

## **God's Covenant with Abraham and Us: One Rabbi's View**

Thoughts shared in the chapel of the Hartford Seminary

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In my recurring dream I receive an announcement from the Hartford Seminary sent by David Barrett to the far corners of the earth! Some of the seminary's great luminaries, President and Ethics Professor Heidi Hadsell, Professor of Islamic Studies and Director of the MacDonald Center Ingrid Mattson, Seminary Dean and Professor of New Testament Efrain Agosto, brilliant young scholar of the Hebrew Bible Uriah Kim, and Yehezkel Landau, a man whose career is synonymous with the meaning of the name of the city of Jerusalem from which he hails, are soliciting applications for a new course that they are team teaching entitled "Ethical Dilemmas in Interfaith Understanding."

I immediately submit my application realizing that only a select few will have the coveted opportunity to study with these renowned teachers but, since it is *my* dream, my application is accepted. In the course the professors assign each student a fifty page paper over which I labor mightily. Unfortunately for me, I do not directly address the subject I have chosen until page 12. When my paper comes back it contains the following comment signed by the faculty. "There are many issues which each of us sees in our own individual way, but we all concur that you have to get to the point of your 50-page essay before page 12."

The same criticism might well be leveled at whoever edited the final draft of the biblical Book of Genesis. It is the story of the beginning of the Jewish people and our Covenant with God. It contains fifty chapters, but the book does not really introduce us to Abraham, the man we call the first Jew and the father of our three western religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam until chapter 12. Indeed we might understandably ask our editor. "'What took you so long to get to the point?'"

Upon closer examination, though, the value and message of Genesis's first eleven chapters become clear. They are not just "prehistory" as some have called them. They are carefully selected stories—out of many other available folktales—which are vital to understand if we are to appreciate the meaning of the religious path which formally begins with God's call of Abraham in Chapter 12.

Overarching all of subsequent Jewish and western religious thought is a magnificent story of creation. Over the years I have resisted the attempts of Fundamentalists to recruit me to join efforts to have the Genesis story of creation taught along with the theory of evolution in science classes in public schools. I resisted because the biblical story of creation is not good science; it is not bad science: it is not science at all. It tells us absolutely nothing about *how* the world was created, but it offers invaluable insight as to *why*.

Genesis's creation account rests on several assumptions that distinguish it from all other ancient creation myths of which there are many. In the story we note first that God is the initiating force of the creation of the world. Second, we note that the entire process is done with purpose and meaning. If creation has purpose and meaning then life has purpose and meaning. In the story everything builds on what comes before. Note the rhythm and the repetition of certain key phrases: "And God said, 'Let there be...and there was.' 'And God saw... that it was good.'" And there was evening and there was morning..." These recurring refrains convey a sense of order and intention.

We do not read far into the creation story before we discover the God presented in Genesis is different from the pagan deities other societies worshipped. Genesis's God is not

merely a powerful force whom worshippers have to appease. The agenda of Genesis's God is for human beings to create a just, caring compassionate society on earth. If the creation poem were a symphony, the music would change dramatically when we arrive at Genesis 1:26. When it comes to humanity, the method of creation changes: "And God said: 'Let us create humanity in our image after our likeness. And they shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the earth and everything that creeps on the earth.'" And God created us human beings—male and female—in the Divine Image.

That does not mean, of course, that we look like God. God has no shape or form. It means that we human beings have God-like powers, and the Almighty has set us in charge of and responsible for the earth. It is an awesome amount of power, and we can use it for good or for ill. We have free will, and the choice is ours.

The Midrash (a form of Jewish religious literature as necessary to understand how Jews read and understand Scripture as corrective lenses are for a significantly nearsighted person who wishes to drive a car) in *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:11 teaches that we human beings stand midway between God and the rest of the animals. Like the animals we eat, sleep, drink, procreate, eliminate our waste, and we die. But in a God-like way we have the power to think, analyze and shape the environment in a way that far surpasses any other creature.

We are the only beings on earth that can go to the side of a mountain, mine ore from the mountain, and turn the ore into iron, the iron into steel and with that steel forge the most delicate of surgical instruments to heal and to save lives.

We are also the only creatures who can go to the same mountain, mine the same ore and from that ore fashion bombs and bullets whose only purpose is to kill and to maim.

The implicit and overriding message of the story is that God wants us to use our power to form a just, caring, compassionate society on earth. But we—not God—must decide if we will.

No, Genesis's magnificent creation story makes no pretense of being scientific. Rather it teaches the core values upon which our religious traditions rest. It teaches that God entrusts the earth to our care. It is, though, as the Midrash (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13) reminds us, the only earth we will get. May that knowledge inspire us to nurture it lovingly and use the talents with which God has blessed us to turn over a safer, sweeter, more ecologically sound world to our children and grandchildren!

The story of creation does not end on the sixth day with the creation of humanity. It ends by telling us that God rested on the seventh day. The Irish Catholic author Thomas Cahill wrote a best seller a few years ago entitled, *The Gifts of the Jews*. In this volume, Cahill contends that one of the greatest contributions the Jewish people have made to human development is introducing the concept of different types of time. It was, he claimed, the Jew who taught the world that time is not just a repeating cycle of meaningless events. Time matters. There is ordinary time when we do our work and the other tasks of daily life. And there is sacred time when we step back and rest from our routines.

