, at certain moments, we too somehow manage to shift God-consciousness to the back room of our mind.

Is the Midrash transposing this quality of Adam and Eve, a drive for independence, an insatiable curiosity, a mood of rebellion - despite God's intense presence - onto all the other of God's creations? Maybe the midrash reminds us that ALL creation is essentially the same. All creation yearns for freedom, for independence of spirit.

One of my teachers - Rav Yehudah Shaviv - once made a fascinating remark in this regard. When examines Chapter 1 of Bereshit closely, there are carefully chosen phrases which describe God's actions in creation. Certain creations are enacted with the term "Vaya'ass - and He made". Others creations are brought into being via a statement rather than an action, the famous *asara ma'amarot*.

To a certain degree, the very fact of creation via a verbal statement assumes a speaker and a listener; a commander and a "commanded". The fact that the "listener" is to be addressed by a verbal statement indicates to us that he is not controlled directly by God, but has the power to enact that command and bring it into reality. However this notion of response, of independent listening; the existence of a being that might obey a command must always allow the probability of deviance and possibly disobedience. If we call out to light to make itself [compare putting on the light when entering a house, to announcing "can someone turn on the light"] rather than making it directly the assumption is that just as there is expectation of consent and obedience there is also the option of the action happening in a way that I did not expect. Maybe the order will be issued and the person that responds will do it in their own style, maybe they will get it wrong, maybe they will refuse. Verbal creation invites independence and by the same token, the possibility of a disobedience. More about this later.

#### IV

"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" i.e. 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...." (Meshech Chochma 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, like God 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. Plant life is predetermined, pre-programmed. Man is different; he defines himself. By the same token, however, 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.

This view would reject the Midrashic perspective entirely. Indeed, most of us with a rationalistic point of view would concur. What is the meaning of the rebellion of an inanimate world? But this view of the Meshech Chochma already demonstrates a clear idea. It tells us that God's creation - even the very "image of God" itself - once it enters the world, is not necessarily God-like. Man is given a God-like power of freedom and creativity. Yet at the same time, this allows for independence, and even, the power of evil. Capricious man might reflect God's image in some way, but the Man of Free Choice might decide to act in defiance of God's will. The "God idea" has been "brought down" to the world, but in its worldly form, it is unpredictable and flawed.

#### V

The mystical thinkers applied this rule **to the world as a whole**. God is perfect, but the world is not. God's plan of the world might have been perfect in concept, but the moment at which the concept transformed into reality, it became limited. The concrete world reflects the world of the ideal but the ideal cannot be fully translated into the particular. The perfect blueprint is perfect because it is in concept. The moment it descends from the lofty heights of the Divine to the earthy reality of the physical, it comes into being as flawed from the outset. Everything in this world has its physical limitation. All living things age, decay and die. Our physical world is limited and timely, subject to the damage of time.

Whenever an idea is reduced from its abstract form to the reality of existence, it will always differ in some way from the ideal. In Kabbala, this is known as the principle of *sh'virat hakelim*. The very transmission of a spiritual, abstract concept into a physical, finite realm, necessitates, inevitably, a certain curtailment of its grandeur, a limitation of its scope.

It's like the problem of how to describe a perfect God in human terms. Every description limits God in some way. If we say God is "good", or "mighty", or "compassionate", that is a human description of God, but God is beyond human description, beyond time and space, beyond human conception. Some philosophers tried to describe God via negative attributes eg. God is "not evil", "not weak". But this too creates problems.

What the real source of the problem comes to is that the infinite cannot be described by the finite. God cannot be truly understood from our human perspective.

And this simply begs the question. How did God with his divine, inscrutable, perfect Will, create a world? Can God's ideal will, his perfect mind become a physical, mortal, limited creation?

In a celebrated passage in Orot Hateshuva (6:7), R. Kook discusses the problem of the tree and the fruit. As mentioned, God commands the tree to produce itself as "etz pri" - a tree that tastes identical to the fruit. The unfortunate result is "etz oseh pri" - a tree that is tree-like, but that gives forth fruit.

What is the meaning of this? Rav Kook explains that this is a metaphor for 'the sin of the world' or the reduction, the diminishment of creation. He asks: If the aim of a tree is fruit production, then why is there a need for the bland lifeless wood? Why not create a tree that is fruit-like itself?

