Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

GENESIS: THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS

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Bereshit
בראשית

The Book of books starts with the beginning of beginnings: the creation of the universe and life. The story is told from two different perspectives, first as cosmology (the origins of matter), then as anthropology (the birth of humanity).

The first narrative (1:1–2:3) emphasizes harmony and order. God creates the universe in six days and dedicates the seventh as a day of holiness and rest. The second (2:4–3:24) focuses on humanity, not as biological species but as persons-in-relation. God fashions man, sees that "It is not good for the man to be alone," and then fashions woman. The serpent tempts them; they sin and are banished from the Garden.

From then on, the human drama unfolds as tragedy. Cain murders his brother. By the end of the *parasha*, God sees "how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" and "regrets that He had made man on earth." God creates order, man creates chaos. Which will prevail?

In the four essays that follow, the first looks at divine and human freedom, the second at the three stages of creation. The third examines the origins of human violence, and the fourth uncovers a hidden story of love, born of the consciousness of our mortality.

The Book of Teaching

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth…. (1:1)

It is the most famous, majestic opening of any book in literature. It speaks of primal beginnings, creation, and ontology, and for many it stands as an emblem of Torah as a whole. But not for all. Consider the surpassingly strange way that Rashi – most beloved of all Jewish commentators – begins his commentary:

> Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have begun with the verse (Exodus 12:2): "This month shall be to you the first of the months," which was the first mitzva given to Israel. (Rashi, 1:1)

What are we to make of this? The question is not merely aesthetic. Does Rabbi Isaac, or for that matter Rashi, seriously suggest that the Book of books might have begun in the middle – a third of the way into Exodus? That it might have passed by in silence the creation of the universe – which is, after all, one of the fundamentals of Jewish faith?

Could we understand the history of Israel without its prehistory, the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their children? Could we have understood those narratives without knowing what preceded them: God's repeated disappointment with Adam and Eve, Cain, the generation of the Flood and the builders of the Tower of Babel?

The fifty chapters of Genesis together with the opening of Exodus are the source book of biblical faith. They are as near as we get to an exposition of the philosophy of Judaism. What then does Rabbi Isaac mean?

He means something profound, something which we often forget. To understand a book, one needs to know to which genre it belongs: Is it history or legend, chronicle or myth? To what question is it an answer? A history book answers the question: *what happened?*; a book of cosmology – be it science or myth – answers the question: *how did it happen?*

What Rabbi Isaac is succinctly saying in his enigmatic question is that if we seek to understand the Torah, we must read it as *Torah* – as law, instruction, teaching, guidance. Torah is an answer to the question: *how shall we live?* That is why he raises the question as to why it does not begin with the first mitzva given to Israel.

Torah is not a book of history, even though it includes history. It is not a book of science, even though the first chapter of Genesis – as the nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber points out – is the necessary prelude to science: it represents the first time people saw the universe as the product of a single creative will, and therefore as intelligible rather than capricious and mysterious.[1]

Rather, it is, first and last, a book about how to live. Everything it contains – not only mitzvot but also narratives, including the narrative of creation itself – is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction. For Jewish ethics is not confined to law. It includes virtues of character, general principles and role models. It is conveyed not only by commandments but also by stories, telling us how particular individuals responded to specific situations.

Torah moves from the minutest details to the most majestic visions of the universe and our place within it. But it never deviates from its intense focus on the questions: What should one do? How should one live? What kind of person should one strive to become? It opens, in Genesis 1, with the most fundamental question of all. As the Psalm (8:4) puts it: "What is man that You are mindful of him?"

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[1] Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1952); see also Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 105–25.

The Essence of Man

Pico della Mirandola's fifteenth-century *Oration on Man* was one of the turning points of Western civilization, the "manifesto" of the Italian Renaissance. In it he attributed the following declaration to God, addressing the first man:

> We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the

> form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.[1]

Homo sapiens, that unique synthesis of "dust of the earth" and breath of God, is unique among created beings in having no fixed essence: in being free to be what he or she chooses. Mirandola's *Oration* was a break with the two dominant traditions of the Middle Ages: the Christian doctrine that human beings are irretrievably corrupt, tainted by original sin, and the Platonic idea that humanity is bounded by fixed forms.