The concept of sacred time—which is emphasized over and over again in the Torah—is so central that it is woven into the very fabric of creation itself. If God is the force of good that we wish to emulate, and if God rests on the seventh day, then we can rest too.

Our rest, though, is not just relaxation and recreation. Our Shabbat is mostly about spiritual rest and as the Torah calls it, "refreshment of soul." (*Exodus* 31:17) It is a time not to create but for each of us to consider how we can use the talents with which God has blessed us to help create a more just, caring and compassionate society.

The material in Genesis 2:4- chapter 11 presents three attempts by God to have human beings establish the kind of society for which God yearns. The first attempt is in the Garden of

Eden. We could discuss different interpretations of this story endlessly. For now, let it suffice to say that Eden was a world of no birth, no death, a place where one did not have to work very hard, and in my opinion, no sexuality. That is what the first couple discovered when the first couple ate of the Tree of Knowledge.

For me the decision to eat the fruit does not represent a great sin but a conscious choice. Eve—the heroine not the villain—saw “that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom (*Genesis 3:6*). Therefore she took of its fruit and ate.

I think this choice is understandable. After a long year of work, I can imagine nothing more inviting than the prospect of sitting on a beautiful beach with nothing to do but let the clear blue waters wash over my toes. When I am hungry, I would love to simply be able to reach up and pick a delicious piece of non-pesticide treated fruit to eat. I would enjoy this for about a week. Some years I could use ten days. After that, though, I would look for something to do, for some way to make a difference. I can imagine the first couple felt similarly. Whether we interpret it as the Fall of Man, or a conscious choice by humanity to choose a meaningful life span of limited duration over eternity in paradise, we can be sure that Eden did not work.

God established a second society after Eden, with new ground rules. We had sex, were born, died and had to work hard. This society did not work out either. Cain killed Abel, and things went downhill from there. Finally God decides to flood the earth and picks Noah, “a righteous man in his age” (*Genesis 6:9*) to survive the flood and rebuild the world afterwards.

Now we are all aware from studies of anthropology or ancient literature that many cultures had their stories of a deluge. What is noteworthy is less than similarities between these stories and the flood story (of which there are many) but the vital differences. Only in the biblical flood story does God decide to destroy the earth because of its moral failure. The Torah presents to us a good, caring, God wanting human beings to -as God’s *raison d’etre*—establish a kind, workable world. The Torah reports that corruption and lawlessness were rampant in the land. Therefore God regretted making the earth and decided to destroy it. (*Genesis 6:5, 6 and 11*).

Unlike the other ancient flood stories where the hero is chosen at the caprice of the gods, God chooses Noah because he alone in his age is righteous (*Genesis 6:9*). Now the Talmud (*B.Sanhedrin 108a*) records an interesting argument between two sages. Rabbi Yohanan argued that Noah was righteous only in comparison with others of his age who were so bad. On the other hand, Resh Lakish contends Noah’s righteousness, for he lived in an age when the culture was so evil, and he is more praiseworthy than if he lived in an era where there were other examples of righteous behavior that he could have followed. Such discussions are important because the rabbis saw righteous action as the *sine qua non* of religious behavior.

After the flood, God tried a third time to have humanity establish an acceptable world with three very significant new ground rules:

1. God makes human beings accountable for administering a system of justice where evil doers are punished (*Genesis 9:5*).
2. For the first time God gives humanity permission to eat meat. (*Genesis 9:3*)  
Personally speaking, the reason I decided to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle is that my studies of Genesis’s earliest chapters lead me to believe that that was God’s original hope and that giving permission to eat meat was a concession by God to human nature. (For a more thorough discussion of this topic see Stephen Fuchs, “Enhancing the Divine Image” in Susan Jean Armstrong and Richard George Botzler, *The Animal Ethics Reader*, Routledge, 2003, second edition, 2008, pp 224-226).
3. God promises unequivocally “Never again will I doom the earth because of man...nor will I ever again destroy every living being.” (*Genesis 8:21*)

It is vital to note, though, that God’s promise that God will not destroy the world again does not mean that we human beings are not capable of doing so. When God created the world,

the Midrash says that God addressed the first couple saying: “Pay heed that you do not corrupt or destroy My universe; for if you ruin it, there is no one to repair it after you.” (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13)

Unfortunately, the third society gets off to a horrible start. The first thing Noah does upon leaving the ark is get drunk. Then Scripture records (*Genesis* 9:20) Noah gets drunk and Ham “saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers.” (*Genesis* 9:22) Now we cannot be sure exactly what that verse means, but the rabbis of the Midrash have a field day with that passage imagining anything from forced sexual contact to castration. (see discussion between Rav and Samuel in *B. Sanhedrin* 70a). Clearly for Jewish interpreters, society three was not working.

