

Parashat Noach

In last week's drash we heard, some of you perhaps for the first time, about there being two versions of the Creation account. According to this proposition Bresheet chapter 1 represents a priestly account of the Creation, from a textual source that modern Biblical scholars have called 'P', while Bresheet 2, it suggested, comes from a source that they have called 'J' or 'Yahwist' - the J being on account of the German pronunciation of the letter Y. Thus, over the course of the past couple of centuries scholars have become convinced that Bresheet 1 and 2 originally came from different pens - or should that be quills? - and tell the story of creation from different perspectives. According, for instance, to Bresheet chapter 1 God made the first human beings sometime on the sixth day, creating at least two of them simultaneously, as we read, "male and female He created them." But then, in the next chapter, we see that the creation of human beings is described in very different terms: "Here is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created. On the day when Adonai, God, made earth and heaven, there was as yet no wild bush on the earth, and no wild plant had as yet sprung up; for Adonai, God, had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no one to cultivate the ground. Rather, a mist went up from the earth which watered the entire surface of the ground. Then Adonai, God, formed a person from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that he became a living being. Adonai, God, planted a garden toward the east, in 'Eden, and there he put the person whom he had formed. Out of the ground Adonai, God, caused to grow every tree pleasing in appearance and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." There then follows an account of how God created the animals and the first woman, "Adonai, God, said, "It isn't good that the person should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him." So from the ground Adonai, God, formed every wild animal and every bird that flies in the air, and he brought them to the person to see what he would call them. Whatever the person would call each living creature, that was to be its name. So the person gave names to all the livestock, to the birds in the air and to every wild animal. But for Adam there was not found a companion suitable for helping him. Then God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the person; and while he was sleeping, he took one of his ribs and closed up the place from which he took it with flesh. The rib which Adonai, God, had taken from the person, he made a woman-person; and he brought her to the man-person. The man-person said, "At last! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She is to be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh. They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed."

The differences between Bresheet 1 and 2 are stark. As Professor James Kugel, an Orthodox Jew and Torah expert, comments to this effect, according to Bresheet 2, "Adam seems to be the first human in history, and he is, at first, very much alone - almost as if the creation recounted in chapter 1 had never happened. God puts Adam alone in the Garden of Eden to live, then creates all the animals and has Adam name them, and only after that goes on to create Eve. Not only do chapters 1 and 2 seem to differ in some of their details, but they also

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depict God's actions in quite different ways. In chapter 1, God is represented as cosmic sovereign: He speaks, gives orders, and as a result things just come into existence. 'And God said, 'Let there be light!' and there was light'. In chapters 2 and 3, by contrast, He seems to be more of a divine craftsman. He Himself shapes Adam out of the fresh mud of the earth and then breathes air into his nostrils to start his life - this seems to be a more hands-on approach to creating. Later, God is said to 'walk about' the garden very much like a human being (Gen 3:8); when Adam and Eve hide from Him, He calls out 'Where are you?' apparently, He Himself does not know. At the end, God makes 'leather clothes' for the pair - another hands-on act that seems at odds with the cosmic deity portrayed in chapter 1."

As Kugel notes, the differences between Bresheet 1 and 2 are very evident in the stated chronology of each act of creation, with the second chapter, for instance, placing the creation of Adam *before* that of vegetation and animals. In Bresheet 1, however, the vegetation is created on the third day, birds and sea creatures on the fifth day, and land animals at the beginning of the sixth day. But these chapters are different linguistically too. The Hebrew is different. And this is nowhere more evident than in the constant use in the text of Bresheet 1 of the word 'elohim' in reference to God. Bresheet 2, however, never uses 'elohim'. Instead as we end Bresheet 1 with its singular use of 'elohim' for God, and begin the second chapter we are immediately struck by the singular use of the Tetragrammaton - Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh. Other differences, are evident in the respective theological outlooks of the chapters, as Kugel has noted, the text of Bresheet 1 sees God as a distant deity, creating all things from afar simply with the word of His mouth; he gives orders, and then, still standing from afar, pronounces satisfaction over what He has made - that it is 'tov' or 'good'. This vision of a distant cosmic God is at significant odds with that of Bresheet 2 who moulds Adam from clay with His hands, personally breathes life into his nostrils, reaches in to his side with His hands and thus creates Chavah. Thus it is that Biblical scholars believe that Bresheet 1 and 2 come from different source traditions and from different authors with a very different way of seeing both God and the world that He created.

