

Shabbat Breishit
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B.E.K.I. of New Haven
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Shabbat shalom.

Thank you, Rabbi Tilsen.
We're lucky to have a rabbi who so generously
shares the opportunity to offer a d'var on Breishit.

Some of the parshahs of Leviticus I could understand.
But Breishit?

I'm also lucky to be able to offer this d'var
on a Shabbat when we celebrate the beginning
of Klara James [Oppenheimer].

And it's in that light that I wanted to think about Breishit -
to think about the beginning of the world
in the context of the beginning of a child.

* * *

This parshah begins with creation
and ends with the promise of destruction.

it's capacious creation
creation of heaven
earth
light
night
sky
dry land
seas
plants
fruit trees
sun
moon
sea monsters
swarming sea creatures

winged birds
cattle
creeping things
wild beasts
people
the first words
the first dominion
the first stopping
Shabbat
the first garden
the first commandment
names
wisdom
curses
exile
sex
children
jealousy
sin
murder
the first city
the first music
bronze work
iron work
prayer
the mating of divine beings and humans

and finally,
the desire for destruction,
G-d's desire to end it all,
all of humanity -
even the animals.

* * *

I want to start with
one of the precursors
to that divine desire for destruction:
the first murder.

The first murder comes with the
the first children.
It's Lord of the Flies
starring the third and fourth humans.

Cain kills his brother Abel
because G-d liked his brother A's gift better.
the soil cries out with his brother's blood
G-d asks Cain where his brother is
and Cain defiantly refuses to answer -
rhetorically asking if he's his brother's keeper.

G-d then deepens Cain's exile -
a second exile
after the exile from Eden his parents suffered
for their transgressions.

But this one isn't just from one place, even if it's Eden:
it's from the land itself -
he will always wander.

"a restless wanderer shall you be on the earth"
the soil that gaped with its mouth
to take his brother's blood
the soil will never nourish him.

and Cain worries -
not that he -
the tiller of fields, the agriculturalist -
will have nothing to eat.

Not that he's leaving home alone
(Adam and Eve at least had each other)
heading out into a world that's now filled
with wild beasts that are no longer vegetarian

No, his concern is with *other people*:
"My punishment is too great to bear!
Since You have banished me this day from the soil,
and I must avoid Your presence
and become a restless wanderer on earth -
anyone who meets me may kill me!"

* * *

Where did those other people come from?

The Torah doesn't say

but it also doesn't treat Cain's fear as silly -
G-d answers it,
and puts a mark of protection on him.

So we're led to suspect
this time through Cain's fear,
that the story we're being told
isn't the only story.

There could be others out there
whose stories aren't being told.

We don't know for sure yet -
these could just be Cain's fears
though they're fears serious enough for G-d
to address.

We know for sure a couple lines later.
One line after God marks him,
Cain leaves the presence of Adonai
settles in the land of Nod, of wandering,
east of Eden.

And in the very next line,
we're told that Cain knew his wife,
and she conceived and bore a child.

Where's the wife from?
Mail order bride? Area 57?

This is of course a grade school 'gotcha'
that many people read as evidence of error

But I think something more subtle
is being communicated.

The text is saying
it's not the story of everything.

It's not *the* story of creation.
It's a story of creation.

There are other stories
not told here

but they too are real.

There's a creation story for the people
who would've killed Cain
if he didn't have his mark.
There's a creation story for Cain's wife.

And these aren't other creations in the sense of,
"well, everyone has a creation story,
isn't that nice" -

these are stories *that our story links to*.

Our story doesn't purport
to tell all those other stories,
but it recognizes that the truth
is larger than our story.

* * *

There's one more proof text for this reading.
It's the very next line.

Right after Cain and his wife
have given birth to a son,
the parshah says

"Then he became the builder of a city,
and called the name of the city,
like his son's name, Enoch."
Enoch, in the Torah's account,
is the 5th person alive:
Adam, Eve, Cain, his wife, then Enoch.

So who came to live in that city?
A whole city.

I don't think Adam and Eve
were going to come live with the murderous exiled son,
but even if that was the plan,
we're talking a city with a maximum population of 5.

Maybe this was a Field of Dreams moment:
"if I build it they will come."

But where were they going to come from?

They were already there in the world,
the Torah is telling us.

This is a partial tale,
and we know it thanks to Cain:
thanks to his fear of vengeance,
thanks to his love of a woman,
thanks to his drive to build a city.

* * *

We don't often praise Cain
but look at what he taught us.

And look at what he did.
The Torah tells us of nothing more
that Cain did but good:
wandering by command,
then marrying,
raising a son,
founding a city,
naming it after his son.

