

Parashat Vayera

Three weeks ago, when examining Parashat Bresheet, we observed the somewhat jarring gear change that occurs as chapter one moves into chapter two. Chapter one of Bresheet portrays God as a cosmic sovereign creating all things simply by the word of His mouth, and then standing from afar and pronouncing the moral judgement that what He had created was 'tov' - good. This God, a reflection of the ancient priestly perspective, is one that is beneficent but stays somewhat aloof. In chapter two however the picture changes. This chapter looks once again at God's act of creation but the picture presented in this portrait is fundamentally different. Here God does not order and stand off from afar but gets down in the dirt, on His metaphorical hands and knees, to mould the first man from clay with His metaphorical hands. Then, stooping down still further, deigns to provide the world's first mouth to mouth resuscitation, breathing the breath of life into the as yet inanimate Adam. Indeed, He cares so much for Adam's feelings that, sensing his loneliness, He creates first the animals and then a mate for Adam from his own side. Furthermore, in contrast to chapter 1, this God is presented as walking in His metaphorical body through the garden paradise seeking Adam's presence - almost as if *He* is the one that is lonely and in need of relationship.

And so there we have it! These first two chapters of Bresheet present two radically different perspectives on the creative act and on God's relationship with His creation. Indeed, to our modern minds this disparity of perspective is troubling. We could perhaps cope with differences in small details but the two perspectives presented here are at opposite ends of the theological spectrum - a fact that disturbs our mental, emotional and spiritual equilibrium. This is because, our perspective on truth as modern people, especially Scriptural truth, is that it should be absolute and singular. After all, don't we rightly turn to the Bible for THE answers and God and the universe when life leaves us floundering and flummoxed? And yet, as with Bresheet 1 and 2, the reality is that our texts are multivariate and often ambiguous. Instead of the definitive answers we crave, Scripture offers us more questions than we can easily handle. As writer Maggie Dugan has cogently stated, "The [modern] human mind is, for the most part, set on being in the know. We don't like being uncertain or confused, we seek answers and explanations, a pattern we can recognize to make sense of what's happening around us. In the face of an elusive solution, or a murky, messy problem, a lot of people are ill at ease. This discomfort has driven invention and innovation for centuries. The need to understand and clarify and find an answer has opened the door to all sorts of advancements, especially in science and technology. In the long term, it's served us well. In the short term, it can be a liability. It is exactly this drive to know absolutely that can get in the way of innovation. It makes us inclined to latch on to an answer too quickly rather than live in the uncertainty for a bit longer to see if a more suitable or interesting response is still at hand. Unknowingly, we trade possibility for certainty. But there's rarely anything novel about certainty." Dugan, who works in the field of science and technology writes further, "We see it happen in our workshops. About halfway through, the organizers get restless, the participants appear fatigued, frustrated. We should be further ahead by now, is what they're thinking, as they glance sharply at the facilitators. This, we remind ourselves, is the hurdle to cross - or to

Parashat Vayera

wait out, if you will. It is usually in this moment of feeling blocked or stalled that there's a fierce temptation to turn back, or to seize the nearest reasonable solution in order to make some progress. It might make us feel like we're advancing, but in truth, the best course of action in those patchy moments is to stay in the fog a little bit longer." Indeed this, I would suggest, is the best course of action to take when we are faced with the seeming illogicalities, ambiguities or differing perspectives of Scripture. After all, isn't our inclination when faced with the disparities of Bresheet 1 and 2, to feel frustrated and resort to seize the nearest and most familiar solution that offers certainty and singularity of thought? Rather than allowing the ambiguity and diversity of the texts to speak to us, challenge us and open us up to new possibilities of thought, we impose pre-existing doctrinal convictions on the text in order to relieve our cognitive dissonance. When it comes to Scripture, we too are apt to trade possibility for certainty, but in doing so, as in Dugan's field, we give up the possibility of new perspective and a fresher, deeper, more nuanced, perhaps even conflicted, understanding of God, our spirituality and the world that we live in. Indeed, that we should do so is hardly surprising in view of the attempts of the Church over many hundreds of years to create and then double down on theological certainties as determined by Church council after council. Messianic believers, many of whom were disciples in the Church, are certainly not immune from this inclination to eschew ambiguity and dance on a theological pinhead. But singularity of thought simply isn't and hasn't been the Jewish way. You know the old saying, two Jews, three opinions? Well, it isn't said for no reason.

