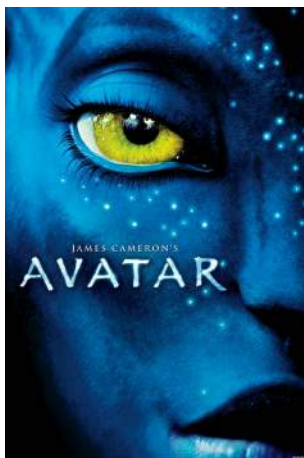


A Modern Creation Theology

It's been a busy month. Almost every day for the last month has been either a holiday or the day before or after one. We celebrated the new year with loud blasts, we fasted, we built and dwelled in our *sukkot* – our huts, and we danced with the *Sifrei Torah* on Monday and Tuesday – celebrating the completion of the annual cycle of reading them. It was awesome and somewhat exhausting.



I did steal away a few hours with my middle child to watch a movie on Saturday night. And we found a great one I had missed a few years ago: James Cameron's "Avatar." We got out our handy 3D glasses and were surrounded by the sounds and sights of this cinematic feast. Now, many of you may have seen this blockbuster when it came out, but for those of you who missed it, here is a brief overview:

"On the lush alien world of Pandora live the Na'vi, beings who appear primitive but are highly evolved. Because the planet's environment is poisonous, human/Na'vi hybrids, called Avatars, must link to human minds to allow for free movement on Pandora. Jake Sully, a

paralyzed former Marine, becomes mobile again through one such Avatar and falls in love with a Na'vi woman. As his bond with her grows, he is drawn into a battle for the survival of her world.”



And there are spiritual themes. The movie reminds us that we and the universe are fundamentally one. Everything is interconnected. On Pandora, there are trees that have synapses like the ones in our brains so that they can communicate and change at light



speed. But the truth is, Cameron’s fictitious world is not that foreign from

our world. Nature is magical and incredible – we merely have to open our eyes to it.

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The idea that creation is wonderous is found throughout our tradition. The rabbis write a beautiful Midrash about the burning

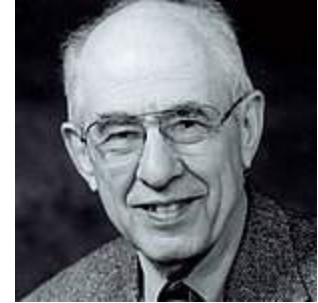


bush, claiming that others before Moshe walked by this phenomenon, but only he was perceptive enough to see something unique was occurring. And he stopped and noticed it.

This morning's *parashah*, *Bereisheet*, contains not one, but two, creation narratives that pull us into the wonders of the cosmos. We have the seven-day version where God focuses on different aspects of the universe each day culminating in Shabbat and we have the more human-focused story where a primordial human being is split into two. Creation is highlighted in our regular liturgical practice as well. Last night at Kiddush, we recited "*Zikaron L'ma'aseh vereisheet* – a remembrance of the act of creation." Our rituals on Shabbat not only provide for tranquility and

the cessation of work, but also remind us that within rest, we have the renewal that originated at the dawn of time.

Franz Rosenzweig, the great 20th century Jewish philosopher, taught that there are three fundamental Jewish theological notions: creation, revelation, and redemption – God’s genesis of our world, the teaching of God’s will in the Torah punctuated by Sinai, and the perfecting of the world, modeled by the Exodus itself.



These three themes weave their way into our prayers and our rituals and even our lifecycle ceremonies. Sometimes, there are two or even all three of them present.

That said, the most commonly utilized rubrics are revelation and redemption. Time and time again, we are asked to go back to Egypt and experience the exodus and we are called back to Sinai – the emblematic moment of the connection between God and the Jewish people. The core moment of God’s sharing divine truths that form the core of our Torah.

Having revelation and the exodus/redemption as the dominant tropes has been helpful to us at times – it has given Jews a strong mission (the

mitzvot) and the focus on learning and study of Torah, but it has also come at the expense of the third trope: creation.

It's time to focus on creation. My teacher, Rabbi Arthur Green, has been on a campaign to re-prioritize creation within Judaism; I agree with him that we should delve into this more inclusive theological notion within our tradition.



