



Shabbat Table Talk

Parashat Bereshit—Erev Shabbat, 05 October 2007

Week of 30 September to 06 October

Torah portion: Gen.1:1-6:4 *Haftarah:* Isa. 42:5-43:11

Sunday Readings, 07 October: Hab. 1:2-3, 2:2-4; II Tim.1:6-8,13-14; Lk. 17:5-10

A new idea has extraordinary power. It can be embraced, rejected, or ignored, but what one cannot do is ‘unthink’ it. So says creative thinker Edward De Bono, and so ‘says’ the first creation account in the opening chapters of *Parashat Bereshit* (Gen. 1:1-2:4). For what do we find here but the quintessential innovative idea, uttered as God’s creative word, that brings into being the universe and sets it upon its dramatic course of cosmic productivity. Human beings can embrace it, reject it, or (try to) ignore it, but what they cannot do is ‘uncreate’ it! We are enmeshed in a history set in motion by God who is intimately involved in, yet utterly free of, the world and ridiculously optimistic in our regard. What better way to begin anew the cycle of Torah reflection than to reflect upon this radical innovation and optimism that grounds our very being?

There is the challenge of over-familiarity with this text. We have heard the creation story so often, from childhood bible stories to parish Easter vigils. But the invitation is to listen again and, more than listen, to speak it out loud and hear it from each other’s lips. What did I (and my *havrutah* partner) hear? More to the point, what do *you* (and your *havrutah* partner) hear? With the help of Fox (ix-xiii), what we heard, as never before, was the text’s methodical rhythm. Fox points out that the closer one gets to the Hebrew text and the sensuality of the Hebrew language, the more obvious this is. But even in the NRSV, if we read slowly and deliberately, the rhythmic structure can be appreciated, and even more so in Fox’s translation where the sentences are placed like this:

God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
God saw the light: that it was good.
God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called: Night!

What is interesting here? Certainly the repetition of ‘God-plus-verb’. But what is strange about it? The austere language and plodding sound-pattern makes it all seem so orderly, effortless. God says, God sees, God separates, God calls... and it is so! Surely the creation of the world cannot be that easy! But here lies the power of the text’s structure to communicate its central message. God is portrayed as being totally in control of, and at peace with, the creative process. There is gradual ascent, but no urgency; nothing is forced. God gets there, when God is ready (Fox, 10; Plaut, 19).

Yet there is a paradox. There is methodical rhythm and sense of careful order, yes. But on the other hand, as our *parashah* unfolds, it bursts at the seams with imagery that is *anything but* calm and restrained: unwieldy growth spurts, lifegiving abundance, joyful abandon. As a wind (*ruah*) from God sweeps over the waters, a dark, formless void comes to life. Subtle repetitions underscore the fertility of the emerging scene; for example: “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed... fruit trees of every kind....that bear fruit with the seed in it” (v.11). Then again, waters bring forth not just living creatures but “swarms” of them (v. 20). The earth itself is created to [re]create, to bring forth, having been brought forth. Plurality and diversity are inscribed in the act of creation, as indicated by the repeated phrase (nine times) ‘of every kind’. Wild animals, sea monsters, and all those ‘creepy-crawly’ things (I wonder why that term “creep/creeping” is mentioned five times) find a home in water or soil. On Day Five, living creatures are judged to be ‘good’, blessed, and commanded to reproduce. On the sixth day, human beings are created, elevated, blessed, entrusted with responsibility, called ‘exceedingly good’ and told to reproduce. (Isn’t it fascinating that God’s first command to the human race is to go and have sex!)

And as if that isn't enough, behind the creation story Jewish tradition abounds with even more creation stories. In brief, one of them goes like this: God consults with Torah before creating the world. When Torah expresses her skepticism as to whether the world can survive human sinfulness, God assures her that that human goodness will indeed prevail. After all, God has already created repentance... (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*). God is not only creative, but decisive and optimistic in the act of creating!

Then, in the final verse of our *parashah*, we hear: "These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth: their being created" (Gen. 2:4). Literally, *toledot* means 'generations' or 'births'. Some translations render it 'story'; Plaut, 'chronicles'. NRSV uses 'generations', and Fox's translation is 'begettings'. Genesis will continue to unfold with generational stories—stories of sexual unions, pregnancies and births... longed-for ones, difficult ones, successful ones. But the overarching theme of generational fecundity and continuity starts right here 'at the beginning' (Gen.1:1). It sets the tone for the entire story of Israel.

The God of Israel is the One who brings forth LIFE. We hear it also in this week's *haftarah*. At all times, even in its most grievous chapters of exile, Israel is called to trust in "the One who created the heavens..., who made the earth... who gives breath to its people" (Isa. 42:5). God's covenant with Israel is inseparable from God's creative act.

Created as we are in the divine image, we too are equipped with extraordinary lifegiving power. How terrifying! There is so much that dampens our creative spark: rejection, failure, the slavery of unbridled work schedules. Little wonder that people pull their heads in, saying, "I'm not the creative type." Some are afraid to have a child. But the story of our beginnings calls us not to be afraid; to believe that, embedded in our very existence, is a desire to burst forth, spill over, share, and extend the very life force, natural and spiritual, that pulses within us. Isn't that what Sunday's second reading is getting at when it says 'God's gift was not a spirit of timidity...' (II Tim. 1:7) and the kind of confidence the Gospel has in mind with reference to the power of faith to uproot a tree and plant it in the sea (see Lk. 17:6)?

Our creative efforts are not to be obsessions, but work embraced in freedom, in love. For unlike other gods, *Elohim* (the Hebrew name for God used in the first creation account) creates with ease, not struggle; calmly sets the sun and the moon as if hanging lanterns, resisted by no creature. Here our *parashah* can be seen as Israel's critique of surrounding cultures [Fox, 12; Plaut, 20]. Most importantly, *Elohim* sets limits to the creative labor and sanctifies Sabbath rest which becomes "the first sign of revelation within the act of creation itself" (Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, quoted by Fritz). The picture is of a completely sovereign Creator in whom we can have total trust. To be human, then, is to have confidence in one's innovative powers, but in a relaxed way, trusting in a divinely creative source beyond self.

For Reflection and Discussion: [1] *God is my Creator.* Ponder this intimate relationship. [2] Think of one aspect of your God-given creativity that has been dimmed by hurt, cynicism, sin. How does God want to 'recreate' that part of you? Take steps that will help the healing process.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Fritz, 'Sabbath Rest and Sunday Worship', *The Way Supplement* (2000/97); Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, (1909; sourced at www.sacred-texts.com/jud/loj/index.htm); HarperCollins *Study Bible: NRSV* (London, 1993); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006).

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