

## Parashat Breisheet CBS 10/22/11

My husband Richard has issues with candles. Not with lighting them, necessarily, but with making sure that they don't light anything else on fire. And for years, we've had an argument that goes something like this:

Me: "Richard, I know that we are going to services tonight, but can we please light the candles before Shabbat dinner anyway?"

Richard: "Sheri, you know how I feel about this. I don't want to leave the house with candles burning."

Me: "But I'll transfer them to the sink before we go. And I'll use our little travel set so that the candles burn out faster. My mom has been doing this forever, and our house never burned down."

Richard: "There's always a first time. Do you really want to take that chance?"

Me: "But it just doesn't seem like Shabbat unless I usher it in with candlelighting at home. How can we make Kiddush while staring at unlit candles?"

"Then go ahead and light them" Richard says, with an expression on his face that is begging me to do just the opposite. And, for the sake of Shalom Bayit, peace in the home, and my love for my husband, the candles remain unlit.

So why am I willing to risk losing my home just to light the Shabbat candles? Let me enlighten you (and yes, the pun is intended). Simply put, it all begins with light. Well, sort of. Let's start at the very beginning: "Breisheet bara Elokeim et haShamayim v'et HaAretz; I am going to assume that even if you are unfamiliar with much of what the Torah has to say, once I translate these words into English you will most likely recognize them, as they are the first words in the book of Breisheet, Genesis. (Dylan will be reading from this Parashah tomorrow morning). And they seem pretty straightforward, until, like most of the words in the Bible, once you take a closer look, things aren't quite as

clear cut as they seem. The translation that perhaps most of us are familiar with, from the King James version of the Bible, begins with a single statement: “In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth.” This is followed by the next statement, describing the earth as being unformed, dark, and wet. The third and final statement is G-d’s first commandment: “Let there be Light.” This interpretation would seem to imply that from nothing, G-d created everything.

However, one of our greatest Biblical Sages, Rashi, was troubled by the fact that the very first words of the Torah just don’t seem to fit together grammatically. Rabbi Robert Harris, associate professor of Bible at the JTS, explains, “The difficulty lies in the way the first two words of the Torah (Breisheet and bara) interact: if, as it seems likely, the word “breisheet” means not “in the beginning” but “in the beginning *of*”, then it seems strange that it comes before the second word, bara, which seems to mean “(G-d) created”. This would yield a literal translation of “In the beginning of.....G-d created”

In the beginning of *what*? There’s something missing. And herein lies both the brilliance and challenge of the Torah: even as we read the very first words, we are forced to struggle with the text, fight to make sense of its meaning, and acknowledge that perhaps this is exactly what G-d wants us to do in every generation.

Our translation in the Eitz Chaim Torah that we use here, solves this dilemma by combining three verses into, essentially, one long run-on sentence, ending with the creation of light: “Breisheet bara Elokeim et haShamayim v’et HaAretz; v’ha-aretz hayta tohu vavohu, v’choshech al p’nei t’home, v’ruach Elokeim m’rachefet al p’nei haMayim; Vayomer Elokeim ‘Y’hi Or’, vay’hi Or: When G-d began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void, (Fox: wild and waste) with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from G-d sweeping over the water – G-d said ‘Let there be light; and there was light.’ And

in contrast to the first translation, this one makes it clear that G-d did not create out of nothing. Something was already there: darkness, and water.

Read in this context, the implications are as explosive as the “big-bang” theory! This translation implies that G-d didn’t create the darkness or the deep, or the wild chaotic mess that was already there. And perhaps even more importantly, G-d didn’t abolish it either. Instead, as Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger states, G-d chose to become “a tamer of the chaotic forces of nature. G-d chose to hold them in control, but not to eliminate them.” Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky writes, “It was this act of giving order, of confining the darkness so that it would be unable to invade the domain of light, that was the truly monumental accomplishment of Day 1.”

So G-d’s very first product of creation was light, and G-d separated the darkness from the light, giving both of them their “turn” to appear. G-d must have understood that both were necessary, perhaps even dependent on each other.

Rabbi Barbara Rosman Penzner wrote a beautiful essay about her visit to Iceland over the summer, where the sun only set for 3 hours a day. But her excitement at being able to frolick in the sun at the beach at 11pm at night, gave way to exhaustion as she discovered how difficult it was to sleep in broad daylight. The winter poses its own challenges as well, as there are only a few hours of sunlight a day. She comments, “Day and night, darkness and light are both equally important parts of the cycle of our lives. Without light, we might curl up in despair. Without darkness, our bodies would not have respite to replenish themselves.”

We all face periods of darkness, and our greatest challenges come in trying to find our way towards the light. As many of you know, I just

began a part-time position as a Chaplain at Harris Methodist Hospital in FW, and in the short time I've been there, I've witnessed much suffering. Patients sometimes ask, "Why is G-d doing this to me? He must be punishing me for something I did." After re-reading the opening words of Breisheet, and reframing the meaning of those words, I can now confidently tell them that I believe that even though darkness and suffering are part of the human condition, I don't believe that G-d created them. I believe that G-d is with us, infusing us with light to help us, and others through suffering. I see that light in all the amazing Chaplains I work with. I see it in those who are caring for all the patients with such skill and dedication.

And I see it in this congregation. I see it in the way you all gather at a Shivah Minyan to comfort a mourner. I see it when you visit the sick in our community. And I see it in the good times too, as we gather for simchas like Dylan's Bar Mitzvah, where many of you took time out of your weekend to help decorate and cook to, and are here now to celebrate such an important milestone in his Jewish life.

G-d spent six days creating and giving order to the world, and to this day, things work specifically according to that order. That's a miracle that we might too often take for granted, which is why the "Yotzer Or" prayer, which we will chant tomorrow, reminds us not to; "Baruch Atah Adomai, Elokeinu Melech HaOlam, Yotzer Or U'vorei Chosech, Oseh Shalom U'vorei et HaKol. Blessed are You Adomai our G-d, Ruler of Eternity, who creates light and darkness, who makes peace and creates all things."

I love this prayer, in which, even as I praise G-d for creation and light, I know that I must accept the existence of darkness, and, consequently, evil and all that implies. But just as I reflect on the idea that darkness might have existed before G-d began the task of creating, I also believe that G-d didn't create evil either. If I am to believe that evil preexisted

along with darkness, perhaps G-d's task was not to abolish it but to reign it in so that we, created B'Zelem Elokeim – G-d's image, would learn to do the same: choose to walk toward the light, choose to live in the chaos and darkness that we must inevitably face and still dedicate ourselves to sharing our light with others.

I am beginning to understand that perhaps G-d never intended for us to live in the perfect world of Gan Eden – the garden of Eden. G-d must have known that the humans that G-d imbued with free will would certainly choose to eat from the one tree that they were told not to touch. After all, if G-d really didn't want to tempt Adam and Eve, G-d could've destroyed or at least hidden the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But just as I believe that G-d made a conscious choice not to destroy the darkness that existed before light, I suspect that G-d also made the choice to put the most intriguing and tempting tree in the garden within reach of his imperfect human creations, knowing all along what they would choose. Because in giving us life, I believe that G-d wanted us to do more than just exist.

G-d's ultimate gift to us was not giving us a perfect world, but a world in which we have a purpose: to be a light to the nations. Proverbs 20:27 states, "The soul of man is the candle of G-d." Our task, our mission, our purpose, therefore, is to choose to be that light, and reflect that light through our actions, and to share it with others so that it is never diminished.

Kein Y'Hi Ratzon. Shabbat Shalom.