

פרשת בראשית

OVERVIEW

"At the beginning G-d created heaven and earth. The six days of creation, the Sabbath, the creation of first man and woman, their offense in the paradise, their punishment – these are the main themes of the first chapter of the "Book of Books". Abel's murder and the punitive measures meted out against his brother are followed by the genealogy of the generations from Adam to Noah.

COMMENTARY

The Account of the Creation

The reaffirmation of the creation out of nothingness (יש מאין – ex nihilo) and the fundamental truth of G-d's supreme rule over nature and man form the introduction to the holy scriptures. Nothing preceded G-d's creation; heaven and earth came into existence solely by the creation of G-d. This is the proclamation of the opening text. It does not reveal to us the secrets of the forces that formed matter and life itself. But it does emphatically rule out the contrary belief that matter always existed and that G-d's was merely a formative function that could only make the best possible out of that material but not the absolute best universe. Every moral and physical imperfection would implicitly be ascribed to the defectiveness of matter and the constraint imposed upon the Creator.

Creation ex nihilo means the completely free, all-mighty creative Will of G-d from which emanate the laws of nature, all material, all forms, everything existing. Consequently men cannot seek refuge in the hypothesis of the so-called "original sin". Notwithstanding all his moral imperfections he has the ability, nay the responsibility to reach towards the highest degree of moral perfection set before him by his Creator.

Creation and Israel

Genesis not only tells the story of the world's origin but it also contains the introduction to the history of mankind and in particular that of Israel. Not in vain did Israel elevate the Sabbath, the monument in remembrance of the creation, to the lofty height of a national institution. Israel's existence, exclusively G-d's creation, by its very structure defies any historical and scientific experience. Fittingly, our sages call Israel "reshit", first-born, and compares it with the birth of the world with is called "reshit". The word contains the root "rosh", head, referring to Him, the supreme being, Creator of the Universe.

The Creation of Man

"And G-d created man in his image, in His image did He create him" 1:27). This traditional translation does not reflect the correct meaning of the phrase. While the term "tselem" denotes the identical reflection of a shape or work of art, here it conveys the idea, repeated again and again, that the physical form of man is worthy of G-d and of his own Divinely-ordained calling.

The Installation of the Sabbath

The six days of creation are completed. Nature, the mighty rhythm of the universal mechanism, now takes the place of the succession of individual creations. The Master rules invisibly. The overwhelming grandeur of nature's eternal laws threatens to diminish G-d's rule in the minds of men. Hence the folly of pantheism, the colossal error of positivism. It points up the necessity of preserving a living memory of the original creation in the midst of nature's awesome fullness. The six days themselves did not need a Sabbath, for G-d's presence was steady and visible. At their conclusion, with the creation's immutable boundaries

and laws in place, it was the as Sabbath which was to preserve in the memory of mankind, that of which Adam, at least partially, was the sole witness.

The first Misstep

The first chapter contains the introduction, even a commentary to the history of mankind. What is the major challenge that every person, sooner or later, must confront as the central motif of his calling? It is doubtless the moral obligation to opt for the good - and to shun evil - out of his own free will and sense of duty. Judaism defines the chief task of man - endowed by the full scale of intellectual qualities - as the free and unconditional adherence to the principle of good, not in response to an inner urge but in obedience to the Divine Law governing human relationships. Listening to one's "voice of conscience" does not necessarily lead to the practice of good. The concept of good as the product of human thought can never match the Divine blueprint for the good. Without it all moral endeavors would be ambiguous and equivocal.

At once, First Man is confronted by this challenge. It is the prohibition of eating the fruit of the tree, of not following his normal desire to taste the delights of the fruit but solely in compliance with the divine instruction. For the first time man is called upon to prove that he is capable of surpassing the level of the animal which is not equipped to exercise self-discipline. The serpent's enticement is simple, direct: do eat the fruit for it is sweet and good. Animals cannot be accused of going astray; their natural instincts dictate their action. Will man, endowed with a free sense of duty, be able to meet the challenge? Will man, at this decisive moment, respond to animalistic and instinctive appetite with a firm, free-willed No? That is the question arid the challenge, yet this act of disobedience by Adam and Eve, however grave, was not a moral lapse

which would cause an irrevocable rejection "before G-d's countenance".

The punishment

Jewish thinking interprets the concept of punishment only in conjunction with improvement and rehabilitation. The punishment is to induce the guilty person to abandon his sinful ways and to regain his moral equilibrium. Let us investigate the meaning and purpose of the punitive measure in the history of mankind as recounted in our Sidrah.

"And he spoke to Adam... the ground shall be cursed because of you... by the sweat of your countenance shall you eat bread until you return to the ground". The struggle for a livelihood following the comfortable existence in the Gan Eden is designed to alert man to the necessity of making a concerted effort in order to achieve his true calling. This thought is accentuated by a barely noticeable but highly significant nuance in our text. "The ground shall be cursed "for you", literally "for your sake". The struggle for a livelihood teaches man the intrinsic value of work. The philosophy of "dolce vita" will sooner or later be revealed as a fallacy. Matured by the experience of privation and tribulation, man acquires a deeper understanding of good and evil than he would have gained through a prolonged existence in the idealized condition of "Gan Eden".

"And to the woman He said: I will increase your pains and with suffering will you bear children". Every mother experiences a unique loving relationship with her child through whom she attains her true vocation. The child transforms the mother into a mature woman endowed with a special insight that turns her into the ideal companion for her husband. During the long months of pregnancy leading to the painful process of birth, she becomes aware of a truth which our foremother Eve failed to

grasp: that good can be obtained only by abandoning the perpetual search for personal gain and advantage. The struggle for true happiness cannot be won without conquest of man's own morally reprehensible inclination.

In summarizing we find no actual curse in the episode. No divine judgment condemns man to an existence that would make it impossible for him to achieve perfection. On the contrary: the teachings gained from a new perspective will enable man to delve even deeper into the meaning of life. The language of the serpent will no longer have an effect on his moral commitment.

It need not be emphasized how detrimentally opposed Judaism is to the dogma of "original sin" which spells final and irrevocable damnation. The capacity for redemption rests in man himself. Messianic hope represents the certainty that the long struggles for the good, on the individual as well as national level, will ultimately be crowned with the fruit of success.

The Proclamation of G-d

Visible to all, mankind rapidly approaches the terrifying end during the lifetime of Noah. Kain's vicious deed and

the suffering's impact on mankind undoubtedly contribute to a quick disintegration. And yet, in the midst of a steadily deteriorating situation, there radiates the powerful beacon of the verse: "It was then that man began first to proclaim in the Name of G-d".

It is a call for help, a final attempt to curtail the growing proliferation of evil. In these words our sages find the first hints of Israel true mission: to hold aloft the flame of the Divine Name in the midst of a materialistic and corrupted mankind. We begin to realize how the history of mankind's first days illustrates the significance of Israel's role. We repeat: The Torah is not a general history textbook. In recounting the history of Israel a singular truth emerges: we must stand at the summit of the human pyramid in order to proclaim that His Name is beyond compare, for He is beyond human comprehension.

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