It is also a strikingly Jewish account – almost identical with the one given by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Man*: "The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. It is this idea that Judaism introduced into the world."[2] It is therefore with a frisson of recognition that we discover that Mirandola had a Jewish teacher, Rabbi Elijah ben Moses Delmedigo (1460–1497), with whom he studied Tanakh in the original Hebrew, together with Talmud and Kabbala.[3]

The emphasis on choice, freedom and responsibility is one of the most distinctive features of Jewish thought. It is proclaimed in the first chapter of Genesis in the most subtle way. We are all familiar with its statement that God created man "in His image, after His likeness." Seldom do we pause to reflect on the paradox. If there is one thing emphasized time and again in the Torah, it is that God *has no image*. Hence the prohibition against making images of God. For God is beyond all representation, all categorization. "I will be what I will be," He says to Moses when Moses asks Him His name. All images, forms, concepts and

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1. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Miller, Wallis and Carmichael (Hackett, 1998).
2. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, translated from the Hebrew by Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 109.
3. Born in Crete, Delmedigo was a Talmudic prodigy, appointed at a young age to be head of the yeshivah in Padua. At the same time, he studied philosophy, in particular the work of Aristotle, Maimonides and Averroes. At the age of twenty-three he was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Padua. It was through this that he came to know Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who became both his student and his patron.

categories are attempts to delimit and define. God cannot be delimited or defined; the attempt to do so is a form of idolatry.

"Image," then, must refer to something quite different than the possession of a specific form. The fundamental point of Genesis 1 is that God transcends nature. Therefore, He is free, unbounded by nature's laws. By creating human beings "in His image," God gave us a similar freedom, thus creating the one being capable itself of being creative. The unprecedented account of God in the Torah's opening chapter leads to an equally unprecedented view of the human person and the capacity for self-transformation. That is Mirandola's point. Everything else in creation is what it is, neither good nor evil, bound by nature and nature's laws. The human person alone has the possibility of self-transcendence. We may be a handful of dust but we have immortal longings.

Mirandola's late-fifteenth-century humanism was not secular but deeply religious. This period was one of the last times in European culture when religion, science and the arts walked hand in hand, giving rise to such figures as Brunelleschi, Michelangelo and da Vinci. It is fascinating to speculate what might have happened had the Renaissance continued along these lines. However, a series of corrupt rulers and popes, followed by the confrontation between the church and Galileo, led to a gradual break of this synthesis of religion and scientific humanism. The advent of the Reformation signalled the dominance of the quite different views of Luther and Calvin, while humanism swung in the opposite direction, becoming progressively more secular.

As it is, the great truth of Genesis 1 remains as the most powerful statement of a religiously-based humanism, based on the idea of the human person as God's image, the one creation that is also creative, the sole life-form capable of dialogue with the Author of life Himself. As the rabbis put it: "Why was man created last? In order to say, if he is worthy, all creation was made for you; but if he is unworthy, he is told, even a gnat preceded you."[4]

That is the simplest answer to Rabbi Isaac's question: Why did the Torah, a book of law, not begin with the first law? For law presupposes freedom. As Maimonides writes in his "Laws of Repentance," if we had no freedom, if all we did was determined by forces beyond our control, what would be the point of commanding people to do this, not that? Where would be the justice in rewarding obedience and punishing sin? Without freedom, the whole edifice of law and responsibility falls to the ground.[5]

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[4] *Bereshit Raba* 8:1; *Sanhedrin* 38a.

The Torah is a sustained exploration of human freedom, the greatest gift God gave man, as well as the most fateful, for freedom can be used or abused. It can lead to the highest heights or the lowest depths: to love or hate, compassion or cruelty, graciousness or violence. The entire drama of Torah flows from this point of departure. Judaism remains God's supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and on the other, to responsibility and restraint – becoming God's partner in the work of creation.

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[5] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah,* Hilkhot Teshuva, chapter 5.