We don't know when he died,
but we know that his descendants too
showed enormous industry:
They were the first to play music,
the first to forge copper,
the first to forge iron.

By contrast,
the descendants of Seth
(Adam & Eve's third son,
the one who replaced Abel)
have few accomplishments
outside prayer.
They invoke G-d's name
and one walks with G-d,
but we know nothing more of them
until Noah.

* * *

I want to come back to that city.
Because I think buried in that city
is something important about disappointment and mercy,
especially a parent's disappointment and mercy.

But I'm going to get there
through a roundabout route.
I'm going to go back to the Garden of Eden,
and even further,
to Creation itself.

Going the scenic route back to Cain's city.
lets us keep exploring
this question about what the Torah says,
in its very first parshah,
about how to interpret it.

I explained why the story of Cain tells us
that the Torah is saying
it's *one* story, not *all* stories,
that it's telling us it's not a totalizing story.

I think the story of creation itself tells us
that it's not a *literal* story either.
Let me tell you why.

There are two accounts of creation in this parshah.

One starts at the beginning, 1-1
and goes through 2-4.
The second starts at 2-5
and goes through at least 2-23.

After that they merge, more or less.
But in the beginning
of "in the beginning"
the two stories are quite distinct.

The first story describes itself
as the story of heaven and earth. [1-1, 2-1, 2-4]
The second story describes itself [2-5]
as the story of earth and heaven.

In the first story G-d is "Elokim."
In the second story G-d is "Adonai Elokim."
In the first story G-d creates - *bara*.
In the second story G crafts or forms - *yatzar*.

So far it's not significant, right?
Synonyms, additional names of G, reversing the order of nouns.

But the next difference is crucial.
In the first story,
the universe unfurls
one layer at a time
in a parade of days
until it gets to humankind, as the climax.
Light, night, sky, dry land, seas.

And when the story comes around to life,
it sounds sort of like evolution:
plants, and then sea creatures,
then winged birds,
then cattle and wild beasts.
then Humans at the end of the creation.

In the second story,
humans are created before
plants and animals.

The text is explicit:
[2-5] "no shrub of the field
being yet on the earth
and no plant of the field yet sprouted."
Plants grow only *after* G-d plants Eden
and only *for* the human [2-9]

and G-d makes animals only after
realizing the human needs a companion [2-18, 19].

They can't both be true.
In a literal sense.

Either the plants came first,
then animals,

then humans.

Or the humans came first,
then plants,
then animals.

Only one chronology is possible.
Things happened in one order or the other.

But the Torah says:
here they both are.

Why wasn't one of them cut?
Whether the editor of the Torah
was human or divine
the question is the same.
Why does the Torah retain two irreconcilable stories?

To tell us something:
don't take me literally.

The Torah winks at us in the midst of this,
in case we didn't get the structural point.

In the second account of creation,
right after the story of the first woman
being created out of the human's rib,
the text says:

"So a man leaves his father and mother
and clings to his woman
and they become *one* flesh" [2-24]

and the very next line is:
"and the *two* of them were naked
the human and his woman
and they were not ashamed." [2-25]

They become one flesh.
But they are two.
As a matter of fact,
right after saying they're one flesh,
the text emphasizes the fact
that they're *not* one flesh

not only by calling them two,
but by then naming each of the two:
the human and his woman.

A husband and wife become one flesh,
so to speak,
Shakespeare's "beast with two backs,"
but not literally.
Literally, they remain two.

This textual point
underscores the structural point
of the two creation stories,
and it's the very *first* interpretive lesson
the Torah give us about itself.

Two chapters later we get to the interpretive lesson
from the Cain story:
don't take me as the whole story:
there are other stories.

Put together those two interpretive lessons
and the Torah has taught us,
partway through its first parshah,

that it is a partial story that
doesn't purport to tell a literal truth.

* * *

That was our scenic overpass.
We'll get back to Cain's city
by traveling through these two stories
and their culmination
in the garden of Eden.

The first story is the story
of the unfurling of days,
one after another,
with humans as the climax.
This is not the rib story,
but the story of the human created
male and female, together,
in G-d's image [1-27].

in this story, G-d's first words
to people are a blessing.
and then a positive commandment-
pru urvu – be fruitful and multiply.
And a gift: all the seed-bearing plants
and fruit trees to eat.

And here, after this story –
the blessing and
the positive commandment
and the gift –
G-d sees that it's very good.
The first time that anything is very good.

We don't know if the blessing is verbal.
Maybe G-d blesses in nonverbal ways.
But we know that the commandment
to be fruitful was verbal,
as was the gift of the fruits.

So these were G-d's first words to humans:
either words of blessing
or words of fruitfulness and fruit,
of flourishing and nourishing.

* * *

The second story is quite different.

