

## **Torah and Haftarah Introductions for Rosh HaShanah**

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Our youngest Sunday school students seem to delight in drawing pictures for the days of creation: the land and sky on day 2, the plants and trees on day 3, the sun, moon and stars on day 4 and so on. It is natural for young children to understand things literally and yet I remain concerned about how we handle this instruction. Soon enough they will learn about Darwin and carbon dating, and if we are not sophisticated in our approach, they will view the story of creation that we told them as baby stuff, if not out and out lies.

This year, 12 months into our 18 months Scientists in the Synagogues grant, it feels like our reading of the first Chapter of Genesis this morning requires some explanation. We do not believe the world was created 5,780 years ago nor do we believe that plants and trees existed before the sun. I speak not just for Reform Judaism which has confronted these issues directly, but for Judaism as a whole which never read Genesis literally, nor looked to the Bible for science instruction.

All the cultures of the ancient Near East had a creation story but ours was a little different. Our God did not emerge victorious in battle with the other gods, nor did our God experience a victory over pre-existing powers. Our tradition stresses the emergence of order from chaos, of increasing levels of differentiation, but with the understanding that there is one unified root to all that is. There are those who argue that this demythologizing of nature is what allowed for the emergence of science, but that is not where the Jewish focus has been, at least not until the past century.

Those who studied and commented on the Torah were aware of the alternative scientific theories of their day- in some generations the prevailing idea was that there had always been something, that the universe is eternal, and in others, it was the belief that creation was from

nothingness that was considered the most “modern”. We find this discussion as early as a question a heathen asked Rabbi Gamliel in Talmudic times, and then later in the argument Maimonides makes in his Guide to the Perplexed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The best answer that science could provide changes over time- as we see even in our own day. Two decades ago I was proud to share that an Israeli physicist, in finding what he thought were the fundamental building blocks of nature, gave them the name t’s and v’s after the Biblical Hebrew words for the nothingness from which the world emerged- *tohu va-vohu*. Now I understand from Michael that the science behind that claim has been disproved, and science has moved on.

Science has moved on but we are still reading this same story- why is that?

For some of us it is because there is still wonder, in the existence of anything at all. *Tohu*, the Hebrew word for what existed in the beginning may mean nothingness, emptiness, but of course, the generations haven’t been satisfied with that one answer. The root can also mean to be amazed and so Rashi—in the beginning – wonder and a state of amazement that something can to be.

Or building on the work of a late medieval scholar, Rabbi Ephraim Sholomo Luntschitz, of Central Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, “Desolation lurks on the other side of creation,” this isn’t sequential but two alternative states, order or chaos. We think the distinctions are hard and fast, but just as we have learned that solid and liquid can be two states of the same matter, the sureties of our world are not what they seem. A century ago it was nation states that seemed fixed in stone, then in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century so many borders were redrawn. I was born into a world where gender was a fixed constellation around which everything else in your life moved, and now gender expression and identity are much more fluid. A tradition which is be continuously reinterpreted serves us better than a fixed and unwavering catechism.

What does the story of creation come to tell us today- not a story about science, but about humanity, where every life is of value, no one better by virtue of their ancestry, and each

unique, and about our tradition's strength through the centuries in reading 70 faces into the words of Torah.

### **Introduction to the Haftarah**

The selection from Second Isaiah, chosen for the Haftarah to accompany our Torah reading this morning, focuses on the theme of repentance and the potential for change.

Living in a time of dramatic upheaval -the rise of Persia, the destruction of the Babylonian Empire, the prophet wonders at the intelligence that underlies the universe, and posits a moral order to parallel the natural order. He wants to know that this is not random, that evil is ultimately punished and good rewarded.

This is something that humanity has long sought, an ethical calculus as coherent as mathematical calculus, a moral law as predictable and verifiable as the laws of nature.

But the prophet imagines more than that.

Like those who write in the style of magical realism, having exhausted images of the real world, he floats off into the world of imagination, a place where mountains themselves can sing, trees clap hands, and lowly weeds be transformed into stately bushes.

We look at the world around us and see only prickly oaks and burning nettles- open your eyes, the prophets says, redemption can be found.