

Creation Stories, and Stories about Stories

Sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth

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A story-teller who addressed my clergy group here in Fort Worth years ago was asked if a wonderful tale she had just told was true. She replied, “All my stories are true; and some of them actually happened.” Keep that in mind, please, as we consider several sacred tales, beginning with Genesis 1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And God said let there be this and let there be that—light, sky, plants, animals, and each was good; then God created the human, male and female, and it was very good. But God was tired from 6 days of creativity, and so God rested on Shabbat.” (That was the Readers Digest condensed version, but I figured it was a familiar enough passage.)

The Torah says God created us and our world, and makes demands on us, the *mitzvot*. Jews in particular, we will find when Abraham shows up in chapter 12, have a long-term partnership, a *brit*, “covenant,” with this commanding God. In a simpler age a few centuries ago most had few doubts about any of that. If the Torah said it, it had to be true. Rosh Hashanah, each year, was the anniversary of creation. This is 5773, meaning five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-three years since creation.

Then, in the modern world, seeds of doubt were sown. Not that there were never doubts before, but in the mid 19th century first Charles Darwin opened our eyes to the origin of the species—which did not go well with the six-day creation story of Genesis 1. Shortly after that Julius Wellhausen and other German scholars demonstrated that Genesis, and the rest of the

Bible, too, was a composite text, full of great stories and moral legislation, to be sure, but not all revealed by God in one dramatic encounter at Sinai. Torah, rather, is the work of many authors over many centuries. These 19th century revolutions were quite a shock even to Reform Jews, and as ongoing battles over school curricula reveal, plenty of Bible-readers, even a few Jews, are still fighting a losing battle against these truths today.

By now, however, we have come to appreciate that the profundity of Torah is in its values, not its facts, not its history nor surely its science (it was never meant as science). In a world seemingly spinning out of control—wars, environmental degradation, more and more mouths to feed, ancient hatreds broadcast more and more effectively by modern technology and made more and more dangerous by modern weaponry—people crave clear answers. The values are plain enough. Genesis 1 preaches human dignity and the capacity to think for ourselves and be creative. That is what it means to be created “in the image of God.” The 10 Commandments in Exodus, furthermore, are about basic decency—not stealing, murdering or committing adultery; respecting parents, setting aside a Sabbath not only for oneself, but for servants and even for the beasts of burden. Leviticus’ Holiness Code says not to cheat or defraud, or curse even the deaf who cannot hear you, but rather to love one another. And so on....

The basic values we need are still there, waiting for us to study them and take them seriously. But with faith in the divine authorship of our scriptures shaken, modern religions—Judaism, too—are still reeling. Indeed, we see a very strange phenomenon in modern cultures like ours: gorgeous temples—and churches and mosques, too, I might add—abound, testifying to

our physical affluence. We build them to tell ourselves and the world: we are here; we care; we matter. But they sit empty much of the time. Oh, they may get a bigger crowd at the Church next door—but only because there are so many more Christians than Jews! We all build these great monuments, tangible expressions of faith, and then the community (lots of us, anyway) fail to frequent them. It's an insurance policy: "I'll need a wedding or funeral one day. My kids should know who they are and where they came from."

When we do go there should be something to touch our souls—music, stained glass; maybe the rabbi will have an interesting story or find a worthwhile twist in the Torah portion to apply to a contemporary issue. But that won't necessarily get us back next week. We have lost the sense of being God's direct creations, and obligated, therefore, by divine commandments. It is all about the Big Bang and evolution. And truths like that are just as available, and more conveniently, on the science network.

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So here is another story, one of my favorite tales of the Hasidim:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and

say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.” and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

That is the original story. Elie Wiesel adds, “God made man because he loves stories.” (Story and addition open *Gates of The Forest*, 1964 in French, 1966 in English)

I always read that as a story about the power of stories. It is; but recently I found that Gershom Scholem, who opened up the field of Jewish mysticism to modern scholars, argued that it is also about, “the decay of a great movement.... a transformation so profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale.” (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1941, p. 350)

I wonder if that is not what is happening with a lot of religion in secular societies?

Torah and the whole tradition it spawned and reflects are full of deep stories, moving stories like that one. Creation is one of them. We sense holiness in the world. We dare to affirm that God is in our struggles, in Torah’s tales, and even in our personal stories. Ours is not the

first generation to think earlier generations somehow knew holiness first-hand, and we've lost it! "We don't know how to light the fire any more," they worried, "or how to pray." Their early modern problem, and our late modern problem, is excessive literalism. There was no magic fire in the forest. Their *hearts* were aflame with faith, so that they did not give up.

