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# SEVEN DAYS, MANY VOICES

Insights into the  
Biblical Story of Creation

EDITED BY

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ages or their coins, as in the midrash cited earlier? Do they cease observing the laws of the land? Certainly, they believe—at least for some time—that there is no ruler in the kingdom. Similarly, if we are God’s identical twin, per the bold suggestion of the parable, then any injury to a human being—even one guilty of a capital crime—not only diminishes the divine image, but may even lead to the conclusion that God no longer exists in the world. Such a conclusion threatens to lead to widespread murder, or at least a failure to treat others as images of God.

The concept of *tzelem Elohim*, therefore, creates both rights and obligations. Every human being merits the protection of his or her life and dignity and simultaneously bears the responsibility of protecting other images of God. The true test of our society’s success in protecting the image of God in each person comes through our treatment of those we find the least sympathetic—particularly those accused or convicted of heinous crimes. If we succeed, perhaps we increase the presence of God in the world. But if we fail, we may find ourselves living in a world with a diminished divine presence and without the protections of *tzelem Elohim* that the Torah demands.

## Notes

1. Rabbi David Kimchi, commentary on Genesis 9:6.
2. *M’chilta D’Rabbi Yishmael*, Tractate *BaChodesh*.
3. Kimchi, commentary on Genesis 9:6.
4. The printed edition of the Talmud inserts the word “of Israel.” However, this word does not appear in manuscripts and does not make sense in context, as Cain and Abel were not Jewish.
5. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Midot HaRaayah, Abavah 9*.
6. This text also contains a clear anti-Christian polemic, especially when we consider that hanging probably actually referred to crucifixion. Just because a person—who looks like God—is seen crucified in the public square does not mean that God has actually been killed.

## The World As It Is

RABBI DR. RACHEL S. MIKVA

*So God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female. God then blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it; hold sway over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and over every animal that creeps on the earth.”*

Genesis 1:27–28

Just one kind. Animals and plants are created with diverse species, but there is no different kind of human. We are one species, all graced by a likeness with the Divine. Genesis 1 presents us with a radical egalitarian vision that we have yet to realize in our world, where human dignity attaches to all people regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, class, or physical ability.

With other details of our creation, we have been overachievers: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it” (Genesis 1:28). This we have determinedly pursued. The verse has become a target of critique for appearing to advocate our heedless assault on the planet, but it wasn’t meant to be controversial. Inscribed in antiquity, it was

an invocation against extinction and an aspiration for some measure of control over an uncertain world. How could one imagine that humanity would multiply so greatly as to overload the earth's resources, and control our environment to the extent that we might threaten Creation itself?

Mastery can mean many things. One way to read day six is as the culmination of a divine plan in which all of Creation exists in balance, where the creature of the divine image holds sway in minding the store. Waters above and below, lights of day and night—all support the life-generating force of the universe. Humans and animals live as vegetarians in harmony with one another. “Very good,” indeed—at least in our imagination as a world that could be, a world we can almost taste each Shabbat, but release as the Sabbath sun sets and we reenter the world as it is.

*Our* world is illuminated in the second Creation narrative, beginning with Genesis 2:4 and its recasting of Creation as a story all about us. Androcentrism run amok, earth and heavens serve merely as a backdrop, with plants and animals apparently awaiting our arrival. We are then created from the dust of the earth; the breath of God animates our being but does not describe our nature.

This world reveals a dialectical struggle embedded in our DNA, where our kinship with the rest of Creation opposes our tendency to hold ourselves apart. Genesis 2 signals both aspects of our being. We are created as *adam* (human) from the *adamah* (earth), words linked to the same Hebrew root. Yet, as we give names to all the animals, we find no fitting partner among them. We also receive a sacred task to till and tend the garden, but stewardship does not come naturally and our appetites are difficult to contain—so the command that follows (the only command in the passage) is about what we can and cannot take, rather than what we might give.

At the same time, the text portrays our deep need for companionship, with a willingness to sacrifice some part of ourselves to make it

possible: “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). As the narrative unfolds, however, it illustrates the all too familiar unsettling of human relationship. Genesis 3:6 shows how we can be driven by desires—physical, aesthetic, and intellectual: the fruit of the forbidden tree is good to eat; it is a delight to the eyes and a potential source of wisdom. Why not take a bite, despite the consequences for ourselves and others? The discrepancy between God's command about the tree as given to Adam (Genesis 2:16–17) and Eve's description of it to the serpent (3:3) forces us to wonder about our struggles to communicate honestly with one another: is it Adam's exaggeration or Eve's distraction that leads her to believe they are not allowed to touch the tree? Most telling of all is the heartbreaking illustration of human beings failing to take responsibility: Adam blames it on Eve, and Eve blames it on the serpent. It's hard to go a full day without a savory rationalization. Yet somewhere in our bones, we know what we have done. After they eat from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve try to hide when God draws near (Genesis 3:8–13).

In the world as it is, sometimes even such minimal awareness evades us. We often cannot be sure if we are doing the right thing. Maimonides asked why God would not want us to obtain knowledge of good and evil; is it not a requisite part of our moral responsibility? He postulated that prior to eating from the tree, we had superior knowledge, knowledge of true and false. One does not say that the concept of the earth as flat is “bad,” but rather that it is false. Yet with many of life's most important questions, he lamented, we have been reduced to relativism, arguing from our own limited cultural context and perspective whether something is right or wrong (*Guide for the Perplexed* I:2). It becomes one more source of conflict.