Jews love debating and arguing! It is our way of life! In fact, the Talmud, which, outside of the Bible itself is Judaism's greatest literary and scholarly work, is, from one point of view, simply a presentation of rabbinical argument and multivariate perspectives. Anyone looking to the Talmud for the absolute truth will be frustrated and disappointed. Indeed, from this perspective the Scriptures themselves, with their own ambiguities and diverse perspectives might be properly termed 'proto-rabbinic.' Indeed I would suggest that the point of our journey through the Talmud or Scripture isn't that we arrive at finality and certainty of thought and doctrine, but the journey is the end in itself. In fact it is precisely the point of this journey to expose us to apparently endless questions, contrasting perspectives and ambiguities, so that, by being stretched and strained mentally, emotionally and spiritually, we are gradually expanded in our humanity over the course of our lifetimes. That is the essence of our Jewish approach to God and the Scriptures.

A young man in his mid-twenties knocks on the door of the noted scholar Rabbi Shwartz. "My name is Sean Goldstein," he says. "I've come to you because I wish to study Talmud."

"Do you know Aramaic?" the rabbi asks.

"No," replies the young man.

"Hebrew?" asks the Rabbi.

"No," replies the young man again.

"Have you studied Torah?" asks the Rabbi, growing a bit irritated.

"No, Rabbi. But don't worry. I graduated Berkeley summa cum laude in philosophy, and just finished my doctoral dissertation at Harvard on Socratic logic. So now, I would just like to round out my education with a little study of the Talmud."

Parashat Vayera

"I seriously doubt," the rabbi says, "that you are ready to study Talmud. It is the deepest book of our people. If you wish, however, I am willing to examine you in logic, and if you pass that test I will teach you Talmud."

The young man agrees.

Rabbi Shwartz holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

The young man stares at the rabbi. "Is that the test in logic?"

The rabbi nods.

"The one with the dirty face washes his face," he answers wearily.

"Wrong. The one with the clean face washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face."

"Very clever," Goldstein says. "Give me another test."

The rabbi again holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"We have already established that. The one with the clean face washes his face."

"Wrong. Each one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face. When the one with the dirty face sees the one with the clean face wash his face, he also washes his face. So each one washes his face."

"I didn't think of that," says Goldstein. It's shocking to me that I could make an error in logic. Test me again."

The rabbi holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"Each one washes his face."

"Wrong. Neither one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. But when the one with the clean face sees the one with the dirty face doesn't wash his face, he also doesn't wash his face. So neither one washes his face."

Goldstein is desperate. "I am qualified to study Talmud. Please give me one more test."

He groans, though, when the rabbi lifts two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"Neither one washes his face."

"Wrong. Do you now see, Sean, why Socratic logic is an insufficient basis for studying Talmud? Tell me, how is it possible for two men to come down the same chimney, and for one to come out with a clean face and the other with a dirty face? Don't you see? The whole

Parashat Vayera

question is "narishkeit", foolishness, and if you spend your whole life trying to answer foolish questions, all your answers will be foolish, too."

If you can sense the point of this little story then you might just be ready to engage on a deeper level with the challenges inherent to this week's portion. This begins with God appearing "to Avraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the entrance to the tent during the heat of the day." What follows is the famous narrative in which God tells Avraham of His plans to investigate the rumours He has heard concerning the people of S'dom and 'Amora. "Adonai said, 'The outcry against S'dom and 'Amora is so great and their sin is so serious that I will now go down and see whether their deeds warrant the outcry that has reached me; if not, I will know.'" Of course, it goes without saying, that this statement in itself beggars profound theological questions. After all, why does the God whom we are told elsewhere knows everything, including the content of each person's heart and mind, need to confirm the 'reports' that had reached Him? Indeed, I am reminded in this respect of God's searching for Adam in the Garden and asking 'where are you?' A curious question when God is supposed to know everything, don't you think?! Indeed, does the omniscient God have or need 'spies' to report to him about what happens on the earth? And if God is omniscient why did He need to personally check the veracity of the reports about S'dom that had reached Him? So many questions already! Then the narrative proceeds with Avraham taking God to task for being willing to destroy innocent lives with that of wicked ones. "Will you actually sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

