

Bereishit: Guests at God's Banquet

It is a momentous week for us in the Torah calendar as today it all begins - the creation of the world. The divine spirit hovers over a void that is all darkness and chaos ... *tohu va'vohu v'choshech* - and God creates light, day and night, heaven and earth, oceans, trees, fruit, fish, birds and animals, and finally – us - humankind! Then the Creator rests.

The Genesis account is not meant to be a scientific treatise; it is not even the only Jewish version of creation. Rather, it is a magnificent poem, that like all of Torah, offers us a framework to understand our world. The creation story paints a picture of life and of **our** place in this universe. It seems to portray us humans as the high point of creation. *We* were created last, after all other living things, the crowning moment.

Only we are said to be created in the divine image. And God tells us to go out and conquer the earth and all of the other animals in it!

We might well conclude that we are at the center of the universe and that everything exists to serve our needs. And much of the time, we conduct our lives with just that attitude. Yet many of our tradition's teachings exist precisely to balance our sense of entitlement. Even this Torah portion offers a balance. In addition to telling humans to have dominion over the earth and all of its creatures, Genesis also tells us that God places Adam in the garden to work it and to watch over it. Long before anyone could have imagined the many ways that we humans would exploit and potentially destroy, the earth, the Torah warns us to protect it (*l'shomra*), and to serve it (*l'ovdah*), and not only to conquer it.

One detail of the creation story piqued the interest of our ancient sages. They asked: why were human beings created last, on Day 6? What does that mean about where humanity fits in the world. Was it because we were and are the crowning achievement of God's creation? The rabbis of the Talmud offer 4 possible answers, each with its own significant lessons.

#1 – God created humans last so that nobody could claim that God had a human partner in creation. Nobody could say that people had helped create the sun and moon, or the animals and plants, because humans did not yet exist when those were created. God alone made them. So – while humans are powerful, and are even called God's partners in the world, *we* are not God. Or as the poet Joyce Kilmer famously wrote - “only God can make a tree.”

Answer # 2 – We humans were created right before Shabbat, so that we would immediately have a mitzvah, a sacred responsibility to carry out – observing the Sabbath. If people must observe a mitzvah, they must serve God. In addition, Shabbat reminds us to limit our impact on the environment. It reminds us that the world does not exist to meet our indiscriminate and relentless use of it.

#3 – Our sages say that humans were created last so that if people get too arrogant, we can be reminded that even the tiniest insect – a flea, or a gnat – preceded us in creation.

All three of those rabbinic answers focus on keeping us humans humble. Each of them suggests that people are *not* in fact the center of the universe.

But for answer #4, the perspective shifts in a beautiful way: Why were humans created last? So that everything would be perfectly prepared ahead of time for our arrival. God, said our sages, acted like a king who builds a palace, sets the table and prepares a lavish banquet, and only then brings in the guests of honor. So it was with creation – all was prepared and *then* humans were invited to partake of the banquet, our beautiful earth.

Look at the magnificence of what we have been served – sun, moon and stars, mountains, oceans, trees, all of the animals, and our fellow guests - the people in this world. We all partake of this banquet, and we are the honored guests. So following the Talmud's beautiful analogy, let us consider how we would behave as honored guests at a royal palace. We would not just grab the food, trash the garden or thoughtlessly kill the pets. We would not demean and insult our fellow guests and try to take everything for ourselves. Rather, we would want to behave with dignity, with respect and with gratitude for what we are given.

Re-reading Genesis reminds us to consider our responsibilities as we share in God's banquet. It reminds us that in truth, we are momentary guests on this earth, a speck in the universe, for a brief moment in eternity.

By now, some of us have become numb to concerns about global climate change. But our destruction of the planet continues, the magnificent diversity of living creatures continues to suffer, and we should worry about the continuing decrease in resources which support life on our planet. We still need to act on these in our personal practices and in our political choices.

Re-reading Genesis also reminds us that we are meant to share the bounty of this world with our fellow human beings. Every one of us, we read in the creation story, is created in the image of the divine. We are all guests at the banquet, and we are also the hosts to one another. Let us set a beautiful table for our guests and for ourselves, so that we will serve a banquet that is worthy of the wonders of creation. Shabbat Shalom