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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Parashat Breishit**

This *Dvar Torah* is adapted from a lecture given by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper at the Center for Modern Torah Leadership (August 2009).

Some Biblical commentators (and many of today's fundamentalists) are committed to the view that *Parashat Breishit* should be read as an historical account of the creation of the world. Such a commitment imposes at least two interpretive responsibilities upon the reader. First, it generates the need to harmonize the *Torah* with scientific reality. Second, it requires that the discrepancies within the Biblical text itself be explained in such a way as to construct a coherent, consistent, historical narrative.

One famous example of textual variance, which has long captivated the imaginations of Biblical commentators, is the two creation narratives found in the opening chapters of *Breishit* (1:1 – 2:3 and 2:4 – 3:24)<sup>1</sup>. The apparent contradictions between them – when Adam was created, how trees grew, how birds were created, how Eve was formed, etc. – raise serious exegetical challenges to anyone committed to the historicity of the *Torah*.

*Rashi*, who likely held such a commitment, addressed perhaps the most notable difference between the two accounts – the different names of God used in the respective texts. *Rashi* pointed out that *Elokim* is used in chapter one while *YKVK* is employed in chapter two.

*Rashi* explained that *Elokim* refers to God's attribute of Justice whereas *YKVK* represents His attribute of Mercy. *Rashi's* message, then, was that while God initially created the world with Justice, He soon realized that Justice needed to be tempered with Divine Mercy.

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper suggests that *Rashi* is not nearly the fundamentalist that some believe him to be. He argues that according to *Rashi*, the first account of creation was not intended to be an historical account. Rather, the creation of the world by *Elokim* as recorded in the chapter one was what God contemplated in his Mind, a Divine thought experiment. In this way, the differences between the two creation accounts is reconciled by making the first account a theological expression of God's intent and retaining chapter two as the historical account.

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<sup>1</sup> A third creation story can be found in Genesis Ch. 5.

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Rabbi Soloveitchik offered an alternative reading of the *Parasha*. In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the Rav maintained that the two creation narratives offer descriptions of man's dual nature rather than a narrative on the historical truth of creation. For the Rav, neither account was necessarily historical!

If, like the Rav, we reject the fundamentalist premise that *Breishit* is an historical account of human origins, how then might we make sense of the extensive genealogies found in chapters four and five? Has the *Torah* simply shifted interest from human ontology to history? Or is it also possible to understand the genealogies as something fundamentally more than history?

Rabbi Klapper offers an interesting reading of *Breishit*, one that is unburdened by the need for historical accuracy and connects thematically the opening creation stories with the subsequent chapters of the *Parasha*. Looking carefully at the genealogies in chapters four and five, the reader will notice remarkable similarities between the genealogies of Adam's two surviving sons, Cain and Seth. Consider the descendants of Cain: Chanoch, Irad, Mechuyael, Metushael, Lamech. Chanoch and Lamech also appear in the genealogy of Seth. Irad corresponds to Yered, Mechuyael corresponds to Mehallael, and Metushael corresponds to Metushelach. Moreover, to further see the literary correspondences compare:

Gen. 4:24:     *“If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.”*

Gen. 5:31:     *“And all the days of Lamech were seven hundred seventy and seven years; and he died.”*

The linguistic parallels between the two genealogies suggest that the text is not recording actual history but rather making a thematic point. Simply put, God wanted the reader to notice that there exists an important relationship between the bloodlines of Cain and Seth.

Citing the *Midrash*, Rabbi Klapper further suggests that Cain's genealogy is listed to explain why his bloodline was cut off after the seventh generation. Tuval Kayin, Cain's great-great-great-great-grandson, became the first blacksmith (and hence the father of modern warfare). As the moral descendant of Cain, Tuval Kayin and most of his family is destroyed in the Deluge.

Most, but not all. According to the *Midrash*, Naama was a direct descendant of Cain and Noah was a descendant of Seth. The author in this particular *Midrash* wanted to emphasize that even though Cain's (male) descendants were wiped out, his line was perpetuated through Naamah.

If we use the Rav's approach of understanding the text thematically rather than literally, the identification of Noah's wife as Naama was not intended to be an *historical* point about the actual ancestry of mankind. Indeed, upon a closer reading of the *Parasha*, the reader will

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notice that the verses dealing with the conception and naming of both Cain and Seth reference God, but for Cain, the Divine name is YKVK while for Seth it is Elokim:

- Gen. 4:1:       *“And the man knew Eve his wife; and she conceived and bore Cain, and said: 'I have gotten a man with the help of the YKVK.”*
- Gen. 4:25:      *“And Adam knew his wife again; and she bore a son, and called his name Seth: 'for Elokim hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel; for Cain slew him.”*

Accordingly, the union of Noah and Naamah (and all humankind that walks the Earth today) can be viewed as the human equivalent of the coupling of Elokim and YKVK found in chapter two. Just as the two creation narratives offer us a mythical vision of what it takes for the world to survive, so too the genealogies offer us a philosophical vision of what it takes for humanity to survive. Just as the world cannot survive without both Divine Judgment and Mercy, so, too, mankind cannot survive without both judgment and mercy.

Naamah, unnamed in the Biblical text, is indeed the missing link upon which human history unfolds. Together with Noah, she unites judgment *and* mercy and makes the world livable. Ultimately, the tension between justice and mercy in both God and mankind makes the rest of the Bible – and human history – so compelling.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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