Maybe there are fifty righteous people in the city; will you actually sweep the place away, and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty righteous who are there? Far be it from you to do such a thing - to kill the righteous along with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike! Far be it from you! Shouldn't the judge of all the earth do what is just?" Here then we witness Avraham taking up the cause of justice, arguing that it is not acceptable, even for God, to disregard the lives of innocent people or consider them 'collateral damage' in His pursuit of evil. Justice, Avraham reminds God, requires that the lives and well-being of the innocent be preserved and protected even if that means letting a whole city of evil people evade judgement! This is still a pertinent issue today. The question of the acceptability of any so-called 'collateral damage' in pursuit of evil is one that those in charge over us must constantly weigh up. Was the loss of millions of innocents lives acceptable in view of the goal of ridding the world of the evils of Saddam Hussein? And what about our justice system? For hundreds of years the death penalty was carried out in this country regardless of the reality that many innocent people, wrongly convicted, were also sent to their deaths. Such collateral damage was considered acceptable given that the goal of capital punishment was to protect society from wicked people. And yet, as the English Jurist William Blackstone famously wrote in 1760, "It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer." Blackstone's opinion, which finally prevailed in 1965 when the UK abolished the death penalty, is fundamentally rooted in Avraham's bold challenge to God in our portion. Avraham not only emerges from this episode with almost universal praise but after it he becomes synonymous with the pursuit of justice itself. And yet, as we read later in our portion, when God tells Avraham to put his *own* innocent son to death he raises not a single word of protest! To the

Parashat Vayera

contrary, it appears from the text that Avraham has no qualms about killing his innocent son; nor for the pain and suffering that this act would inflict on him; nor does he have any doubts regarding the theologically abhorrent idea of human sacrifice.

Indeed, the fact that many believers today revel in the destruction of the evil Sodomites (whom we believe got what was coming to them) while at the same time praising Avraham for his dutiful obedience to God in being willing to sacrifice his innocent son, suggests to me that it is *our own* values and interpretative framework that should be questioned. Should Avraham be praised for turning a blind eye to the murder of his own innocent son? Should we praise him for obedience to what appears to be an inhumane command? Indeed, what do we think of a God who could suggest such a thing - even *if* it was only intended as a test or ironic divine jest - as if the Lord said to Avraham "I was only kidding!"

The unavoidable fact is that story of the akeidah is morally troublesome, especially when set against the preceding narrative in which Avraham plead for the lives of S'dom's innocents. As such it demands critical thought and deep reflection. Our instinct, however, is to attempt, by means of exegetical and mental gymnastics, to harmonise these contrasting and troubling views of Avraham and God and dismiss our disquieting questions by falling back on preassumed theological certainties. We don't like ambiguity so seek singularity of interpretation and theology. But this response, however understandable, doesn't do proper justice to the intentions of or take seriously the multivariate nature of the Scriptural texts themselves. Rather than this perhaps we should follow the advice of the aforementioned writer, Maggie Duran, who advises that we endeavour to condition ourselves so as to be more tolerant of ambiguity. "This," she says "is when we need tolerance for ambiguity. It means staying in uncertainty, or staying with the question, despite the discomfort of not knowing the answer, or not knowing where we're headed. It requires relinquishing control - even though a solution isn't always guaranteed - to make room for new and emerging connections to crystalize into a clear direction. It also means accepting the fact that there might be numerous ways of answering the same question, each with different but potentially positive results. It makes sense that if you can stand to hover in the gray areas between black and white distinction, you might get to a more creative outcome. But how do you cultivate this tolerance for ambiguity? Stay neutral and suspend judgment. Delay, as long as you can, the expression of an opinion, positive or negative, about the topic of discussion or exploration. Don't get distracted by the process either. Take it all in as interesting data. Stay curious. Seek to understand the things that would otherwise induce a judgment. Avoid assumptions, and try to take on an openminded, curious stance about what's happening around you. Ask questions that start with "why" and say things like, "Tell me more about that." Enjoy the mess. The creative process is rarely neat and tidy. Consider this an opportunity that allows you to be messy. The whole world is constantly demanding that you put things in order, give yourself permission to let them stay out of order, in service to a possibly more innovative outcome. Take time. The world that's asking for order is demanding speed as well. Slow things down and take your time to look at things for longer, to ask more questions that you'd normally permit yourself, to generate more ideas and options before selecting among them. Try things on. Play with questions and ideas and concepts, try them

Parashat Vayera

on for size. Follow threads of thought, pretend something might work and see where it takes you. Live, temporarily, with possible options to see if they are useful or not. It's easy to get frustrated by the lack of clarity and certainty, or annoyed by too many questions and not enough answers. In fact, that's what usually happens when you're right on the threshold of a breakthrough. It sounds clichéd and maybe it is, but this is when you have to trust the process. Our experience is that if you can cultivate the capacity for ambiguity tolerance, and you don't try to shortcut the creative process, it will produce novel insights and distinct opportunities for innovation."

I hope you will agree with me that this approach, is likely to bring more fruit to our lives as we study our Bibles and think about the nature of God than the pursuit of certainty and singularity of thought.