The identification of Bresheet 1 with a priestly textual source has been made by Biblical scholars on a number of bases, one of which was the apparent suggestion that this first chapter has much in common with other similarly identified passages in the Torah that relate to the subject of priests and their duties in the sanctuary. Scholars pointed to the occurrence of certain common words favoured by this priestly source which occur in Bresheet 1 as well. The word for work 'mel'akhah' is used dozens of times in the priestly source but not nearly so much elsewhere in the Bible. And it is this word 'mel'akhah' that is used three times in the last two sentences of the Bresheet 1 creation account, almost like a priestly signature. Wherever this priestly source has been identified within the Torah, so the scholars tell us, the source tradition demonstrates a concern for numbers and order, a concern which is also to be found in Bresheet 1. Indeed, it has been observed that the priestly source never uses the Tetragrammaton prior to the revelation in Shemot 6:2 that "I am the Lord - YHVH. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord [YHVH] I did

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not make myself fully known to them.” Thus prior to Shemot 6:2 the priestly text refers to God as ‘elohim’. The priestly text also avoids depicting God in human terms, preferring to present Him as a great, cosmic deity or spirit. As eminent theologian Gerhard Von Rad has said, “Anyone who expounds Genesis chapter 1 must understand one thing: this chapter is Priestly doctrine - indeed, it contains the essence of Priestly knowledge in a most concentrated form.” But perhaps the most striking indicator of the priestly authorship of Bresheet 1 was the not so small matter of the Sabbath. Shabbat, indeed all the holy days, was a matter that was particularly dear to the ancient priests. Thus scholars have concluded that the chronology of creation in Bresheet 1 is deliberately constructed to emphasise the Shabbat as the foundation of creation. As James Kugel again explains, “This whole account of how the world was made, they said, had been set forth in this six-day scheme so as to stress the importance of the seventh day, the sabbath. From the very beginning of the world, this priestly author was saying, the sabbath has existed; indeed, God arranged the creation into six ‘days’ so as to be able to rest on the seventh day, and so should you. That, rather than a simple recitation of the facts of the creation, seemed to modern scholars to be the whole point of chapter 1.”

The evidence that our Torah contains separate source traditions with different perspectives on the narrative and theological outlooks but which have been woven together into one text mounts when we look at Parashat Noach. Just as in the Creation account so in the flood account we find switches in the Hebrew between ‘elohim’ and the Tetragrammaton - YHVH. Indeed, if we separate out the lines which refer to ‘elohim’ and those that refer to ‘YHVH’ we can recover two distinct but wholly consistent and readable accounts of the flood. Thus, for instance, Bresheet 6 begins, “And YHVH saw the evil of humans was great in the earth, and all the inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the day. And YHVH regretted that he had made humans in the earth, and he was grieved to his heart. And YHVH said, ‘I shall wipe out the humans which I have created from the face of the earth, from human to beast to creeping thing to bird of the heavens, for I regret that I have made them.’ But Noah found favour in YHVH’s eyes.” Here, as we saw with relation to Bresheet 1, J or Yahwist source, refers to God as ‘YHVH’. Suddenly, however, in verse 9 the reference to God changes to ‘elohim’ - indicative of the priestly source. As we read, “These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God [elohim]. And Noah sired three sons: Shem, Ham, and Yafet. And the earth was corrupted before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and here it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with violence because of them, and here I am going to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of Gofer wood, make rooms with the Ark, and pitch it outside and inside with pitch. And this is how you shall make it: three hundred cubits the length of the ark, fifty cubits in width, and thirty cubits in height. You shall make a window for the ark, and you shall finish it to a cubit from the top, and you shall make an entrance to the ark in its side. You shall make lower, second, and third stories for it. And here I am bringing the flood, water over the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life

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from under the heavens. Everything which is on the land will die. And I shall establish my covenant with you. And you shall come to the ark, you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. And of all the living, of all flesh, you shall bring two to the ark to keep alive with you, they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kind, and of the beasts according to their kind, and of all the creeping things of the earth according to their kind, two of each will come to you to keep alive. And you, take for yourself of all food which will be eaten and gather it to you, and it will be for you and for them food.' And Noach did according to all that God [elohim] commanded him - so he did." As is apparent, throughout verses 1-8 God is referred to as YHVH, then between 9 and 22 God is referred to as 'elohim', and then in chapter 7:1-5 the text switches back to using YHVH. As we read, Bresheet 7:1-5, "And YHVH said to Noach, 'Come you and all your household, to the ark, for I have seen you as righteous before me in this generation. Of all the clean beasts, take yourself seven pairs, man and his woman; and of the beasts which are not clean, two, man and his woman. Also of the birds of the heavens seven pairs, male and female, to keep alive seed on the face of the earth. For in seven more days I shall rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and I shall wipe out all the substance that I have made from upon the face of the earth.' And Noach did according to all that YHVH had commanded him."

And so the narrative continues, swapping the name of God alternately from elohim to YHVH and back again. What is particularly interesting, as I have already hinted, is that if one first separates out and then puts these elohim passages together and after that the YHVH passages together the result is two narratives that are fully readable and consistent stories all by themselves. If we take the YHVH passages for instance in Bresheet 6 and 7 we find that the statement in 6:8 that "But Noach found favour in YHVH's eyes" flows naturally to the next instance of the Tetragrammaton in Bresheet 7:1, "And YHVH said to Noach, 'Come, you and all your household, to the ark, for I have seen you as righteous before me in this generation.'" The same can be said of the texts that refer to God as 'elohim'. In both cases there are other variances in the Hebrew that also mark these passages out as being from separate source traditions. There are further significant differences in the narrative. As Friedman helpfully observes, the priestly version (which refers to God as 'elohim') "has one pair of each kind of animal. The J version [which refers to God as YHVH] has seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals. P pictures the flood as lasting a year. J says it was forty days and forty nights. P has Noach send out a raven. J says a dove. P obviously has a concern for ages, dates, and measurements in cubits. J does not." Friedman continues, "Probably the most remarkable difference of all between the two is their different ways of picturing God. It is not just that they call the deity by different names. J pictures a deity who can regret things that he has done (6:6,7), which raises interesting theological questions, such as whether an all-powerful, all-knowing being would ever regret past actions. It pictures a deity who can be 'grieved to his heart' (6:6), who personally closes the ark (7:16) and smells Noach's sacrifice (8:21). This anthropomorphic quality of J is virtually entirely lacking in P. There God is regarded more as a transcendent controller of the universe." Friedman thus concludes that, "The two flood stories are separable and complete. Each has its own language, its own

