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## Parshat Bereishit: Starting Over Again with God

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Here we are, on the cusp of Cheshvan, back again at the beginning of the Torah. After so many *chagim*, which transported us spiritually to so many different places, now the hard work really begins. Without all of the high drama of the high holidays, in the quiet, the humdrum rhythms of everyday life, we must now find a way to live the life we dreamt of on Rosh Hashanah; to become that person we committed to becoming on Yom Kippur; and to connect to that God whose embracing presence we sensed on Sukkot and throughout the season. The task is large and daunting and so very full of promise.

How are we to proceed? Our tradition offers us both rituals and readings to help us along. We begin our laborious efforts at self-creation with the story of world-creation. And we begin our renewed spiritual strivings after God with the story of God's earliest strivings with humankind. "*Breishit barah Elokim*" (Genesis 1:1). The opening of the Torah is a continuation of the themes of the *chagim* and an invitation to integrate them and to execute them in our lives.

In that spirit, let us focus on the spiritual messaging of the earliest chapters of the Torah. Who is the God of *Breishit* and what would it mean to be in relationship with that God? How does God introduce Godself to us? And what are the implications of that introduction for our spiritual lives?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik famously identified two different religious personas, Adam 1 and Adam 2, in the opening chapters of *Breishit*. Rabbi Donniel Hartman has suggested, a bit less famously and a bit more radically, the presence of God 1 and God 2 in these chapters as well. Allow me to explain.

Genesis 1 begins:

1 In the beginning, or when God began to create heaven and earth—2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—3 God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. (Genesis 1: 1-3)

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תוֹהוּ  
וְבִהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ  
אֱלֹקִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ג  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהִי־אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר:  
(בראשית א:א-ג)

The first lesson of our Torah, the very first thing that we learn about God, is not the oneness of God, but the profound otherness of God. God is not of the world, not subjected to laws of world. God is utterly transcendent, beyond time, beyond space. And yet, nevertheless, this God chose to transcend His transcendence through an act of creation. Demonstrating the grandeur of divine power, God speaks the world into being. First comes light, then *rakia*/sky, then land and seas, then plants. Then: "*Va'yar Elokim ki tov*" (1:12). God sees that all of this is good. The radically other, uniquely powerful God interestingly affirms that He is also beneficent.

The pinnacle of this creative act, indeed its realization as "very good," "*tov meod*," comes at the end of chapter 1 with the introduction of the human being.

26 And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." 27 And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." (Gen. 1:26-28)

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים וַעֲשֵׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ  
 וַיְרֵדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה  
 וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הַרְמֵשׁ הַרְמֵשׁ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: כז  
 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקִים  
 בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם  
 אֱלֹקִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹקִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ  
 אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ וַרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף  
 הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי הַרְמֵשׁוֹת עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (בראשית  
 א:כו-כח)

Hartman argues that God creates human beings in God's own image, to replace God, as it were. God sets up proxies in the world and endows them with tremendous power—to fill the world, master it, rule over it—so that God can return to being God in His infinite transcendence. God creates the world, loves it, imbues it with value, puts us in charge of its maintenance and then exits the scene, so to speak. "Shabbat is God's goodbye party," he says.

1 The heaven and the earth were finished, and all of their array. 2 On the seventh day, God finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. 3 And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done. (Gen. 2:1-3)

א וַיְכַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל־צְבָאָם: ב וַיְכַל אֱלֹקִים  
 בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה  
 וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְכַל־מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: ג  
 וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹקִים אֶת־יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ  
 שָׁבַת מְכַל־מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים לַעֲשׂוֹת:  
 (בראשית ב:א-ג)

End of story 1. End of God 1. Creation is a singular act, not an ongoing part of a relationship. It ends with God's blessing but without God's continued involvement. The act of creation is critical, but it seems that God leaves history just after entering it. God 1 remains completely self-sufficient and utterly transcendent.

7 The Lord formed Adam (or man) from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. 8 The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. (Gen. 2:7-8)

ז וַיִּצְרֶה ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה  
 וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: ח  
 וַיִּטַע ה' אֱלֹקִים גֶּן־בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שֵׁם  
 אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר: (בראשית ב: ז-ח)

15 The Lord took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. (Gen. 2:15)

טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֵן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ  
 וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ: (בראשית ב:טו)

Genesis 2 reverses God 1. Here we find a God not of transcendence, but of immanence. God 2 is not a God who powerfully speaks a world into existence, but is rather a compassionate God who plants a garden and dreams of a green fellowship. Human beings are not created to be God's proxies, but to be God's partners in tilling and tending, growing and nurturing the land. And God similarly wants to nurture us, to be in relationship with us. Indeed, the language of *mitzvah* is introduced here, in the garden, as a means to maintain human-divine contact—" *Va'yitzav Hashem Elokim al ha'adam lemor, mikol etz ha'gan echol tochel...*" (2:16). God

2 years to stay involved in human lives and asks only for loyalty in return. This is a God who is vulnerable, needy, open to care and to caring.

And so unlike the God 1 of Breishit 1 who leaves the world, God 2 enmeshes Himself in human relationship and human history in perpetuity. The story in the garden ends with human failure, divine punishment, and then, so poignantly and paradoxically, a reaffirmation of God 2's care:

21 And the Lord made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. (Gen. 3:21)

כַּא וַיַּעַשׂ ה' אֱלֹקִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיְלַבְּשֵׁם: (בראשית ג:כא)

Despite sin, God shields Adam and Chava, as if to say, “No matter what, I still have you covered.

The rest of the Torah follows in a similar vein. God 2, the God of relationship, is the primary force, seeking out relationship, demanding loyalty, and maintaining involvement. The God of detachment, God 1, hovers in the background and surfaces mostly through the occasional human experience of divine absence or awareness of divine power. (*Tehillim* showcases that most clearly.)

It is beyond our scope for now, but it is worth stating that it is in rabbinic literature that we find a real reckoning with the reality of God 1. *Chazal* very much existed in a world of divine detachment, but they desperately yearned for divine engagement. Their work—which is very much ours as well—was to find a way to live again with God 2 in a world of God 1.

We began by considering *Breishit* as a post-*chagim* call to action, as a way to live into the commitments and aspirations we set for ourselves just a few days and weeks ago. It seems to me that in opening with such a rich, wide, and varied picture of who God is, where God lives, so to speak, and how we might relate to God in time and over time, the Torah is offering us a theological gift and maybe also a spiritual method. It is granting us permission to experience God in multiple, even conflicting ways: in the world and beyond the world, transcendent and immanent, primarily powerful and primarily nurturing, once-creative and always-creative, in history and not in history. And it is also granting us permission to experience ourselves relative to God in multiple, conflicting ways: as agents and subjects, proxies and partners, sinners and beloveds, naked before God, and clothed by God. The story of *Breishit*, the beginning of our beginnings, invites us to meet God again, that singular being who is at once God 1 and God 2, and there to make space for a relationship that is complex, changing, sometimes dizzying, sometimes electrifying. It encourages us to accent different spiritual modes as our lives demand; to live at different spiritual pitches as the music of our respective realities changes.

This message of spiritual inconsistency is not an easy one, but I believe it can be an enlivening one as find our way into a new year of paradoxes and possibilities.



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