

Ma'amar Bereishit
The Role of Language in Human-Divine Partnership

Bereishit 5783

I.

The world was created with Divine speech, and our Sages perceived therein a matter of profound significance. As the mishnah states in Avot, the calibrated stages of speech through which Creation was achieved lend greater significance to the righteous who maintain Divine creation, and, correspondingly, greater accountability for the wicked who act destructively.

Yet, it would appear that Parashat Bereishit lends itself to a more specific understanding of that Mishnah: perhaps it is through the vehicle of speech that worlds are both created and destroyed.

After all, it was Onkelos who understood the Divine contribution to humanity to be centered on the capacity for language and articulation, *va'yipach b'apav nishmat chaim va'yehi ha'adam l'nefesh chayah*. Onkelos renders the last two words as *ruach mimalila*, connoting the capacity for speech.

If this description of humanity maintains at the universal plane, the Jewish people, as recorded in the Haftarah of Bereishit, are later tasked with a specific responsibility in this regard. As Yeshayahu Ha-Navi affirms, *atem edai ne'um Hashem*, the Jewish people are charged with bearing witness to Divine creation, and ongoing majesty over and within the world. There is an inescapable motif of the significance of speech.

II.

In the Parshah, it is perhaps most obvious that the capacity for speech can be used in a pernicious and destructive fashion. The snake seduces and entraps the Isha with deceptive words, creating the halakhic paradigm of mesit, incitement, which is uniquely stigmatized in the world of halakha. Kayin, for his part, lures Hevel into the field with words, where he

commits the very first act of homicide. To be sure, these incidents certainly constitute illustrations of the Mishneh in Avot's contention that our partnership with the Almighty can result in the destruction of worlds.

To be fair, however, a closer analysis of the parshah provides four instances of human speech which reflect human-Divine partnership with profound significance.

First, after naming all of the animals in the world, and thereby manifesting his supremacy over the cosmos, Adam is overwhelmed with a sense of deep loneliness, *uli'adam lo matza ezer k'negdo*. At this point in the narrative, the Almighty creates the woman, *ezer k'negdo*, and Adam's reaction is one of sublime joy, coupled with deep insight: *zot ha'pa'am etzem me'atzamai uvesar mi'besari l'zot yikraeh isha ki me'ish lukacha zot. Al ken ya'azov ish et aviv v'et imo v'davak b'ishto v'hayu l'basar echad*.

Contra Rashi, who understands the term "basar echad" to relate to the capacity of a man and wife to produce offspring, Ramban understands this term to reflect the potential inherent in human matrimony for existential bonding signalled by the words "*v'davak b'ishto*." As opposed to all animal life, where reproduction exists as a means of sustaining the species, the human union aspires, even as it secures reproduction, to a union of far greater significance, in which virtues of loyalty, compassion, and connubial devotion can be expressed¹.

Most significantly, this was all captured by Adam in speech. He sensed, and immediately articulated one of the most profound and sacred human institutions- marriage itself.

III.

¹ In great measure, the moral landslide that constitutes the second half of the parshah can be linked to betraying precisely this ethic. First, Lemech's taking two wives, degrading both of them in the process by decoupling reproduction from conjugal satisfaction, represents a gross distortion of the aspirations of "*v'davak b'ishto*." Second, the bnei elohim's seizure of all women, *mi'kol asher bacharu*, as a manifestation of self serving hedonee, and, as noted by Rashi, in defiance of matrimonial bonds, was sufficient for the Almighty to despair of humanity. The Divine lament "*be'shagam hu basar*" would seem to relate directly back to the lost potential of "*v'hayu l'basar echad*." All of this underscores the critical role that the institution of marriage plays, as well as Adam's capacity to articulate that ideal.

If Adam was able to capture the essence of matrimony in a burst of inspired language, it was Chava who articulated the spiritual essence of another foundational human institution, that of parenting.

When Kayin, the first human born to humans was named, Chava reflected, in four succinct words, on the significance of the moment: *kaniti ish et Hashem*.

Rashi understands Chava's insight to relate to the well established rabbinic tradition of three-fold partnership in child bearing, with the father, mother, and Almighty each contributing towards the creation of life. In this reading, Chava had the spiritual sensitivity to recognize the utterly sublime opportunity such partnership presented, and named her first child on its account.