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details, and even its own conception of God. And even that is not the whole picture. The J flood story's language, details and conception of God are consistent with the language, details, and conception of God in other J stories. The P flood story is consistent with other P stories. And so on. The investigators found each of the sources to be a consistent collection of stories, poems, and laws."

The woven nature of the Torah and other Biblical texts is testament to a multiplicity of sources, stories, traditions and interpretations of events in and among our ancient forbears. To the modern believing mind this realisation may at first hand feel somewhat troubling. After all, one might say, what are we to believe? Shouldn't there be just one narrative? A single account and perspective on events? And yet do we not also have four gospels which differ in small and sometimes large matters of detail and perspective? The fact is that ancient Hebrews did not think in the way that we think today. They apparently had no trouble with multiple points of view either in the relation of Biblical events or in their interpretation and theological outlook. The fact that today's believers find this difficult to handle is no doubt a result of the Church's creation of the idea of heresy, otherwise known as 'religious thought crime', which barely existed prior to the Second Century CE, and its imposition of a singular set of beliefs, codified by endless Church councils in creed after creed. The Church pursued those who demurred from these creeds, vigorously pursuing singularly of thought and doctrine, with threats of heresy, excommunication, actual burning at the stake and the promise of eternal damnation in a lake of fire alongside Satan and his demons! But thankfully that is not the pattern of Judaism, which, to the contrary, has from the very earliest times welcomed a multiplicity of ideas, discourse and debate, as is evident from the woven nature of our Hebrew Scriptures. Think about it.... The redactor of our Hebrew Scriptures might simply have used a single source tradition in pursuit of a single narrative and theology. But he didn't! Rather the very fact that not just Bresheet (as we have seen) but the whole Torah is woven together into a singular but diverse entity from separate source traditions with different theological perspectives teaches us that in Judaism there must be freedom to think differently without fear or accusation. The redactor was keen to preserve and not to expunge the many different points of view that it is possible to hold about God - and so should we. If Messianic Judaism is truly to be a Judaism and not just a form of evangelicalism with Hebraic bells on, then those who have come out to it from that very background need to open their minds and hearts and embrace the pluralism and diversity that has characterised Judaism and the Jewish people from the very beginning. For just like our Scriptures we *are* a diverse and plural people with many different theologies and ideas, woven altogether as one. The phrase *Am Echad* does not mean that we only have one point of view! As the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has cogently observed, "The beauty of creation, as we believe and as science ever more wondrously shows, is that Unity above creates diversity below, and the more complex the life form, the greater the diversity. The Rambam (Moreh haNevuchim 2: 40) says that though diversity applies to all life forms, it applies more to humans than any other. To which one must surely add: and among Jews more than most. No small people is more diverse, ethnically, culturally, attitudinally and religiously - and the more religious, the more

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diverse. There was hardly a Jewish settlement in the Middle Ages without its own minhagim and piyyutim. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century each hassidic group and yeshivah had its own style, its own niggunim, its own derekh ha-limmud, its own role models, its own spiritual tonality. The way of Ger was not that of Chabad; that of Volozhyn not that of Mir. Diversity is a sign of strength not weakness. As R. Yechiel Michel Epstein notably said in the introduction of Arukh haShulkhan to Choshen Mishpat: in the very last of the 613 commands, the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah, Moses uses not the word Torah but shirah, because in this respect Torah is like music, that its greatest beauty lies in complex harmonies. Or as the Netziv writes in his commentary to the Tower of Babel, uniformity of thought is not a sign of freedom but its opposite. Almost everything I read in Torah, Tanakh and Torah shebe'al peh seems to say likewise. Judaism is the only religion I know, all of whose canonical texts are anthologies of arguments: arguments between God and humans, humans and God, humans and one another. The Mishnah preserves the arguments of the sages even when it knows that the law is like one not the other. The greatest work ever undertaken to eliminate argument from its pages was the Mishneh Torah, and it gave rise to more arguments than any other. So difference, argument, clashes of style and substance, are signs not of unhealthy division but of health. The Judaism of Torah, Emunah and Halakhah continues to do what it has done for so long: to defeat the law of entropy that states, all systems lose energy over time. Not Judaism. Where you find argument, there you will find passion."

Of course, as ever, you are completely free to disagree - and that is the beauty of Judaism!