The second Creation story concludes by describing a series of profound alienations that permeate our reality (Genesis 3:14–16). The world as it is struggles with spiritual impoverishment, for the Divine Presence (or its secular parallel, a transcendent sense of purpose) too

often feels distant or absent from people's lives. The world as it is suffers a rampant sense of homelessness, with countless individuals physically or emotionally stripped of their place. The world as it is evokes enmity between human beings and the animal world, fighting for space and food and security. The world as it is perpetuates patriarchy and a host of other hierarchical relationships that infect the body politic. The world as it is admits a fundamental alienation between humanity and the earth. Not only have we had to eat by the sweat of our brow (or someone's brow, anyway), we stand on the precipice of catastrophic climate change.

These are not commanded ways of being. They are not the eternal punishment for sin. Torah is not merely describing this world; it is critiquing it with a cautionary tale of what happens when we continue to miss the mark, when we repeatedly demonstrate our origin in dust rather than the divine image.

Historical criticism assigns authorship of the two Creation narratives to different documentary sources, Genesis 1 to the Priestly tradition and Genesis 2–3 to the Yahwist tradition, each with its own historical context and conceptual emphases. Yet they speak together in our Torah, and we are forced to reckon with their collision. Rachel Adler writes: "The goodness of creation and mastery conferred in Genesis 1 are complicated by pain, alienation and defeat. The redemptive truth offered by this grim depiction is that patriarchal social relations construct a world that cries out to be mended."<sup>1</sup>

Is patriarchy the foundational hierarchy of human society, as Adler's comment would suggest? It certainly reaches beyond our remembered past and operates on us beyond the realm of consciousness. There are multiple systems of power, however, that enable some people to dominate others and allow humanity to destroy the ecosystem that sustains us. As the quick succession of curses in Genesis 3 suggests, the problems of our world are bound up together. We cannot repair one piece while leaving other forms of oppression and alienation in place. Too often, this truism of intersectionality is paralyzing; the cumulative task is too

immense. Yet its corollary is that we can begin in one place and thereby contribute to the reweaving of the entire social fabric. So let us begin at our creation on the sixth day, which does seem to emphasize gender in unraveling systems of domination. Judaism neither invented patriarchy nor eliminated it, but the foundational anthropology in Genesis 1 is a building block for constructing right relation, relations of mutuality and tenderness, equality and empowerment—the world as it could be.

It is difficult to translate the verse of our creation in a way that captures its radical vision, however. The first edition of the Plaut commentary used the New Jewish Publication Society translation, "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). There is no hierarchy and no essentialized ideas about what men do and what women do. Even though *adam* (human) has been rendered as "man," there is no codified difference in our existence; we are each created in the image and "likeness" of God. If we of diverse genders are so fashioned, then how can we call the Creator "he"?

Using "they" would reflect the plural-form name of God, *Elohim*, inscribed in the first Creation narrative—and it is the commonly preferred way to finesse gender binaries and male privilege when talking about people in English today. In our multi-faith world, there is even something attractive about lifting up the multiplicity of the Divine. The Hebrew Bible itself flirts with such language, as in the previous verse, which states, "Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). It cannot be sustained, however, without seriously undermining clarity of expression and the text's emphasis on monotheism.

The Plaut commentary's more recent gender-sensitive version opts for a less verbatim translation and adds bracketed words to accommodate our egalitarian perspective: "So God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female." That works fairly well. For our study, however, I propose something more destabilizing: "God created humankind in zher

image; in the image of God did zhe create it, male and female zhe created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Resorting to the already outdated and never-popular neologism of "zhe" and "zher" highlights our struggle. How do we liberate our imagination from the blasphemous grip of patriarchy that idolizes maleness as representative of the Most High? Can we do it without stripping God of gender altogether and accidentally desexing the Divine? The Hebrew verse is also a bit stilted, ensuring that we stop to notice the astonishing nature of our creation.

Might the blended pronoun also empower us to recognize that "male and female" need not be two utterly distinct and static genders in binary relation? The Rabbis of late antiquity knew it; they discerned a minimum of six genders within the community, overlapping and fluid. The Sages' interest was in guiding these individuals toward a fulfilled Jewish life, not in judging them. My favorite comment is "The intersex person, he is a creature unto herself" (*Mishnah Bikurim* 4:5). Our minds are wired to discern difference, but they are not computers, limited to thinking in ones and zeroes.

The experience of endless diversity within Creation should blow open the limits on our theological imagination. Pulling at the thread of gender polarity, we glimpse a world without the hierarchies that separate person from person, humanity from the earth, and Creation from its Creator. This is not "the world as it is," but part of what makes us human is the capacity for abstract thought, to explore and to fashion even things we have not seen. The world of Creation in balance is yet a possibility.

And God saw all that he had made and found it very good.

And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

(Genesis 1:31)

## Note

1. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 123–24.

## Paradise on Earth

DR. RACHEL HAVRELOCK

*God then said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water!" So God made the expanse, separating the waters beneath the expanse from the waters above the expanse—and so it was.*

Genesis 1:6–7

Human life transpires in a fragile state between efforts toward a perfect order and the possibility of an overwhelming flood. In the beginning, water is as potent as God, who contains it in order to bring distinct life-forms into being. On the second day of Creation God separates water into the lighter elements that form the sky and the heavier ones that run beneath the earth. The boundary is the *rakia*—the firmament or expanse—which the Rabbis describe as a tunnel at the horizon where surface water and rain turn like buckets in a waterwheel. It is clear that Genesis 1:7 knows how blue skies and azure waters are connected in a cycle of evaporation and precipitation and sees the interconnection as an essential component of the world. However, this is the only day of Creation not deemed "good" by God, as if to acknowledge the great struggle between the Creator and the