

## Tuesday Weddings: Parashat Bereshit

There are lots of reasons why a person might want to get married on a Tuesday. For one, florists and caterers and photographers are far cheaper. The most exclusive venues, those that generally book up years in advance and are already taken by the time a couple finally gets engaged, are miraculously available. You're less likely to conflict with another wedding or a bat mitzvah or some other special event which forces guests to choose between parties (although, admittedly, you're more likely to conflict with a work obligation or a school commitment or an event of everyday life). And, of course, Tuesday is considered the luckiest day on which to wed according to Jewish tradition! Why, you might ask? It's all right there in our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Bereshit*.

Before we get to weddings, however, I want to look at our Torah portion today and particularly the words "God saw that this was good" – a phrase and its analogues which are peppered throughout chapter one of the Book of Genesis, the first chapter in all of Scripture. What, precisely, "good" means in the context of creation is a matter of great debate – it appears not to indicate a moral quality as it is applied to inanimate objects like "light" and "earth" and "the stars" but rather seems to suggest some combination of "having appropriate qualities for its given role" and "providing benefit to others." The medieval commentator Ramban sees "good" as meaning "according to God's will" and thus a permanent addition to the emerging world. His colleague, Rashbam, understands "good" as meaning in no need of repair and sufficient just exactly as it already is. The sun is good because it lights the sky by day, performing a useful service to humanity. Seed-bearing plants are good because they provide food for the natural world. "Good," is the word assigned to each of the first six days of creation except for

one – the second day, which we call Monday. And then on day three, “good” is said twice making Tuesdays a particularly auspicious time for Jewish weddings!

So what is so lacking about the second day of Creation, the only one not labeled as “good?” On Day Two the firmament is created, the vast expanse that separates water from water. The firmament comes to be called “sky” and the waters above it known as the heavens, while the waters below the firmament eventually come to be gathered into one place so that dry land can appear –essentially creating sea and soil. The reason, according to tradition, why “good” is not said about the second day is because it’s incomplete; while the process of creating earth, sea, and sky is begun on Day Two, it is not yet finished until day three and thus can’t be approved of until done. As the great midrashic compilation Bereshit Rabbah (a collection of rabbinic stories) teaches, “Why is ‘It was good’ not written about the second day? Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said: ‘Because the disposition of the waters was not yet finished. Consequently ‘It was good’ is written twice in connection with the third day, once about the disposition of the waters and a second time about the work that was begun and completed on that day’” (Bereshit Rabbah 4:6). Because Day Two begins a discrete act without finishing it, it lacks a closing benediction. Instead, the pronouncement is pushed off to the next day when it is repeated twice.

Along with this first interpretation, Bereshit Rabbah goes on to include a few more as to why Day Two is never labeled as “good.” It first recounts the parable of a king who had an excessively violent army which led the king to say, “Because this legion is so fierce, let it not bear my name.” The king didn’t want to be associated with such a destructive force and thus tried to distance himself from his troops. So, too, says the midrash, God knew that the waters created on Day Two would ultimately wipe out the world with flood in the time of Noah and thus God couldn’t bear to praise them. Having witnessed the

terrible devastation caused by flooding here in our own day, we can perhaps understand this Divine inclination.

Finally, Bereshit Rabbah puts forth a third explanation as to why the waters of Day Two were not labeled as “good,” and this suggestion has to do with destruction not of a physical nature but rather of a spiritual one. “Rabbi Hanina explained: [The statement ‘It was good’ does not occur], ‘because separation was brought into being on the second day, as indicated in ‘Let [the firmament] separate water from water’ (Genesis 1:6). In this regard, Rabbi Tavyomi noted: If there was not mention of ‘It was good’ about an act of separation conducive to the world’s improvement and well-being, all the less should words occur in describing occasions leading to the world’s disarray.” Put simply, Day Two is not labeled as “good” because on it disunity is born. Although the divisions of creation are ultimately productive, leading to the miraculous reality of the world as we know it today, division more often is caustic and painful and deeply damaging. Hence the absence of “it was good.” Permanent ruptures very rarely are.

I read the Torah less as a logician and more as someone seeking to find meaning in sacred text, so the obvious fallacies of the various explanations just described bother me less than some. Of course we could argue that water is by no means the only destructive item formed throughout Creation but that wild animals, human beings, even the blinding power of the sun also have potential to cause great harm. We could also argue that Day Two is not the first time that division is introduced into the world as the day and night of Day One are also created by separation, this time of light from darkness. The midrash’ first explanation, that “good” is withheld because the works of Day Two are not yet complete seems the most sensible to me. And yet, sensible is not always the same as spiritually significant.

