

בראשית *B'reishit*

(Genesis 1:1–6:8)

B'reishit

Lawrence S. Kushner, 1995

Why, if the sun, the moon, and the stars were created on the fourth day of the Creation sequence, did the Creator make light on the first day? How does one do that?

Why, of all animals, was it a snake that got Eve and Adam in trouble? Would the story be as effective if it were, for instance, say, a talking chicken? And why, if Adam blamed Eve, did Eve blame the snake and not Adam?

B'reishit

Lawrence S. Kushner, 1996

In the traditional understanding of Genesis 1 and 2, the two stories are not from different sources but are different ways of telling the same story. Putting the Documentary Hypothesis aside for a moment, what might be learned from placing the creation of humanity last in one account and first in the next, from mentioning the arising of a mist in one story but not in the other, from the creatures of earth and sky preceding Adam's creation in one story and created as a possible *eizer k'negdo* (helpmate) in the second? If God created man and woman simultaneously in God's image, as Genesis 1 suggests, what does it mean

that woman was taken from Adam in Genesis 2? If Genesis 1 and 2 are the same story with different emphases or lessons, how might you tell the story a third way to emphasize yet a different lesson?

B'reishit: The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

Stephen E. Cohen, 1997

None of the sages of *B'reishit Rabbah* speak openly of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil “symbolizing” a general realm of forbidden knowledge; they speculate only about actual species—wheat, grapes, figs.

B'reishit Rabbah 15:8 Rabbi Yosei said, “They were figs. It is like the story of a prince who slept with one of the concubines. When the king heard of it, he threw the prince out of the palace. The prince went knocking on the doors of each of the concubines, and none would let him in, except the one with whom he had slept. She opened her door and received him. So too, when the first man ate from the tree, the Holy One threw him out of the garden, and he went from one tree to another, but none would receive him, except the fig tree, whose fruit he had eaten. She opened her door and received him, as it says, ‘They sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths’ (Gen. 3:7).”

Comment Several of the medieval *m'forshim* (commentators)—and modern commentators as well—believe that the Knowledge of Good and Evil refers to sexual knowledge. Rabbi Yosei may be guiding us, indirectly, toward that idea by using a frankly sexual parable to help identify the mysterious fruit. Do you think so?

B'reishit: Whose Land?

Stephen E. Cohen, 1998

In this midrash, transmitted by Rashi, we may detect a sensitivity on the part of at least certain rabbis to the ancient (and enduring) accusation that in conquering the land of the Canaanites, we were simply stealing their property.

Rashi Rabbi Yitzchak said: God might well have begun the Torah with “This month shall be for you . . .” (Exod. 12:2). For what reason does the Torah open with the story of Creation? Because of the principle expressed in the verse “The strength of His deeds He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of nations” (Ps. 111:6). So that if the nations of the world say to Israel, “You are thieves; you conquered the lands of the seven nations,” they will be able to reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One. He created it, and gave it to whomever He saw fit. By His will He gave it to them, and by His will He took it from them and gave it to us.”

Comment Does this teaching not lead directly to the conclusion that all territorial conquest is God distributing land according to the divine will? Would Rashi say that there is no such thing as “stealing” on a national level?

B'reishit

Mordecai Finley, 1999

If prophecy is fruit from the Tree of Life, and the fruit is pressed into wine for our personal use through *t'shuvah* (repentance), then what do we make of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the exile resulting from that fruit being eaten? According to the *Zohar*, Adam HaRishon, the first person, ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil purposefully; he sought not prophecy, but experience, to know vagaries of good and evil, compassion and judgment, right and wrong. He became like “*Elohim*,” not like “*Adonai*.” Adam HaRishon became like the emanation from *Adonai* called “*Elohim*,” the aspect of the Godhead that creates differentiated reality. Adam HaRishon was now like *Elohim* in now being ontologically rooted in the world of differentiation, but without the intrinsic connection to the Godhead—in him, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was separated from the Tree of Life. Ingesting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil separates Adam HaRishon from the Tree of Life, and places him in the worlds of husks (*k'lipot*)—masks and veils. Some say, and the *Zohar* agrees (1:36b) that the tree was in the form of a fig tree, and in a homeopathic-like urge,