This is the inverted story-
no longer the story of heaven and earth,
but of earth and heaven.

The bottom up perspective instead of top down.
The human centered view.
The one that starts with humankind.
“when the L-rd G-d made earth and heaven . . .
the L-rd G-d formed the human from the dust of the earth.”

And the relationship is far more intimate.
We're clay in G-d's hands now:
G-d now crafts –
the verb is *yetzer*, associated with potters –

rather than abstractly creates – *bara*.
And there is a tangible closeness:
“the L-rd G-d formed the human from the dust of the earth.
He blew into his nostrils the breath of life
and man became a living being.”

The clay Golem brought to life,
but not with mystical words -
as the old European stories have it –
instead, with breath, G-d’s own breath.

If we anthropomorphize G-d
(and we’re invited to by the text,
since humans are made in G-d’s image)
then the image is of the Creator cradling
the lifeless body of the first human,
G-d’s face close to the human face,
the giving of breath as the giving of life.

* * *

And it’s more than the process of creation that changes.
G-d’s name changes too.
Elokim in the first story;
Adonai-Elokim in the second story:
L-rd G-d rather than just G-d.
G-d takes on a second attribute, a longer name.

The rabbis identified Elokim (G-d) with justice,
i.e., rules and consequences,
each according to his desert.
they identified Adonai (L-rd) with mercy and intimacy.

And in the second story they come together –
justice and mercy.
tzedaka v’chesed

Etz Chayim [the *humash*] repeats an old story,
a midrash of two worlds
created before this one.
One was built on strict justice, *tzedaka*
where anyone missing the mark
was struck down.

G-d destroyed that world
and built one based on compassion,
where the motives and origins of evil deeds
were understood, and forgiven.
But predictably, in that world evil increased and increased,
and G-d destroyed that world too.

Only then did G-d build this world,
in which justice and mercy mix
So in this world – and this is the 2nd creation story –
both names of G-d come together
Elokim the just and Adonai the merciful.

And we bend ourselves to *this* G-d
our pleas on Yom Kippur
are to both *Avinu* and *Malkenu*
father and king,
compassionate father and stern king.

And we ask for
tzedaka v'chesed:
asay imanu tzedaka v'chesed –
do for us justice *and* mercy -
only when those come together
can we be saved –
asay imanu tzedaka v'chesed
v'hoshiaynu.

So justice and mercy mix in this world,
necessarily.

But uneasily too.

* * *

Let's go back to the 2nd creation story,
where the first living thing is human
and the intimate G-d forms the human
and breathes life into his nostrils.

In this story what are G-d's first words?
Not words of blessing,
or of flourishing and nourishing.

No, in this 2nd story there are instead
words of commandment –
v'yitzav Adonai Elokim al ha-adam
– and the L-rd G-d commanded the human –
saying Of every tree of the garden
you may surely eat
but for the tree of knowing good and bad
you must not eat,
because on the day you eat from it
you will surely die.

No blessing.
A promise of fruit instead of fruitfulness.
But a prohibition too:
eat some fruit, lots of fruit, but not all fruit.

And more than a prohibition.
A dark promise:
on the day you eat from it,
you will surely die.

* * *

This is a very different vision
of the relationship between God and people.

In the distant story, the first story,
the story of origins and essences,
God began with blessings and
promises of fruitfulness.

But now in this second story,
this immanent story,
this intimate story, G-d
begins with rules and consequences,
prohibitions and
promises of death.

Two stories, father and king,
mother and queen,
parent and sovereign,
Avinu malkenu.

But they come out differently than we might expect.
The intimate, *Avinu*,
the One who cradles us
and breathes life into us –
this intimate One is the one who sets prohibitions
and warns of stern consequences.

The transcendent, more distant one, *Malkenu*,
the One who creates vaults of water
and first light and the leviathan,
this G-d of essences and origins,
this is the One who blesses us
and foretells a fruitful future.

* * *

Those of us who are parents,
or other kinds of lovers,
know this paradox.

We know that sometimes
blessings and unconditional love
come most easily from a distance.

And we know that when we are close to someone -
a child, a lover -
so close that we have helped form them,
so close that we feel they reflect us,
so close that we breathe our spirit into them,
then we are sometimes more like the stern judge.

And as that stern judge we give
tzedaka without *hesed*,
justice without mercy.
We set strict limits
and threaten stern consequences.

Sometimes we have to –
that mythical world of only-mercy did not survive.
Could not survive.

But we have to be very careful
about those consequences too –
because that other mythical world,

the world of only-justice,
didn't survive either –
couldn't survive.

* * *

In that second story, the intimate G-d's
first words to human beings were
a prohibition and a dark promise:
if you eat from the tree of knowing good and bad
you will surely die.

