

Undoing Domination

While our *parashah* opens with the grandeur of the creation of the universe, the spotlight hones in on one particular aspect of creation: humanity. Having been formed last, we stand at the pinnacle of all existence and only humans are given any directions about how we are to live.

Our Torah states: “*Va’yivareikh otem Elohim va’yomeir lahem Elohim: ‘pru u’r’vu v’milu et-ha’aretz v’khivshuha...*’ – God blessed them and God said unto them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.’” (Gen 1:28)

I have read this verse countless times and understood it that we are supposed to have children, if we can, and that we stand above all other life forms.



That always seemed like common sense. We have the most evolved brains and, whether one believes in the Torah's account or the scientific, evolutionary perspective or, as I prefer, a synthesis of the two, this was not a dangerous proposition.

It was just obvious.

But there is something that is problematic here; in fact, quite problematic.

You can see it in the Old JPS translation of the text that states: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and **subdue** it; and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth."

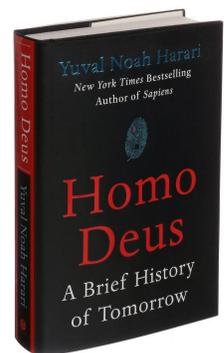
Subdue – *kvivshu'ha* – capture it, take it.

Dominion – *r'du* – dominate it.

Living in the 13th century in Spain, Ramban, *Nahmanides*, comments that human beings can do what they wish with the animals and the earth, "to carve precious metals out of the mountains, and everything else that follows from this."

Subdue, capture, dominate, do with it what we wish....

As Noah Harari explains in his book *Homo Deus*, following the Agricultural Revolution, the Bible places human beings in position to rule over all other life and this has led to many challenging behaviors including our willful neglect and even destruction of the natural world and abuse of animals.



If this was not bad enough, if we look at Rashi's comment on these same verbs: he points that the word '*khivshu'ha*' is feminine, referring to the

woman – that the man should master her, as he writes: “the male dominates the female.”

While we can understand Rashi’s comment as a product of the world he inhabited in 11th century France, we can also see how this has reinforced a terrible behavior pattern – one which is a part of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam among others. Two chapters later, the Torah states that husbands will rule over wives and in the New Testament, we find the statement: “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands.” (Colossians 3:18)

This pattern of domination by men, treating women in terrible ways, has been passed down through the generations and we find ourselves still reeling from it. While we may have advanced in certain respects, this notion of dominion is still very much with us.

We see it in the behavior of men in a variety of ways.

We see it in sexual abuse, which has been brought to the fore through the #MeToo movement.

We saw it last week in Senate hearings for the Supreme Court vacancy and we see it in the words of our leaders.



I have to say that I am sickened by this behavior, the sense of traditional male privilege and entitlement. We are witnessing crass and inappropriate behavior in response to [the fear of losing this privilege](#).

Never in my wildest nightmares could I have imagined the president of the United States would make fun of a woman who spoke out against the violence she experienced.

That such leaders are in office and can appoint judges whose behavior is suspect and whose temperament is so poor make it a sad day for our democracy.

Many of you have shared with me the pain you are experiencing.

Many people have shared how triggering these days have been for their own experiences of abuse and this has led to deep pain, fear, anger and anxiety.

My heart goes out to all who have experienced this and other forms of abuse. Know that we, as a community, stand with you – with those who are victims, and not with those who subdue others.

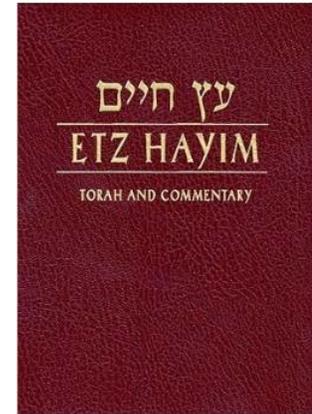
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So, are we left with a tradition that seems so out-of-line with our values or is there another understanding?

Fortunately, there is.

The first idea I wish to share is critical. While the roots of our tradition are in the Torah, we are not “biblical Jews.” We do not follow every word of the Torah. Ours is a living tradition, one that evolves in each generation to adapt and change in response to new ideas, situations, and understandings.

