

The Unfinished Business of Creation – Breishit 5782

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We thought we were so clever. ...

A group of 10th-grade boys plotting to derail the *humash*/Bible teacher's lesson plan at Yeshiva High School in Atlanta. Let's see how he responds to this one: Can God create a mountain that God can't move? It's the perfect paradox. If God is all-powerful, God can do anything. If God can't make it or God can't move it, either way, we have found the perfect loophole!

Rabbi Silverman (and, parenthetically, I should say that he is a really good guy and an excellent teacher who is responsible for bringing countless Jews closer to their Judaism; and he is also very classically Orthodox) was not impressed. It turns out we weren't the first. The philosophers of the Middle Ages all fielded this and similar questions, so Rabbi Silverman just channeled his inner Rav Sa'adia Gaon: "אנו משיבים להם שהוא יכול לכל דבר ואילו מה ששאלו לא דבר הוא", We respond to them that God can do anything, but what you are asking of God is not a thing; הבל הוא וההבל אינו כלום, what you are asking is futility, and futility is nothing." In other words: You are just playing with logic. Noting you can say – and certainly not your *klutz kasha* – will move me from my firm belief that God is perfect and unchangeable and entirely just.

I left the school, but it would be unfair to suggest that it was because of that interaction with Rabbi Silverman. As a rabbi myself now, I field plenty of these questions from children and adults. And I encourage them, even when I suspect the students are just trying to derail my lesson plans, because they are an opening to conversation; and what teacher wouldn't want that? I think Rabbi Silverman felt the same way. But I also think he was wrong.

I don't think it is wrong to ask about God's abilities. I think the medieval Jewish philosophers may have been wrong to embrace so whole-heartedly the doctrine of divine perfection, which may well have originated from the outside the Jewish world. In Breishit – and throughout the Torah – God is described in human terms. God speaks; God plays in the dirt to form the first human being; God walks in the garden; God regrets having created humanity; God makes mistakes; God changes God's mind. The philosophers tell us the Torah doesn't mean it when it says those things; we shouldn't take them literally. But maybe it is the doctrines of God's immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience that we shouldn't take so literally. Maybe we can learn to emulate a God who is more like us – changing and growing and improving.

Genesis 2:1: "*Vayekhulu ha-shamayyim v'ha'aretz vkhol tzeva'am*, The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. ... And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation God had done." Except it wasn't really finished.

- The other creation narratives from the Ancient Near East end with the lesser gods building a palace for the head god. In the Torah, which obviously doesn't believe in lesser gods, it is the Jewish people who construct God's palace; but that doesn't happen until the end of Exodus.

God creates Shabbat as a palace in time, but Shabbat is not really until Shabbat until the Jewish people accept the commandments of Shabbat at Sinai, which also doesn't happen until Exodus. The Rabbis of the Talmud imagine that the world waited in limbo for 26 generations from creation to Sinai. If the Jewish people would accept the Torah, all would be well; but if they reject it, the world would return to its primordial state. The point is that creation was not complete in Genesis. There was still work to do. God could not do it all at once.

- The exodus itself is also a creation moment. Think of the parting of the sea. The waters are pushed to the side and dry land appears, just like in Genesis, so the people can march through. Here, creation is associated with freedom. God's creation is not complete until God's people are free. Creation is still not complete as long as any people are not free. Creation is a continuous process. Even God could not do it all at once.
- In Midrash Genesis Rabbah, the 3rd-century Rabbi Hoshaya teaches: "Everything created by God during the first six days of Creation needs further improvement. The mustard seed has to be sweetened. ... Wheat needs to be refined. Even the human being needs improvement." The world was not created in a perfect state because God could not do that.

I understand that for those of us – probably all of us – who were raised on the doctrinal orthodoxies of the medieval philosophers, it can be discomfiting to assert that God's powers are limited in certain ways. But there is also something empowering and encouraging in the idea that the reason evil and imperfection exist is that God simply couldn't create a perfect world. If the world is to be perfected, we are the ones who will have to bring that about. That means we have a purpose. *Mitzvot* have meaning. Our actions matter.

In his first comment on the Torah, Rashi – perhaps the most famous of all the medieval rabbis – asks why the Torah begins with creation. If the purpose of Torah is to present God's commandments, why not begin with the first commandments in Exodus? Rashi's answer has to do with God's mastery over the entire world and the Jewish people's particular connection to the Land of Israel, which is a fine interpretation for another day. But I think there is something else. The Torah begins with creation to teach that God was the Originator of an ongoing process that must be carried on by humanity, with a special role for the Jewish people. In other words, the Torah begins with creation for the same reason that it doesn't end with creation – to teach that our ultimate responsibility, more than just observing the commandments, is to partner with God in the ongoing process of improving and perfecting our world.

Think about the environment. The political question regarding climate change is: Are humans responsible for what is happening, or are the changes to our environment happening by themselves? But that is the wrong question. The right question is simply: what can we, as God's partners, do about it? Whether this is happening because of things we and our ancestors did, or whether it is happening because the changes are baked into the system from the beginning, our mandate is the same. We have a role in putting out the fires and repairing the damage.

And now is a good time to start. This year, beginning with Rosh Hashanah a few weeks ago, is a *shmitta*/sabbatical year. In ancient Israel, fields would lie fallow, debts would be forgiven, indentured servants would be freed, and society would reset. The ancient practices have all but disappeared, but

this year there is a movement to try to mark the sabbatical by reaffirming our responsibilities to protect the earth and restore certain equilibriums that have fallen out of whack. Creation is not finished and it is not just God's responsibility to complete it. We have a role.

Or our country. The political debates often revolve around whether or not our little experiment with democracy and individual liberty has produced the greatest country known to humankind. But that debate masks the more relevant point that, despite our greatness, despite the many blessings and achievements that are America, our work remains unfinished. There is more we can do. There is more we must do to ensure that more people experience the blessings and share in the opportunities. And we play a critical role in that work.

So maybe God *can* create a mountain that God can't move. Or maybe the mountain can be moved, but not without our help. Breishit was only the beginning. Let us accept our role as the protagonists in creation's next chapter. Shabbat shalom.