"At the start of the process of creation it was planned that the tree would have the taste of its fruit. In the same way as the spiritual objectives and goals may be perceived clearly and felt, it was intended that the entire process of becoming; the means to every spiritual objective, even wider spiritual goals, should have been suffused with the same intensity of spirituality as the spiritual goal itself.

But the nature of the earth, the inertia and bustle of life ... meant that only the fruit - the end-goal, the prime ideal - would have the taste. But the "tree" that carries the fruit, despite its essential role, fossilised and materialised and lost their taste. This is the "sin of the world" ..."

In a perfect world, the road towards a worthy goal should be an easy one. The vision of truth should be evident to all. In an imperfect world, we find ourselves confused by the fact that the route to the good is frequently paved with much pain, misfortune and difficulty. According to Rav Kook, God's original intention was that ideals should always be clearly in sight. The means to a particular worthy goal should have been suffused with the same meaning as the ends. In the imagery of the Midrash, the bark should taste the same as the fruit! The means and the objective should be unified by a single vision. But this was not to be. The world "sinned." The result: that the tree remains a tree. A means to a goal but the goal is now distinct and separate from the tree itself.

How does this happen? How is it that the plan of the all powerful God can be frustrated and altered? The word "chet" in Hebrew usually means "sin". But the verb itself can also have a different meaning. Sometimes it indicates a misdirection. Missing a target in Hebrew is also described with this verb. The "sin of the world" is not so much a sin but a distortion, or a perversion. The ideals in life should be visible at all times, even in the nitty-gritty of life. In this way the tree (the means) will taste like the fruit (the end product). But somehow, this theoretical state of being is not reflected in reality. This is in some way a rebellion. It is shallowness within the world that obscures truth and meaning.

When we sin, when Adam sinned, the selfsame process happens. The truth is blinded by the momentary glimpse of something tantalising. We don't know how to see the process of life as infused with the ultimate goal. If we could see that even the drudgery of life were filled with meaning, then we might tend less to the momentary diversions of defying God.

In some way, there is a parallel between man's sin and the sin of the earth. With both of them, were the intensity of God, of perfection, to be a more total awareness, the problem would not exist. (see Orot Hakodesh 3 pg.140)

I will leave you to think about this with a similar comment by the Sefat Emet - the first Gerrer Rebbe:

"In Rashi it states that God had intended to create the world with the attribute of "Din" (Justice). However, God saw that the world would collapse if it was guided exclusively by strict Justice applied the additional force of "Rachamim" (flexibility-mercy).

This is not to say that God reversed His initial intent. Rather, we might understand that the way of "Din" is the way that things SHOULD be "down here" in this world, for man's thoughts and will SHOULD act to fulfill God's design perfectly to the letter! However in our realisation that Man cannot act in all ways with total perfection, then, he should apply the "midat haRachamim". In concept one should strive for the level of "Din", for the concepts touch the Source of thought and his actions the Source of action" (5637)

God intended to create an ideal - Din - world, but no sooner had he created it, there was a necessity for a certain flexibility, a less exacting approach. Inherent in the act of Maaseh Bereshit is a certain "fall." The reality could never match the concept. In this sense, Reality is defiant to God.

Shabbat Shalom

### footnotes

(1) A third point that we might mention relates to our second comment of Rashi. Here we enter a realm known as "*yesh kin'ah bema'aseh bereshit*" - that there must be a certain balance or symmetry in the creation. There is a competition between the '*elyonim*' - the upper (angelic?) worlds - and the '*tachtonim*' - the lower (human) worlds. They compete with each other over the ownership of each day of the week, and over the ownership of man. What is the meaning of this competition? And why does God give in to their pressures? Does He want this cosmic symmetry?

(2) Before we launch into theology, let us at least acknowledge that Rashi's comments are rooted in textual difficulties. When Rashi talks about "din" transforming to "rachamim", he is bringing this explanation to explain the textual problem of God's name being different in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of Bereshit. Likewise, when he talks about the trees or the sun and the moon, each of these comments are based on a close reading of the words. ("etz pri" and not "etz oseh pri"; "me'orot" and "taninim ha-gedolim" both in their "chaser" format; the "meorot hagedolim" then reduced to "me'or hagadol" and "me'or hakatan".)