Now remember:

the serpent told Eve to eat,
she did,
she gave it to Adam,
and he ate.

And nobody died.

They got kicked out of paradise,
sentences of hard labor for them both.

But nobody died.

So what do we make of this story,
where G-d's very first sentence to human beings
is a prohibition and a dark promise,
and the promise *is not fulfilled*?

As I see it
there are three possibilities.¹

¹ Some try to solve this problem by saying that Adam and Eve were immortal in the Garden of Eden and mortal after the exile, so that in a sense they did die because of eating from the tree of knowing good and bad. But that reading contradicts the text, which makes plain that they never ate from the tree of life. Only if they ate from the tree of life would they have become immortal, and G-d prevents them from doing that by exiling them. Adam and Eve were mortal in the Garden and after the Garden, and the conundrum of G-d's unfulfilled dark promise remains.

* * *

First, it was a lie.
G-d knew that they would eat from the tree,
G-d knew that they wouldn't die,
that He would nevertheless spare them,
but G-d said it anyway.
Maybe because they needed to experience transgression
so deep that it risked their own lives.

Or maybe because G-d wanted them to know good and evil -
but knew that they wouldn't learn it on their own,
by happenstance,
that they would only learn good and bad
if it was worth dying for.

But whatever G-d's reason,
G-d, who on this first reading is all-knowing,
intentionally lied.

This is not my favorite account.

* * *

The second possibility is that G-d didn't lie,
G-d erred.
A false prophesy.

G-d thought they were going to die
because of the tree -
from the power of knowledge -
not from G-d's own doing.

But they didn't die from eating the fruit.

On this reading,
G-d is not all-knowing:
once G-d creates,
the creation is outside G-d,
and He does not fully know it.

He may have insight into it
but that insight is not perfect.

* * *

The third possibility is that
G-d intended to kill them
if they ate from the tree.

G-d's very first words to the humans:
His first commandment,
His first promise;
how could He not fulfill it?

What sort of a start to a relationship would that be,
if G-d didn't follow through,
if G-d didn't keep his first promise?

But then G-d sees his people.
People whom He's crafted,
built with clay and breath and ribs,
the only creatures that G-d has spoken to.
And G-d has mercy.

G-d meant to keep His promise when He said it,
He meant to fight for justice,
to kill the transgressors.

But *tzedaka* alone does not prevail,
justice alone does not prevail.
Mercy tempers the judgment.

G-d does not abandon justice,
does not leave them in Eden
as they were before they ate.

They are punished, and the punishment is severe –
they are exiled from their home,
and both are sentenced to hard labor,
she to the pains of childbirth,
he to the pains of tilling the soil.

Eden is barred by a flaming sword -
a double symbol of death.
There is no going back.

But out of mercy they are at least alive.

On this account G-d is all-knowing about his creation
but not all-knowing about Himself;
G-d Himself changes,
adapts to His growing creation,
changes with his children.

This is the Torah's story of the first parent, *Avinu*.
The parent of limits, of dark promises,
and eventually of a mercy that tempers judgment.

And it would be sort of a sweet story
if it ended there.
Even with exile and the flaming sword
we would still have love and growth and mercy.

* * *

But the story goes on.
We know that soon
children will be born
and Cain will kill his brother
and be exiled further -
exile after exile.

We humans will keep disappointing.
Cain will lie to G-d -

maybe he's heard from his parents
how G-d said they would die
when they ate the fruit,
and knows that they didn't die,
and thought that G had lied,
so thinks that he can too.

And G-d will punish him
for the killing and the lying.

Do you remember the punishment
G-d gave Cain when he killed his brother:
"a restless wanderer shall you be on the earth."

But we know he didn't end up that way.
He's married, with a child, living in a city that he built.
The first city.

He's become the *opposite* of a restless wanderer,
just 5 verses after G-d has pronounced that punishment.

What happened? We can ask the same questions all over again.

Did G-d lie?
Did G-d make a mistake - a false prophesy?
Or was it mercy again?

As G-d reached down
to that first child
to put the mark of Cain on him,
the mark of protection,

when the intimate G-d leaned down
to the face of that first child,

did mercy overcome justice?

And did that mercy allow
the first city to come into being,
and music?

And did it also - and inevitably -
lead to the end of the parsha,
when "Adonai saw that the evil
of the human creature
was great on the earth
and that every scheme
of his heart's devising
was only perpetually evil"?

You bet.

We need mercy,
we cannot live without it.
But it destroys us.

They cannot be reconciled,
mercy and justice,
the first creation story and the second,
Avinu and *Malekenu*.

They can only be mixed together
again and again
with each new child,
with each new day.

Shabbat shalom.