Look at nature and how incredible it is. This is not something supernatural – but, as Rabbi Green calls it, the *nes she'ba-teva* –

the miraculous within nature. The more we look at the universe – from the



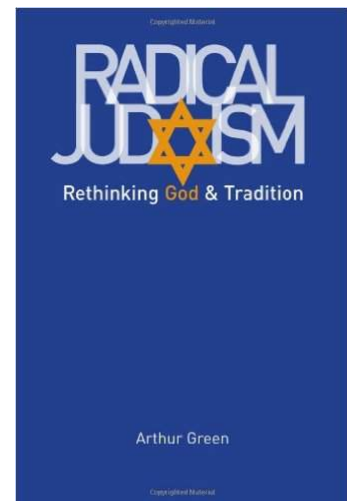
smallest subatomic particle to the largest galaxies, we may feel that we are uncovering aspects of the Holy One. Science and our creation narrative are not competing, but partners in

uncovering deep truths. Darwin explains how species evolved into existence, but our Torah begs us to look at the enchanting poetry of the

Universe, to see the miraculous within its structure. What does God say over and over again in the creation narrative? God declares that the world is *tov* – good – and sometimes, that it is very good – *tov me'od*. When does God finally say that something is not good? When God teaches that it is not good for a person to be alone – *lo tov he-yot ha'adam levado!*

The Torah is teaching us about what it means to be a human being in this world and that God loves us.

Rabbi Green delves into creation in the most magnificent manner in his book: *Radical Judaism*. He writes:



“Here on this smallish planet in the middle of an otherwise undistinguished galaxy, something so astonishing has taken place that it indeed demands to be called by the biblical term “miracle,” rather than by the Greco-Latin “nature,” even though the two are pointing to the exact same set of facts. The descendants of one-celled creatures grew and developed, emerged onto dry land, learned survival skills, developed language and thought, until a

subset of them could reflect on the nature of this entire process and seek to derive meaning from it.

“The coming to be of “higher” or more complex forms of life, and eventually of humanity, is not brought about by the specific and conscious planning of what is sometimes called ‘intelligent design.’

But neither is it random and therefore inherently without meaning. It is rather the result of an inbuilt movement within the whole of being, the underlying dynamic of existence striving to be manifest ever more fully in minds that it brings forth and inhabits, through the emergence of increasingly complex and reflective selves. I think of that underlying One in immanent terms, a Being or life force that dwells within the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is ‘other’ and separate from its own Self. This One — the only One that truly is — lies within and behind all the diverse forms of being that have existed since the beginning of time; it is the single Being (as the Hebrew name Y-H-W-H indicates) clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all.

“If we could learn to view our biohistory this way, the incredible grandeur of the evolutionary journey would immediately unfold before us.” (*Radical Judaism*, pages 20-21)

Rabbi Green offers us and our tradition a new way of looking at creation. We should think about how it can inform our thinking and our behavior.

How?

First, we will need to write new *midrashim*, new narratives, a new Jewish focus on creation as a dominant paradigm. That is what Rabbi Green is doing in the selection that I just shared. But we will need more – each of us should reflect on what creation means and can mean in our lives. This should leave us with new syntheses of science and religion that reflect our understandings of the world today and our values.

Second, given that our planet could be doing much better environmentally speaking, we should hone in on the *mitzvot* that reflect this concern. Our tradition has spoken



about protecting the environment and not wasting our precious resources. Heeding that is long overdue. The *mitzvot* that relate to our responsibility to the planet should be highlighted. In fact, our Torah reading narrates how God wants us to fill the earth and “*V’khivshu’ha* – master it.” Mastery includes that we must be responsible for it – something we have not been doing very well. That was a big part of Cameron’s “Avatar;” the situation has only deteriorated since the film’s release.



Finally, we need to express our new understandings in ritual – for embedding our values in ritual is the secret of our success as a people. What should we add to our existing nature rituals like Sukkot that connects us the fragility of the natural world?

[Rabbi Green suggests using the existing concept of *Ma'amadot*](#) or cadres of people that some of us studied this last year in our Mishnah class. This concept goes back to the rabbinic understanding of the priestly functions in the period when the Temple was the locus of Jewish worship. There were more priests than were needed to serve in the Temple at any given time. To make things run smoothly, the *Kohanim* were divided into rotating groups, each of which officiated in the sacrificial service for a week at a time. The *Ma'amadot*, which literally means, 'standing up with or for,' were the groups of Jews who came to the Temple with their local *Kohanim*. The accompanying laypersons would "stand up" with them. But, instead of performing the sacrifices, they would recite a sacred text.

What text? The creation of the universe. Why? Because our rabbis were teaching us that the sacrificial service was fundamental to the existence of the universe.

Rabbi Green suggests that in our time we recite a part of the creation narrative each day. So, Sunday is the first day – we read of the creation of light and darkness. Monday, the second day, the formation of water and so on. And now, not only should we read the text, but we should contemplate and act to improve that aspect of creation. So, on Sunday when we think

about light – we can consider how to conserve energy and power and electricity and heat. On Monday, when we read about water, we can think about and act on water preservation. Et cetera, et cetera.

Each day we can actually work on improving the environment, while reviewing this central text. And we can contemplate the mystery at the center of existence and all creation.



While this suggestion may not be as eye-popping as “Avatar,” it could become even more significant by changing the way we see and experience the world. In fact, I am going to try it myself! I will let you know how it goes!