We in turn read Genesis 1, where God speaks the world into being—"Let there be light;" "Let there be vegetation;" "Let us make the human in our image"—and well-schooled modern skeptics that we are, we say, "No; there was this Big Bang, and millions of years of development, and then the evolution of the species."

But the objection reveals that the whole point has been missed. The Torah's authors were expressing the insights and values which flowed from confidence that the world was God's (they knew they didn't create the world; we know the cosmos is not ours). The world--the universe, we would add--has order and direction, purpose. We can make sense of it! And humans are God-like in our ability to make choices, create new life, and think new thoughts. We are inspired by nature--the forests, the constellations, the microscopic and sub-microscopic intricacies of crystals, cells and particles. And we are inspired by texts, the record of earlier generations struggling to make sense of life and the world. We have certainly not become God, but the Psalms assertion that we are "but little lower than the angels" rings true. The classic Jewish idea of covenant means we can be, yea we cannot escape being, partners with God in creating the future.

The Jewish stories—Torah—say: there *is* meaning; there *is* holiness; there is, therefore, divinity and hope. We do not differ so much from the presumed masters of earlier generations, who, like us, worried that they weren't good enough. We just need to be the best that we can be—and that may be sufficient to prevent the death of the spirit that modernism and secularism are said to threaten. God is involved in our stories, too. Each of our life-stories counts for something. Torah as Jews have understood it for thousands of years is not a single book in the ark, but a sacred stream of creativity, a tree of life, which grows out of it. We, too, create more Torah for the generations who will follow.

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How ironic that such a broad swath of the religious world, more fundamentalistically inclined Christians and Muslims, resist the whole notion of evolution, which you and I as liberal Jews, and other educated people the world over, know is well-demonstrated scientific fact. (Those who deny evolution should not bother taking their flu shots this year, since the science behind them is wrong if germs do not evolve.) Yes, evolution disproves a childlike understanding of Genesis. But not only is creation still awesome, it is not something that happened aeons ago, but is ongoing (that is modern physics—the universe is still expanding--developing; and that is modern biology—so are we!). Torah, too, I just noted, expands and develops. So modern religion adds: God is manifest in the process. Does evolution undermine religion? Listen to this gem from Rabbi Arthur Green's book, *Radical Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2010). Green, incidentally, is a professor at Boston Hebrew College:

As a religious person I believe that the evolution of the species is the greatest sacred drama of all time. It is a tale—perhaps even the tale—in which the divine waits to be discovered.... We Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all overinvolved with proclaiming—or questioning—the truth of our own particular stories.... There is a *bigger* story, infinitely bigger, and one that we all share. How did we get here, we humans, and where are we going? For more than a century and a half, educated Westerners have understood that this is the tale of evolution. But we religious folk, the great tale-tellers of our respective traditions, have been guarded and cool toward this story and have hesitated to make it our own. The time has come to embrace it and uncover its sacred dimensions. (*Ibid.* p. 16)

What are those sacred dimensions? A little later, he adds:

Here on this smallish planet in the middle of an otherwise undistinguished galaxy, something so astonishing has taken place that it indeed demands to be called by the biblical name “miracle,” rather than by the Greco-Latin “nature,” even though the two are pointing to the exact same set of facts. The descendants of one-celled creatures grew and developed, emerged onto dry land, learned survival skills, developed language and thought, until a subset of them could reflect on the nature of this entire process and seek to derive meaning from it. (pp. 20-21)

Green, who teaches kabbalah as well as theology, is a mystic. I am not, but here, at least, he is right; so let me phrase it more as a logical statement. The same evolutionary process that

brings us wondrous diversity and complexity brings us human minds to appreciate them. We have even evolved morality, and brains to glimpse the divine, the holy, God. No particle or element cares about decency and morality. Few if any animals do, and, tragically, not even every person does. But—as Jews—we care. Our caring evolved, as well. God is there when we appreciate, and act on, our best instincts. Science does not replace, it merely reveals more clearly, the divine mystery.

But others can be good, too, not only Jews! Yes. Is that a problem?! The more the merrier! There are billions of people and only a few million Jews. If we want the world to be holier, more a manifestation of God’s goodness, we need all the help we can get. We have the *chutzpah* to believe, moreover--and classic Christianity and Islam actually agree with us on this—that quite a bit of what they learned about God, good and evil, and holiness ... they learned from us! Plenty of others concur that to serve God is to serve others and make this world a more livable, a more sacred, place. “All the rest is commentary,” said Hillel.

All existence, and thus *our* lives, has meaning; and our stories—for Jews, Torah—point us to the meaning. The meaning, the mystery, God, really is there—really is here in the ark, and in the Temple, not only to be stored and venerated, but to be learned and taught, passed on to our children, and implemented in the world. Amen.