Ramban, in a sense, goes even deeper into Chava's inner world. As the birth of Kayin takes place once the sin of the Etz Ha'Da'at, and its consequence of human mortality have been introduced into the world, Chava, in Ramban's telling, is acutely aware that this child is possessed of the potential to carry on service of the Almighty after she and Adam pass from the earthly scene. In that sense, Chava relates to her son as a "kinyan la'Hashem", and articulates her sense of parenthood as inextricably linked with raising this child to be just that, a servant of the Almighty, even after the parents who reared him with those ethos have passed.

In this moment, in Ramban's reading, Chava has distilled the very essence of parenting within the covenantal community. The first and most significant priority of parents, within a covenantal framework, is to raise the next generation to embrace and maximize their potential with respect to Divine service, and in turn, to transmit that unending mission forward to yet another generation. All of this was captured by Chava in her own inspired moment of speech.

IV.

Bridging Adam's rarified articulation of the meaning of matrimony, and Chava's exalted formulation of the promise of parenthood, we find the episode of the Etz Ha'Da'at. To be sure, as previously noted, this incident certainly demonstrates the destructive capacity of malevolent speech. It is not merely that this sin literally introduced mortality into the world,

but, according to Ramban, fundamentally altered human nature as well. Only from this point forward would humanity have to struggle with a conflicted, ambivalent nature, wishing at the same time to heed the norms of the Creator but also to abrogate them.

And yet, this episode, cataclysmic as it surely is, ends in a redemptive moment. After first insinuating, with deep ingratitude, that it was Chava's fault that he sinned, Adam turns to his wife following the sin and gives her a new name, an elevated identity: *va'yikra ha'adam shem ishto chava ki hi haita em kol chai*.

In this moment of crisis, when Adam must confront his newfound mortality, he appreciates within his wife an aspect which he had perhaps overlooked. In the first naming, Adam is focused on the bond between he and his wife, with the name *isha* connoting her originating from him. In the second naming, with mortality being introduced into the human condition, the life producing capacity of this woman is that much more precious.

If life itself is now the ultimate limited resource, the woman's capacity to generate new life is a commodity of far greater value. As such, Adam renames her Chava, as the matriarch of all creation, *eim kol chai*, to reflect his appreciation of her singular capacity.

This moment not only represents a watershed in Adam's personal development, as well as the character of his union with Chava, but a reflection of a fundamental element in Creation. Adam's changing *isha's* name to Chava connotes deep affirmation of the sanctity of human life, especially in a new epoch in which that life is now of a circumscribed nature.

V.

Much as the sin of the Etz Ha'Da'at was followed by a moment of inspired speech, the horror of the first murder concludes with a redemptive moment as well. After failing to engage in a process of repentance which the Almighty had encouraged Kayin to undertake, and instead, compounding his original failures by murdering his brother, the object of his envy, Kayin is severely castigated by the Almighty. If the ground itself was initially cursed on account of Adam's sin, *arurah ha'adam ba'avurecha*, Kayin, as noted by Ramban, is cursed *from* the ground, *na va'nad tihiyeh ba'aretz*.

Contra Rashi, who understands Kayin's reaction, *gadol avoni mi'niso*, to reflect Kayin's incredulity at the severity of his punishment, Ramban understands Kayin to be engaged in act of *vidui*, heartfelt confession, taking stock of the gravity of his sin, expressing shame and remorse at his heinous act, engaging in *tzidduk ha'din*, the validation of Divine justice in his severe punishment, and finally, acknowledging the Divine grace which alone was responsible for his being spared.

If it is indeed the case that Kayin destroyed not only Hevel, but, as the Mishnah famously states, all of the worlds which may have emerged from Hevel in the future, Kayin, in three words, is able to chart a path forward for all future sinners as it concerns accepting responsibility for one's actions.

The simple reading of the text affirms Divine acceptance of this confession, as the Almighty yields to Kayin's request for protection, *va'yasem Hashem L'Kayin ot l'vilti hargo oto kol matzo*.

VI.

In aggregate, these four inspired moments of human articulation- Adam's perception of the sanctity of matrimony, Chava's intuiting the telos of parenthood, Adam's validation of the sanctity of human life, and Kayin's confession- present a model of human-Divine partnership mediated through speech.

The Almighty may have created the world, *ex nihilo*, through acts of speech, *b'devar Hashem shamayim na'asu*. It is, however, human speech, as an expression of the *ruach mimalila*, which is necessary to uphold and sustain that world, properly distill all that is sacred within it, and provide the basis for moral rehabilitation when humans inevitably fall short.