

Torah Table Talk – Sacred Words

Parshat Bereshit, Genesis 1:1 – 6:8

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Whenever people gather around the table for a meal or come together to enjoy one another's company, it is customary for someone to deliver a *d'var Torah*, a teaching based on the wisdom of Torah. One doesn't have to be a rabbi to do so - each person has the ability to discover his or her own insights into the Torah and the lessons of the sages. By doing so one adds his or her own voice to the chain of the Jewish tradition. These teachings have the power to improve the lives of others and bring healing and wholeness to the world. The expression '*d'var Torah*' literally means 'a word of *Torah*.' A single word of *Torah* can reveal great insights and profound truths. The sages compared words of Torah to drops of rain that bring life to a parched earth: "Even as a rain shower falling on various trees gives to each a special savor in keeping with its species - to the vine the savor of grapes, to the olive tree the savor of olives, to the fig tree the savor of figs--so words of *Torah* are one, yet within them are Scripture and *Mishnah*, *Halakhot* and *Aggadot*." (*Sifre Devarim*)

The task that I have set for the coming year is an intriguing one: to deliver a *d'var Torah* each week, to literally share a single word of *Torah* that captures not only the essence of the *parashah* but also contains a core idea in our tradition. The words which I have chosen are significant not only in understanding the weekly *Torah* portion but in understanding our way of life. I hope that by teaching 'sacred words' I will inspire readers to increase their knowledge of the Hebrew language. One cannot savor our way of life without increasing one's knowledge of the Hebrew language. Judaism is more than just a list of laws or a set of beliefs. It is a civilization and a way of life. And one cannot understand a culture without developing an understanding of its language.

There is much that can be said about the story of creation, or better yet, the stories of creation. Everything in the Bible and the Jewish tradition begins with, and grows out, of the word *Bereshit Barah Elohim*, "When God began to create." But the core of the creation story is the creation of the first human being. Before we are Jews we must understand what it means to be human. I will focus, therefore, on the word Adam – not only the name but the term and all it implies.

Genesis 1:26-28 And God said: Let us make the human (*ha-adam*) in our image, after our likeness...and God created the humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God, creating them male and female.

Genesis 5:1 This is the record of *Adam's* line. When God created humankind, it was made in the likeness of God. Male and female were they created.

Sources

Pesikta Rabbatai 14:9

Rabbi Aha said: When the Holy One desired to create the first human, God consulted the ministering angels and asked, "Shall we make human?" They asked, "What is to be its character?" God replied, "This being whom I desire to create will be wiser than you." How did God prove it? God assembled all domestic animals, wild beasts, and fowls, and made them pass before the angels. Then God asked, "What are the names of these creatures?" The angels did not know. Subsequently, God created the first human, and again assembled all animals and made them pass before the human. God asked, "What are the names of these creatures?" *Adam* replied, "This one--the name, 'ox' fits him. This one-'ass.' And this one-'horse.' And this one-'camel.' And this one-'lion.' And this one-'vulture.'"...Thus it is written, "And the human gave names to all the cattle, to the fowl of the air," (Gen. 2:20). God asked, "And you, what is your name?" *Adam* replied, "The name *Adam* fits me." God asked, "Why?" He replied, "Because I was fashioned out of the earth (*adamah*)." God asked, "And I, what is My Name?" "The name *Adonai* fits You." God asked, "Why?" "Because You are Sovereign over all."

Mishnah Sandhedrin 4:5

Therefore, a single human being was created to teach you that if one destroys a single life, it is accounted as if he has destroyed a whole world, and if one saves a single life, it is accounted as if he saved a whole world. Also, for the sake of peace among all beings, so that one person may not say, "My father was greater than your father," and no heretical group shall say "there are many powers in heaven." Also, to show the greatness of the Holy One: human beings stamp many coins with one seal and each is like the other, but the Sovereign of all Sovereigns, the

Holy One, stamps every human being with the seal of *adam* and not one of them is another. Therefore every person should say: "for my sake was the world created."

Bereshit Rabbah 24:7

Ben Azzai said: The verse, "This is the record of *Adam's* line. When God created humankind, it was made in the likeness of God," (Gen. 5:1) utters a great principle in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva said: This is a great principle of the Torah: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). (This teaches us) that you must not say, "Since I have been humiliated, let others be humiliated; since I have been cursed, let my neighbor also be cursed." (In support of Ben Azzai's opinion,) Rabbi Tanchumah said, if you act thus, realize who it is that you are willing to have humiliated - "the one who was made in the likeness of God."

Commentary

It is clear, both from the language of the Bible and the *Midrashim* above, that the term *adam* (pronounced *ah-dahm*) is both a generic noun which applies equally to both males and females and a proper name. In the opening chapters of the Torah it appears with a definite article *ha-* which mean 'the.' As we can see from the *Midrashim*, the word *adam* is applied to human species much in the same way that the other creatures in God's universe were created as a species and not as individuals. The sages recognized the true meaning of the word *adam*, from the word *adamah*, the earth. We are earth-beings created from the earth, and appropriately returning to the earth when our mortal lives come to an end. Interestingly, none of the other creations are described in this way. According to the *Midrash*, it is *adam*, the earth-being, who names itself because it recognizes the true nature of its limited existence.

The sages also understood that the creation of *adam* must be read as a myth and not as a historical narrative. A myth tells us more about who we are and what we should be than where we come from. If *adam* means human being, then why is humanity created as a singular being? The Mishnah offers several answers to this question. The singularity of *adam* points us toward the uniqueness of our humanity and the moral potential of human beings. It is a statement about our relationship to God and our relationship to one another.

The term *adam* (as opposed to the proper name) also comes close to the Yiddish term *mensch*, the term for a decent person of integrity and honor. *Mensch* is the German term for a human being. Before one can be a good Jew, then, one must begin by striving to be a *mensch*, a human being, in the best sense of the word. The Bible begins not only with creation but our fundamental humanity and all that it implies about how we live and who we are. We come from the stuff of creation. We have free will. We can make good and bad choices. But we are created in the image of God.

Questions to Ponder

1. Jewish scholars have always puzzled over the language of Genesis 1:26. To whom is God speaking when God says, "Let us make *adam*"? Who is the 'us' in this verse?
2. The term *tzelem*, image, usually has a concrete physical connotation. The term is even used for an idol. What does it mean to be created, "In the image of God"?
3. There are two stories of creation in the opening chapters of the Torah. In one (quoted above) God creates *adam*, the earth-being, both male and female, simultaneously. And in the second chapter, God creates the *adam*, the earth-being, breathes the force of life into HIM (note the gender), and only later does God create woman from the side (or rib) of *adam*? What does each version of creation say about the role of men and women in the world, and the nature of human life? How is the term *adam* different from one another in each version?
4. What does it mean to be an *adam*, an earth-being? How are we connected to and different from the other creations?
5. What does it mean to be a *mensch* before you are a Jew? Can one be a Jew without being a *mensch*? Can one be a *mensch* without being a faithful Jew?

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