While the Torah states that we should stone a stubborn and rebellious thirteen-year-old son, we do not, nor do we practice animal sacrifice. Over thousands of years, our civilization has grown and developed – thankfully. While we are anchored to our texts, each generation writes its own new commentaries that allow this to truly be a living tree, an *Etz Hayim* – as our *humash*, as our edition of the Torah is called and as we just sang as we returned the Torah to the ark.

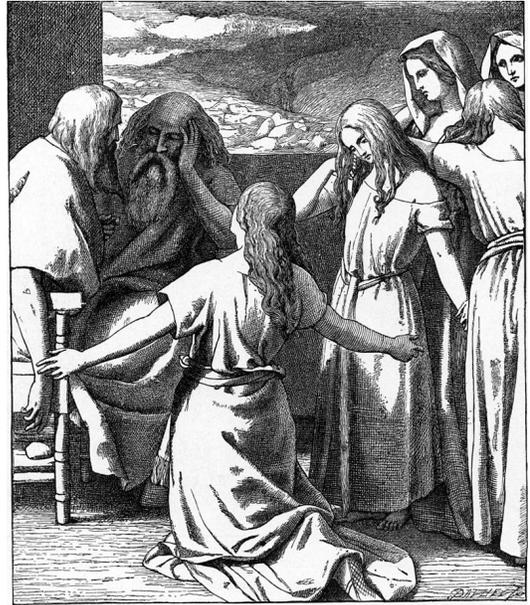


The second idea is that our tradition already in its earliest phases presents multiple perspectives on these notions. In the verse before we are told to master and rule over the earth, the text states that human beings are created in a fundamentally egalitarian manner: *zakhar u'nekeivah bara otam* – God created them male and female – neither better or superior to the other.

As the rabbis in the Midrash state and Rashi cites, both male and female were created since the first human contained both genders until this being was split, the rabbis translating the word *rib* as side. Two sides, two genders to the first person – neither above the other, neither before the other.

While Judaism contains texts that promote a more egalitarian world-view and sometimes a less egalitarian worldview, when we look at the full swath of the tradition and see how our texts elevate women's place in our society, we can appreciate the move towards equality.

Whether it is inheriting land as the daughters of *Tzlofhad* demand and receive in the Torah or the notion of giving a woman a *Ketubah*, monetary protection in the event of divorce or the death of the husband, ours is a tradition that often advanced women's status and rights, especially when understood in the context of its world and times.



Third and most powerfully, the Torah itself presents a countervailing command to domination. In the second chapter of Genesis, we are offered a second creation narrative.

In this narrative, the first human being is placed in the Garden of Eden “*l’ovdah v’l’shomrah* – to till and to tend it.” (Gen. 2:15)

Here, we find a very different direction – we are not told to dominate something, but to care for it. It is not about using our power over something so that we can do with it what we wish, but that we have a unique ability to protect the earth, its animals, its plants, and all that it contains.

The word the text uses is *shamor* – to watch over, guard, protect and nurture. Instead of seeing the animals, the land, and even women as objects and seeing them all as things that benefit men, we can view everything and everyone as filled with value. Not better or worse than men. Instead of objectifying women, we should see them as equals.

Instead of seeing how we can rule over others, we should approach others with *hesed* – with a fundamentally kind, gentle and loving approach which is made explicit in Leviticus which challenges us to love others as we love ourselves.

The great Jewish philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Buber, taught that we should move our relationships from I-It to I-Thou. Buber teaches us that we should not treat others as mere objects, seeing them through a lens of how they can be of benefit to us, what can they do for me.

Instead we should see them as laden with value – as unique creations. Every individual is created in the image of the Divine, as this *parashah* also teaches, and thus, we learn that each person is of infinite value, of ultimate worth.

That is how we should approach every human being. As we are instructed to care for the entire planet, so should we treat every human being with respect and kindness.

We should feel empowered to move this world, our country, our political leadership from domination to caring. We have the power to change this trajectory, just as these verbs in chapter two of Genesis fundamentally offers a different vision from the command in chapter one.

Let us aspire to be people who live the tender, caring approach of chapter two, not that of domination. And let us be at the fore of spreading that vision into our world.

