

בראשית *B'reishit*

(Genesis 1:1–6:8)

B'reishit

Rabbi Stephen Wylen, 2011

"Let us make the human [*adam*] after our own image" (Gen. 1:26).

It is possible that the word *adam* derives not from *adamah* (earth), but from *dimyon* (imagination, resemblance), and that the initial *alef* is prefixed. The distinction of the human being from all other creatures lies in the power of imagination. All other creatures perceive only what is, but the human being, who is created from a mixture of above and below, divine and animal, sees with the power of imagination. The human perceives that which is beyond the senses, that which could be. The human being can deduce one matter from another and draw conclusions beyond sensory perception. Few today would contend that the resemblance of the human being to the Divine lies in its form, as visualized at the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Modern philosophers have tended to focus on reason as aspiring to the Divine, thereby setting science over against faith; but historically, religious rationalists like Maimonides, and even the nineteenth-century Romantics, described reason and imagination as complementary and cooperative powers of the human soul. Imagination was not relegated to the realm of fine arts and belles lettres.

Arthur Green has called for a new theology that integrates our new scientific knowledge into received spiritual wisdom. Can the reintegration of imagination assist with this endeavor? Can we make such a theology emotionally relevant in the lives of our people, such that they will

not have to turn to a fundamentalist rejection of reason as they seek spiritual warmth and meaning?

B'reishit

Rabbi Janice Garfunkel, z"l, 2012

I was surprised to learn that although the Hebrew words used for both Adam's and Eve's punishments are the same, they are nearly always translated differently.

In both the 1962 and 1967 JPS translations we find for Eve: "I will make most severe your pangs [*itzvoneich, ayin-tzadi-bet*] in childbearing; in pain [*b'etzev, ayin-tzadi-bet*] shall you bear children" (Gen. 3:16). For Adam we find: "By toil [*b'itzavon, ayin-tzadi-bet*] shall you eat of it" (Gen. 3:17).

Why did translators use "pangs, pain" for Eve but "toil" for Adam? I further find it interesting that Eve's "punishment" is giving birth to children (the word translated as "toil" might also be translated as "labor" in both cases), and at the conclusion of Adam's punishment, mortality is introduced: "Until you return to the ground—for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). Of course, the creation of new life via the birth of babies does necessitate mortality. While this consequence is phrased in the masculine singular, we know that both Adam and Eve share equally in it, as do the animals.

Perhaps these words are neither punishment nor consequence, but merely a description of what life is like, as a parent might say to a child: I brought you into this world and taught you right from wrong, good from evil. Now, you must grow up, labor to have children, labor to earn a living, and eventually return to dust.

B'reishit

Rabbi Michael Boyden, 2013

One of the lessons that we all have to learn in life is that nothing is perfect. That may seem like a human problem, but it is also God's. Having made a world that was meant to be good, at the end of our *parashah* we read that "Adonai regretted having made human beings on earth, and was heartsick" (Gen. 6:6).

In *B'reishit Rabbah* 8:3, Rabbi Berechiah says that God is like a king who engages an architect to design a palace for him. When he sees it, he doesn't like it. But who could he be angry with, if not with the architect? So, how strange it is that God was saddened in God's own heart!

God's world is an imperfect place. Indeed, Rabbi Avahu tells us in the same midrash (*B'reishit Rabbah* 9:2) that God created many worlds and destroyed them. While our world was meant to be *tov m'od* (very good), one of the interpretations of those two seemingly harmless words is *tov mot* (good to die). The world can be a good place, but death is also part of the package.

And what brought Cain to murder Abel? One explanation attributes his action to envy. Cain and Abel tried to divide up the world between them, with Cain taking possession of the land and Abel of the movable chattel. However, Cain was never satisfied with what he had and sought to drive Abel out of the world.

There is enough in this *parashah*—as indeed in this world—to make one despair. And yet its concluding words give us cause to believe that not all is lost: "But Noah found favor with God" (Gen. 6:8). Even when today seems hopeless, there is always a tomorrow "when the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (Mal. 3:20).

B'reishit

Rabbi Stephen Wylen, 2014

Why does the Torah begin with the letter *bet* and not with *alef*? To teach us that just as the *bet* is closed before, above, and below, we should not inquire into what is before or above or below, but only into what is open to us—the Torah (*B'reishit Rabbah* 1:10). This midrash teaches us two things: first, it teaches us that religion is about human behavior and the study of Torah more than it is about answers to ultimate questions (one good response to the popular atheists of our time!); second, the midrash teaches us about the limits of human knowledge. The *Zohar* makes a similar point when it states that the "*reishit*" of Creation is the initial material point of Creation. "Beyond that point nothing is known" (*Zohar* to Gen. 1:1).

The big bang theory of Creation makes the same contention. We can study the big bang up to billionths of a second after its beginning. Of the actual moment of Creation and the time before, nothing can ever be known.