Then there is the wonderful story of the Tower of Babel. From a modern perspective I love the story of the Tower for the following reason. Perhaps the religious question non-Jews ask me most frequently (second only to “Why do Jews not believe in Jesus?”) is “Why do we have to have all of these different religions? Wouldn’t the world be better if there was just one religion instead of all the problems caused by religious difference?”

My response to this question is: “Whose religion would it be? Would it be yours where the life, death on the cross, resurrection and ascension to heaven of Jesus is the defining religious motif? Or would it be mine where the life and death of Jesus plays no role whatsoever?”

Clearly we shall never have just one religion unless some people are forced to give up beliefs they consider essential to their outlook on life. No, religious unity should not be our goal. Rather, respect for and appreciation of honest religious differences is what we need more of in this world. (That is why it was so gratifying to see Dr. Hans Ucko’s workshop, “Thou Shalt Not Convert” as part of the seminary’s 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary program.)

While exactly what happened in Genesis 11 (The story of the Tower) is not clear from the biblical text, it is clear that God did not like it. Seen through Midrashic eyes, the building of the tower was an outright rebellion against God’s divinity and authority (*Bereshit Rabbah* 38:7).

According to another Midrash (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer Jerusalem Eshkol, 1983, pp. 78-79 and *Midrash Ha Gadol* 11:3) the wickedness of the generation of the tower was so great and their regard for human life so little that if a brick fell from a scaffold, all work would stop until the brick could be retrieved. If, however, a person fell from a scaffold, they would just plaster over the injured party and build him into the tower.

Society number three then—especially as seen through Midrashic eyes through Midrashic eyes—worked out no better than the first two. Now God has a serious three-pronged dilemma:

1. God still cares.
2. God is still disappointed in the moral progress of the world.
3. But God has promised never to destroy the earth again.

The answer to that dilemma is that God chooses the family of Abraham and Sarah, and makes a sacred Covenant with them and their descendants. In that Covenant, God promises to protect us, give us children, make us a permanent people and give us the land of Israel.

Whatever one’s feelings about the Middle East today, the Jewish connection to that piece of land goes back to the very beginning of our story as a people. Interfaith dialogue can not be truly meaningful if it does not on some level take that ancient connection into account.

By definition a Covenant is a two-sided agreement. In return for God’s promises, God charges Abraham, Sarah and their descendants to

1. Be a Blessing.” (*Genesis* 12:2)

2. Walk in God's ways and be (my translation of the Hebrew word *tamim* is) worthy" (*Genesis 17:1*)
3. Fill the world with and teach your children to practice "righteousness and justice (*Tzedakah* and *Mishpat*). (*Genesis 18:19*)

We see now that the first eleven chapters of Genesis do not comprise a random and overly long introduction to Genesis's main theme. Rather those chapters contain carefully chosen stories illustrating God's desire for human beings to establish a just, caring and compassionate society. Eden, the post Eden-pre-flood, and post-flood societies all fail. The Covenant God makes with Abraham is God's fourth attempt to encourage humans to do what God has yearned for us to do since the time of creation.

Among the most noteworthy features of the God of the Covenant is that God enters into a true partnership with Abraham and his descendants and can be influenced and even inspired by them.

When God was ready to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, we find God ruminating rhetorically, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do..." (*Genesis 18:17*) God's answer to God's self is "Of course not! I can't hide from Abraham—even though I know he'll give me a hard time about this—anything so significant because I have taken him on as a partner in the quest to create a better world.

Abraham does indeed give God a hard time: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" —He challenges.

The Sages of the Midrash take the challenge even further than the biblical text. The Hebrew statement: "Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do justly" can be read without changing any of the word order as a statement; "The Judge of all the Earth shall not do justly." The meaning is that Abraham is actually saying to God: If You insist on standards of rigid justice, then no society will ever work out. Abraham is effectively telling God to lighten up a bit in dealing with human beings and temper the Divine insistence on justice with mercy and compassion. (*Bereshit Rabbah 49:9*)

The idea that our Covenant with God is a true partnership and that human actions can actually influence the Almighty also manifests itself in the Exodus story. The children of Israel are suffering in bondage in Egypt. According to one Midrash, Moses would go out quietly among the slaves and rearrange their tasks so that the frail and the weak would not be overburdened. Later when he sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, Moses intervenes on the slave's behalf. God observes Moses' action and thinks: "Since Moses has left his high throne to take up the case of a slave, perhaps it is time for Me to come down off of my throne and redeem the children of Israel." (*Shmot Rabbah 1:27*)

What a concept! Our actions can influence God! God yearns for us today to fill the world with righteousness and justice as much as God charged Abraham with that responsibility 4000 years ago. But we have free will and it is up to us to decide whether we shall use our talents for good or for ill.

Today, of course, three great religious traditions see Abraham as our spiritual father. We share many common ideals and goals, and we also have real religious differences. Our task as twenty-first century seekers of harmony is not to simply tolerate but to understand, accept, respect, and affirm those areas of difference. Hopefully, though, whether we practice Judaism, Christianity or Islam, we find inspiration in the ancient hope that God not only cares about the choices we make but is moved when we act righteously to partner actively with us in the sacred task of repairing our troubled world.