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Rabbi David Willig

*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

Parashat Bereishit: A Revolution in Thinking

There are some revolutions that are so successful that later generations no longer see how revolutionary was the change. Beethoven is accepted today as one of the most popular of the concert composers. We do not realize that the initial performances of many of what are now his most famous and popular works were greeted in their initial performances by boos and hisses. We do not understand that Beethoven was the first composer to whom music was more than pretty sounds. Music, to Beethoven, was the expression of ideas, of his personality and will. After Beethoven, music was never the same. Each composer was compelled to inject his personality into his music.

We look at Babe Ruth as the man who hit 60 home runs. Hank Greenberg hit 58, Roger Maris 61, Barry Bonds 73. We no longer appreciate the revolution that Babe Ruth caused. We cannot envision the offense based on the stolen base, the hit and run, the sacrifice bunt and the suicide squeeze. We cannot get our minds around an era where Frank "Home Run" Baker led the league in home runs four consecutive years, with totals ranging from nine to 12. The revolution of Babe Ruth was to turn every at-bat into a potential home run, changing the game forever.

We begin the reading of the Torah with one sentence that signified a major religious revolution. Seven words in Hebrew, eight in English: "When God began to create heaven and earth." One God, one Creator, creating everything. No polytheistic vision of very human gods, each with one unique power, sort of like a divine Justice League. No magical substance that gave birth to the gods, against which the gods themselves are powerless.

If we can put ourselves back to pre-biblical times, polytheism answers many questions. With many gods, each of whom has a limited sphere of influence, and each of whom can, in a very human fashion, play favorites, it is no wonder that some are rich and powerful, others are poor and powerless. It is no wonder that sometimes evil prospers, as the pagan gods do not rule by virtue of their goodness, and lay no claim to justice, only to power.

Monotheism, spelled out in the initial sentence of Genesis, is a truly revolutionary concept, and not easy to accept or understand. If there is truly only one God, and not a multitude of gods fighting among themselves, why is the world not perfect? Genesis famously talks about man's sin, eating the forbidden fruit, but even before that difficult story (a talking snake?), Genesis 2:15 gives us a very strong clue as to why our world is

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not as perfect as we would like it to be. “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and tend it.” The world is not perfect because it is man’s job, our job, to perfect the world. A truly worthy task for man. This brings us to the third revolutionary sentence in this week’s portion: Genesis, 6:1. “This is the record of Adam’s line – when God created man He made him in the likeness of God.” If all people are descended from Adam, and Adam was created in the likeness of God, then what follows is “All men are created equal, endowed by their creator with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” This line from the Declaration of Independence can only follow from the premise of monotheism. Polytheism would necessitate inequality, as the polytheistic gods themselves are not equal.

Modern science suggests that the six days of creation are not to be taken literally. But a look at the pictures taken by the Hubble telescope will show the wonders of God’s creations. We can literally see stars being born.

The great search in modern physics, from Einstein to today, has been for a unified theory, one theory that would account for the entire universe. Is this itself not a reflection of the monotheistic revolution of Genesis? One God, one fundamental law. The revolution of Genesis continues to change the world.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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