I'm not a logician but rather someone who seeks to find meaning in sacred text, so I will tell you that I find the midrash's last teaching – that disunity should never be called good – the most important, and I certainly find it the most relevant to the complicated times in which we live. The Conservative Yeshiva, in its commentary on Bereshit Rabbah, resolves the contradiction that I raised earlier – the idea that division is actually introduced on Day One rather than Day Two of Creation with the following argument: “When light was separated from dark (the first day), that was good because they are inherently opposite, but when things which are akin – families and friends – become divided, it is not good” (Torah Sparks, B'reishit 5776). The Yeshiva argues that when individuals who share little in common come to separate it is no great tragedy, that it is only division amongst people who care for one another that is a problem. Yet looking at our world today, I would suggest that this simply is not so - that division even, perhaps especially, amongst people totally opposite from one another foments anger and creates strife and ultimately weakens society by preventing partnership and collaboration. Too often we use as an excuse the magnitude of the differences between us to explain why we can't have a reasonable conversation or create a fair compromise or work together on a project of joint concern. I think we are seeing far too clearly how this kind of polarization and division is tearing apart our country.

The last few weeks have been supremely challenging ones as many of us have been riveted by the unfolding drama of the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. These proceedings and their aftermath have raised vital questions about how we handle allegations of sexual harassment and abuse in a way that honors and protects the dignity of those brave enough to come forward while also searching for truth and justice. They have spurred a nation-wide debate about moral leadership and judicial temperament and college drinking and how much the indiscretions of a person's youth should imperil his or her future. They have caused us to consider important issues related to honesty and integrity, to the voice

and visibility of women, to what constitutes a full investigation of claims of malfeasance and what falls far short. They have, most regrettably, reanimated the pain of victims of assault to whom we extend our love and support at an incredibly difficult time.

Many of us, on both sides of the Kavanaugh issue, are angry these days and for good reason – so very much is at stake with the selection of any Supreme Court justice, so much is at stake with this one in particular with his confirmation feeling like a referendum on the #MeToo movement and all that it stands for in addition to being a referendum on Judge Kavanaugh himself. My colleague, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, reminds us that anger is not necessarily a bad thing according to Jewish tradition and quotes the 11<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol who writes, “Anger is a reprehensible quality, but when employed to correct or to reprove or because of indignation at the performance of transgressions, it becomes laudable.”<sup>1</sup> Ruttenberg goes on to suggest that those of us who are angry channel that energy productively, towards organizing or fund-raising or protesting or canvassing for the midterms. When anger is used to fight for right and justice, it can be a very powerful tool indeed.

The danger of anger, however, is that it separates people from one another and that is my concern about this particular moment in American history, that along with the good and important activism and social organizing and working for change that we are seeing in our country, we are also seeing bitter divisiveness that only continues to grow and deepen, become further entrenched and increasingly hateful. I fear for the violence that I believe may erupt after the Kavanaugh issue is settled once and for all. I fear for the increasing decline of bipartisanship and the way that this lack of collaboration prevents

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://forward.com/opinion/411180/so-brett-kavanaugh-is-going-to-the-supreme-court-3-self-care-tips-for/?attribution=author-article-listing-1-headline>

important work from being done for the sake of our nation. I fear for a country that more and more feels like it is two different countries and wonder if we will ever find a way to somehow, with much difficulty, bridge that gap. Day Two of Genesis was not called “good” because disunity – whether it is amongst opposites or analogues, is never a good thing. Sadly, disunity is in very wide supply these days.

*Parashat Bereshit* celebrates the universal creation of humanity all descending from a single ancestor so, as the Talmud teaches, no person should be able to say “My father was greater than yours.” The Torah starts not with Abraham, the first Jew, but rather with Adam, the first human being, so that people of all faiths and ethnicities and races and beliefs will remember what unites us in addition to that which divides us. On this Shabbat when we read *Parashat Bereshit*, we hope for a day when we will again feel a sense of being part of one, unified collective whole. This, I believe, is what God wishes for us.

Tuesday may be the luckiest day for a Jewish wedding but Tuesdays are also, traditionally, the day on which November elections are held as they will be again this year. While I’m sure that the Book of Genesis was not top of mind while fixing this date, it seems to me entirely appropriate that the day on which we head to the polls is also the day which reminds us to hope for partnership amidst disagreement, to seek understanding even in great difference. I hope that each of us will cast a vote next month because the issues at stake for our world are dangerous and devastating and require strong and immediate action. I hope that each of us will remember, too, that after the election has concluded we have no choice but to work together.

“And God saw that this was good” - May we indeed see a time when such words can be said about our country and our world.

Shabbat Shalom.