

Drasha Bereishit—Seeing the Good

Two years ago, I spent the summer working as a chaplain at NYU Medical Center in New York. During my summer there, I spent a lot of time with one particular family, the Rosenbaums. The patient, the matriarch of the family, was in quite delicate condition, and suffered from end-stage Alzheimer's combined with Parkinson's. She appeared to be nearing the end of her life. Mrs. Rosenbaum, a very *frum* Orthodox Jew from a Hasidic community in Brooklyn, had a large family, and her room was constantly filled with children and grandchildren there to visit and care for her. It was with these family members that I had my most memorable conversations.

After we talked, I would leave the room amazed by their continued sunny outlook. Even after she could no longer pass a swallow test, they would try to feed her soup brought from home, and remind her of the delicious food she once cooked for them. Even when it seemed that she could not understand what was being said to her, they would regale her with stories of their lives together, and offer promises of how things would be when she got better. I was moved by their struggle to come to terms with her prognosis. It would have been

so easy to be disheartened by her continued decline, but they seemed to hold onto a hope that she would regain her former self, that she would be healed. Her daughter-in-law, during one particularly candid conversation, explained that yes, they knew that she was terminally ill. She also told me stories about Mrs. Rosenbaum before all this, how she had raised seven children, taken in another who needed a loving home, and had taught them all to be *menschen*, about how she welcomed her children's husbands and wives into the family, and loved them like they were her own, about how she felt such *nahas*, such joy and pride, in her grandchildren and now great-grandchildren. She had done so much for so many people and they were only too happy to be able to return the favor, to care for her as she had for them.

The story of this family, of their struggle to cope with a far from perfect situation and still remain hopeful, is the story of our parasha today, of parashat Bereishit.

Parashat Bereishit begins with the wonder and the indescribable mystery of the creation of the world. We encounter stories that depict a pristine, idyllic time, when the world was new and all was, as it

seemed, perfect, full of potential. Everything was light, grandeur, and promise. At the culmination of this first week of Creation, God declares all that was made "טוב מאד", very good. This view of the brand new world is the one that holds firm in our imaginations. When we encounter natural wonders, we say a *berakhah*, עושה מעשה בראשית, Blessed are You God, who works the wonders of Creation.

This is, however, a rather narrow view of the world's beginnings. The world was preceded by תהו ובהו, an unformed void, and, once Creation was set in place, it seemed steadily to return to that chaotic place. Almost immediately after the creation of people, they strayed from God's path, ate of the tree, and found themselves expelled from Eden. The next generation witnessed the first murder, Cain killing Abel. The Torah then recounts the first 10 generations of human existence. While it tells us very little about that primordial time, the little we are told points only to decline. The birth of Noah in the 10th generation is interpreted as a good omen; his father Lemekh declares that he will provide relief from their arduous working of a land cursed by God. We learn of the *Nephilim*, the creatures born from the divine beings who left heaven's coupling with human women. Their very

name, *Nephilim*, hints at their decline—some suggest that it comes from the word *nafal*, meaning to fall. These 10 generations of falling come to a climax at the end of our Parasha, when God sees "כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ" that man's wickedness was great on earth, and how every plan devised by people was nothing but evil all the time. Quite a bleak view of the world that began with such promise. So bleak, in fact, that God regrets having created people at all. God is saddened, and wants to destroy the world.

How can it be that the world that was so degenerate that God sought to destroy it be the same world that held such promise and was called "very good?"

Our sages wondered the same thing, and their answer is that the world was always far from perfect. A midrash from Bereishit Rabbah teaches: אמר ר' סימון, Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy Blessed One was about to create the first people, the ministering angels separated into different groups. Some said, "Don't create people," and some said, "Create them." חסד, Compassion, said, "Create them, for they will be great doers of compassionate deeds." אמת, Truth, said, "Don't create them, for they will be full of lies." צדק, Righteousness, said, "Create

them, for they will further the cause of righteousness.” שלום, Peace, said, “Don’t create them, for they are war mongers.” God considered all of the angels’ advice, took Truth, and cast it to the ground. Despite the angels’ protests that Truth is God’s signet, God refused to reinstate Truth, and instead created the first people.

God chose to ignore the inevitable downside of humanity in order to bring people into the world. God’s faith in humankind’s potential for compassion and righteousness overcame the truth of our tendency toward dishonesty and discord. This fact, our midrash explains, is why the early stories of Creation focus only on the good. This was how God chose to see the beginning of the world.

Perhaps if God had listened more to Peace, and Truth, we would never have been created. So we must be grateful for God’s deliberate singlemindedness. On the other hand, it may have been God’s unmitigated faith in Hesed and Tzedek that left God unprepared for the actuality of human civilization, leading God to reach the devastating conclusion we encounter at the end of our Parasha.

Like God, we find it easy to see the decline in humankind’s humanity. We are barraged daily by reports of this from all over the

world. The genocide in Darfur continues unabated, with the Sudanese Government continuing to refuse UN intervention. Just in recent days we have witnessed a terrifying nuclear test from North Korea as well as continued sectarian bombings in Iraq. Like God, we struggle to recall the hope and promise that the world still holds in the face of such violence.

Looking at both ends of our Parasha, it's hard to know which worldview to adopt. Were we to turn to the end of Bereishit, and focus only on the events that horrify us, we would be paralyzed by our despondency. However, knowing that such things exist, seeing only the beauty and light of the first words of Bereishit is impossible.

There is, thankfully, another way. We recall that Noah's birth, constituting the 10th generation since the creation of people, was seen as heralding a sense of respite. His father named him נח, explaining that he would provide relief from the hard work they had known in the past, playing off of the Hebrew, "זה ינחמנו". נח—ינחמנו. While Noah's name and the word ינחמנו do not actually share a root, the commonality of sound builds the meaning of comfort into Noah's name, which

literally comes from the word for “rest.” Noah’s birth is thus the ray of hope for peace in the midst of the chaos of this 10th generation.

And it is with Noah that our Parasha ends. God makes the horrifying decision to destroy the world and all its creatures. But, נח מצא חן בעיני ה', Noah found favor with Adonai. Again, we hear his name in its characteristics. He found favor, חן, grace, with God. This word, חן, ח-ן, is an anagram for Noah’s name—ח-נ-ח. In a world full of, of chaos and degeneration, this man of rest, comfort and grace sticks out. While he cannot erase the violence that marked his period in humanity’s development, he is not overshadowed by it either.

Noah is our reminder that God’s outlook of hope and anticipation from the beginning of Creation had not been totally destroyed. The Rosenbaum family took that lesson to heart. They knew that their mother’s illness was severe, and that her condition was irreversible. But they took great joy in being with her, in caring for her, even as she continued to decline. They found their moments of נח, of rest, of נחמה, of comfort, and of חן, of grace in the tragedy that was unfolding before them.

The lens through which they were viewing the world was one of love. Even as Mrs. Rosenbaum's illness progressed, their love for her helped them to see through her decline. In much the same way, the lens through which God viewed humankind was hesed, compassion. Even as the world became a violent and terrifying place, God's faith in hesed still remained intact, so much so that God was able to notice the hope that was Noah.

May their examples of faithfulness to love and compassion sustain us as we begin again the story of our people. And may these lessons strengthen us as we face the blessings and challenges we will inevitably encounter in our own lives.