

Parashat Bereishit 5771, 2010:

Bereishit and Revelation

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

There are two moments in world history that initially seem to be distant and disconnected from one another: *Maaseh Bereishit* (the Creation of the World) and *Maamad Har Sinai* (the Revelation at Mount Sinai). The creation of the cosmos is, by definition, the ultimate act of universality, whereas *Maamad Har Sinai* is the personification of particularity. The first act created all matter and life, while the second forged the existence of the Jewish people. In a certain sense, therefore, they appear to be as different from one another as the primordial darkness and light.

Upon careful reflection, however, *Maaseh Bereishit* and *Maamad Har Sinai* are, in fact, inextricably interwoven. Beyond question, the Creation of the World remains a theological and scientific quandary. Rashi's (1040-1105) second interpretation of the first *pasuk* (verse) of the Torah: "In the beginning of G-d's creation of the heavens and the earth," hints at this sense of ultimate inscrutability when he states: "This verse calls for midrashic interpretation." (This, and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Stated somewhat differently, the words depicting the Creation of the World hide far more than they reveal. While they initially seem to be transparent and explanatory in nature, in actuality, they are a cloak for the greatest mystery known to us. In short, finite man can neither apprehend, nor comprehend, the full scope and content of their majesty and meaning. The true meaning of these words, therefore, remains hidden

forevermore in the primal mist that ascended (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:6), and continues metaphorically to ascend, from the nether regions of the earth.

In sum, *Maaseh Bereishit* represents unanswered, and perhaps in some ways, never to be answered questions. Although we ardently try to understand the Creation of the World, we ultimately can do no more than remain enraptured and amazed by its grandeur and majesty. As my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) so aptly noted, the best man can do on his own is to attain a "... consciousness of the wonder of reality." (*And From There You Shall Seek*, translation, Naomi Goldblum, p. 127) This, perhaps, is one of the most powerful reasons for man's exploration and appreciation of Nature. Clearly, within Nature, Hashem's presence is writ large.

Given all of the above, let us now try to conceptualize, to the best of our limited ability, the nature of the Creation. Rav Soloveitchik noted (*ibid.*, p. 131) that *Maaseh Bereishit* was "a moral act," if not the ultimate moral act. Yet, the Creation of the World, as magnificent and awe-inspiring as it was and is, was still an imperfect act. How did it finally obtain completion, how was its authentic purpose fully actualized? To this query he unhesitatingly responded: "[*Maaseh Bereishit*] attained perfection in the Revelation on Mount Sinai." (*Ibid.*) In other words, whereas the Creation of the World represents *sheilah* (question and mystery), the revelational experience at Mount Sinai represents *teshuvah* (the answer and clarification). As Rabbi Soloveitchik stated so beautifully: "The words of the solution come from Mount Sinai: the G-d who is sought on the paths of the creation experience reveals Himself in the Sinaitic vision." (*Ibid.*)

In my view, *Sefer Bereishit* 1:2 represents *sheilah* like no other *pasuk* (verse) in the Five Books of the Torah: “Now the earth was (*tohu vavohu*) astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of G-d was hovering over the face of the water. (Translation based upon Rashi: **astonishingly empty**: Heb. תִּהְיֶה נֹבֵחַ הָאָרֶץ is an expression of astonishment and desolation; that a person wonders and is astonished at the emptiness therein.) It seems, therefore, that *tohu vavohu* is an expression that connotes some kind of unformed and elemental potential. Everything is yet to be; yet, we know not what will be. Like Creation itself, the phrase represents the pinnacle of “question and mystery,” since everything is “astonishingly empty.”

Let us apply these ideas as an aid to understanding the moral universe in which man has most often operated. In short, it is nothing other than that of *tohu vavohu*. This means that moral relativism, rather than absolute morality, has been the rule: Man has ever sought to be the arbiter of right and wrong and not G-d. This has led to unspeakably horrific and depraved acts on man’s part that seem incomprehensible to anyone with even a modicum of understanding of what it takes to be human. Rabbi Soloveitchik publically expressed this concept in a lecture that was given on September 15, 1970. Therein, he analyzed the true nature of the sin of Adam and Eve:

Man’s sin consisted in his desire to write his own moral code. While perforce he recognized that he was ruled and controlled by G-d’s physical code – i.e. Nature, he was unwilling to cede this unlimited power to G-d in the moral realm; and sought, instead, to be the author of his own moral code and, thereby, his destiny. This rebellion sought to establish good and evil (*tov v’rah*) as the litmus test for that which was fitting and proper in man’s behavior. This was a replacement and rejection of the G-d given tests of truth and falsehood (*emet v’sheker*). Man failed in his rebellion – the effects of which haunt us until our own historical moment. (Synopsis my own)

I believe that we may now see one of the essential functions that the Torah provides for the Jewish people, and by extension, for all mankind: It is the role of the Torah to bring

us back to a moral universe wherein G-d is the supreme judge. Our ethical principles must never be based upon the slippery slope of morality of the moment. Instead, our ethical values must be firmly based upon the words of the Voice that spoke at *Maamad Har Sinai*. One of the clearest representations of this idea is to be found in the introductory passage of Rabbeinu Ovadiah Bartenura (known as “the Rav” or “the Bartenura,” died approximately 1500) to *Pirkei Avot*:

I must state that this tractate is not based upon any particular mitzvah from among the mitzvot of the Torah; it is, therefore, unlike the rest of the tractates of the Mishnah, in that it is entirely composed of moral and ethical exhortations. [In truth,] the wise men of the nations [i.e., Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle] also wrote works [of this nature] according to what they imagined in their hearts to be moral and ethical behaviors and how one ought to act with their fellow man. This is precisely why the Mishnaic Sage (*hatanna*) begins this tractate with the phrase “*Moshe kibale Torah mi'Sinai*,” (“Moses received the Torah at Mt. Sinai”) to teach you that the moral and ethical exhortations in this tractate were not contrived by the Sages of the Mishnah based upon their [mere human] intellects. Rather, everything contained herein was said [by G-d] at Mount Sinai, from He who revealed Himself at Sinai. (Translation my own)

Thus, mankind’s salvation from the churning morass of moral confusion, from *tohu vavohu*, is to be found within “The words of the solution [that] come from Mount Sinai: the G-d who is sought on the paths of the creation experience reveals Himself in the Sinaitic vision.” (Rabbi Soloveitchik, op. cit.)

With Hashem’s help, may we always be guided by His vision of moral and ethical behavior and live lives that represent the highest standards of His holy Torah. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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