

We're back to the beginning – or are we? Year for year on Simchat Torah we turn our Torah scrolls back to the Book of Genesis and begin the process of reading anew the 5 books of the Torah. But before we read the first part of Genesis, we read the final parashah of Deuteronomy, merging the old into the new. We all know that life is both linear and cyclical; we count years chronologically of course, but within each year there are many recurring events. We also know that we can never completely return to the past because change is continual. Therefore, each fresh reading of our Torah is imbued with the experiences of past years. Things we used to find boring, puzzling, or just plain irritating can suddenly come into focus, while others lose or change their significance. How we understand the two widely differing creation stories in Parashah Bereshit is not only a prime example, it can be a lifetime work in progress.

In the first, animals appear before humans, and in the second a man comes first. Today most of us understand that our scriptures were authored by many different people at different times and from differing perspectives. We are also able to find parallels in other myths and legends from around the world. But does any of that really matter? As we mature, we accumulate a variety of perspectives from which to view both stories, enabling us to find significance in each even if we are far removed from taking either of them literally. The first story is about order and classification. It is linear, progressing from emptiness, darkness, and disorder to a fully formed Earth with humans at the pinnacle, equipped to not only inhabit, but also to subdue it. The second story begins with the creation of a man. It is anything but linear, jumping from describing the land and its rivers to planting the Garden of Eden with its two fateful trees, to observing that the man is still alone, to having the man name all the animals, to finally creating woman from the body of the man through a surgical procedure. Bible scholarship, science, and mythology aside, one of the most important gleanings from these differing versions is the acknowledgement that as human beings, we are not only able to process both versions, we also need both to understand and appreciate our own complexity. To some extent, we all think logically as well as creatively, but some of us are more analytical than intuitive while others are just the opposite. The first story appeals to our analytical side, the second to our creative nature, and we can – and must – relate to both for healthy balance.

In the first story God is אֱלֹהִים *Elohim*, a plural noun, but taking a singular verb. Since the Hebrew root *el* denotes power (the *elim* are the mighty ones), *Elohim* signifies concentrated powers. After creating an inhabitable environment and pronouncing each step good, Elohim creates man and woman together, in the image and likeness of Elohim, calling all that has been created very good. This is a story of majesty and power, of work and achievement, and of satisfaction and reward upon completion.

In the second story, God, now called אֱלֹהֵי ה' (HaShem Elohim), creates a man first, “from the dust of the earth” and breathes the soul of life into his nostrils. HaShem Elohim then plants a garden and places the man there to work and guard it. This roundabout, disorganized story is all about the relationship between Creator and creation. In the first, man is at the top of the food chain, and is commanded to fill and subdue the earth. In the second, man is told to be the custodian of his environment, and he is simply asked to name, not to dominate, all the animals Elohim HaShem creates and shows him. And Elohim HaShem sees that the man is lonely because he has not found a suitable helpmate, so he creates one for him, because “it is not good that man is alone.” This is not only a story about relationships, it is also a story about empathy. Elohim creates; HaShem interacts with creation.

The first story lacks individual names; it's almost as though Elohim is creating objects. The second is full of names; the man is called *Adam* because he was formed *min ha'adamah* – from the soil. *Adam* signifies mortality – our bodies come from the soil and return to it. But he names his wife *Chava* because she is “the mother of all life.” We are all mortal, but because we are able to procreate, life continues. Creation is an unending process.

So once again, “Turn it, and turn it [the Torah], for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it ...” (Ben Bag-Bag in Pirke Avot, 5:22). Yes, we're back to the beginning again, a year older, and with another year's worth of experience. What new vistas will this year's cycle of Torah readings open for you? It's not too late to say *shanah tovah* – and may your Torah gleanings be sweet!

Shabbat shalom!