

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
Rosh HaShana Second Day 5778
September 22, 2017

Bereshit: Lessons from Michaelangelo's Sistene Chapel for the New Year

Every year, on this second day of Rosh HaShana, we read the first verses of Genesis:

light and darkness;
sprouts of vegetation and fruit trees;
the sun, moon and stars;
creeping, swarming creatures of the seas and the skies;
beasts and reptiles of every kind;
until God's creation is almost complete.
And God saw that it was good.
And God said, "Let us make a being in our image."

Later we learn that his name will be Adam, from the earth (*Adama*).

"The Creation of Adam" reminds us of the Garden of Eden, the breath of life, the birth of humankind. "The Creation of Adam" might also conjure up an image some 4200 miles from here in, of all places to mention on Rosh HaShana, the Vatican.

This year there was a display of photographs of Michelangelo's work last June in the new transportation center at the World Trade Center. As well, the Metropolitan Museum will open the largest Michelangelo exhibition in its history this November. In addition to drawings, paintings and sculptures, his earliest known painting (created when he was 12 or 13) will be included.

And then a few weeks ago, I was helping my son, Sam, to move into a college apartment for his senior year (!). One of the furnishings randomly left behind by a previous tenant there is a painting of the iconic image of the hands of Adam and God with outstretched fingers. That picture pointed me (pun) to explore Michelangelo's masterpiece.

So I decided that 5778 is a good year to contemplate the Rosh HaShana messages, from the Sistene Chapel. I have, indeed, found that there is so much to discover as we 'scratch the surface' of the damp fresco and its creator.

If his father had his way, Michelangelo would have pursued a more 'honorable' and lucrative profession than fine art. But the young artist was stubborn and driven; he refused to give up his passion. When he was about thirteen, he apprenticed in the Medici palace. In addition to the skills of sculpting and painting, he also two tutors who also introduced him Plato and philosophy, to enlightened thinking and literature. His lessons included the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, Midrash and the Kabbalah, the mystical texts of Judaism.

Years later, if it had been up to him, Michelangelo would never have left the marble of his sculptures for the scaffolding of the ceiling. When Pope Julius II summoned the artist, at first he refused. Like the Prophet Jonah (who we will read next week on Yom Kippur afternoon), Michelangelo tried to run away from the task. History describes that the artistic community of Rome felt so threatened by his talent, that they devised a plot, persuading the Pope to summon Michelangelo to the Sistine Chapel. This would accomplish two things: he would be occupied for a long time on this project, getting him out of the way of the other artists. And, perhaps more significantly, since they knew that Michelangelo was a sculptor, they hoped he would fail at the medium of painting. Michelangelo himself seemed to fear the same; in a sonnet he wrote to his friend in 1509:

*.... My painting is dead.
Defend it for me, protect my honor.
I am not in the right place - I am not a painter.*

How wrong was he! And look what became of the other artists seeking their own fame by sending Michelangelo to the vaults of the Sistine Chapel for those years.

The work itself was arduous. He describes it in the same Sonnet:

*I've already grown a goiter from this torture,
Hunched up here like a cat in Lombardy
My stomach's squashed under my chin,
my beard's pointing at heaven,
My brush,
Above me all the time, dribbles paint so my face makes a fine floor for droppings!
I'm bent taut as a Syrian bow.*

“When the Author was Painting the Vault of the Sistine Chapel”

“Nevertheless he persisted.” (as they say)

In the Torah we are often reminded that there are no extraneous words, even letters, in the ancient scroll. I believe we can say the same about the Sistine Chapel. The artist's skills were not only in the colors of paint and design. Those who have studied his work far more than I have reveal the great depth of meaning hiding in plain sight, right before of our eyes.

These theories are presented and analyzed in book called, The Sistine Secrets: Michelangelo's Forbidden Messages: “Michelangelo couldn't allow the papal court or the casual viewer to catch on to the fact that there were countless secret messages hidden within the overwhelming mélange of images... He infused his ceiling fresco with Kabbalistic images. He linked the Jewish ancestral tree to Jesus. He connected pagan philosophy and design with Judaism and Christianity. He narrated the entire story of the universe, beginning with creation, in a way that makes us realize humanity's common ancestry, promoting brotherhood and tolerance for others.”

We would all do well to gaze up at his masterpiece today.

And now, let's look at the painting itself:



A more 'traditional way' to describe the image:

God is depicted as an elderly white-bearded man wrapped in a swirling cloak. God's right arm is outstretched to impart the spark of life from his own finger into that of Adam, whose left arm is extended in a pose mirroring God's, a reminder that man is created in the image and likeness of God." Another point is that Adam's finger and God's finger are not touching. It gives the impression that God, the giver of life, is reaching out to Adam who has yet to receive it; they are not on "the same level" as would be two humans shaking hands, for instance.

I would like share a more insightful and inspiring exploration of that same image

It is called the Creation of Adam. But, Adam is already created. His body is fully formed; his eyes are open. So it isn't really 'the creation of Adam!' What is it then?

- Let's look carefully at the image of God. The 'bearded old man in the sky,' surrounded by angels. Where are they? Not free-floating in the heavens.
- A neuroscientist has studied the shape and the details of God's surroundings. Who knew that we could study art through the eyes of neuroscience? We know that Michelangelo had studied human anatomy in great detail, as evidence in his most famous sculptures.
- Shape of brain, brain stem

("Explaining the Hidden Meaning of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam," Frank Meshberger, MD and Tony Rich)

Like one of those optical illusion riddles, once you see the outline as a brain, you might always see it that way.

- God is not the creator as much as God is the intellect, as represented by the brain. Remember that Michelangelo's training was not just in paint and marble, it was in philosophy and ancient texts, including much Judaic knowledge.
- "I'm ready for my close-up," said Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Blvd* – the iconic image of the finger of God stretching toward the finger of Adam.
- The neuroscientist suggests that this design represents the electrical charge that jumps across the synapses
- What does the finger of God represent?

Turn back to the Torah, which Michelangelo had surely studied. Finger of God is a sign of God's power and leadership:

- causes Pharaoh's heart to be hardened.
- points showing Moses the way to the land of Israel.
- Finger of God is the instrument of revelation of Torah

Exodus 31:18 When God had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.

Deuteronomy 9:10: And the Lord delivered unto me (Moses) two tablets of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which the Lord spoke with you in the mount.

Many other verses speak of God 'writing' the words on the tablets, writing the law.

The revelation of intellect and Torah that is celebrated in the imagery.

What are (some of) the lessons we can glean from The Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome? In this new year:

- Let's keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to recognizing that sometimes a coincidence is telling us something: How did I come to explore this painting?
- May we pursue our passions. Sometimes being stubborn is not a bad thing. Imagine if Michelangelo's father had been successful in having his son learn a different trade.
- Like Jonah, Michelangelo finally 'couldn't say no' and that is also sometimes a good thing.
- Remember that nothing good comes of deceitful behavior: Look at the others in the art community who devised a plan to get Michelangelo 'out of circulation,' hoping he would 'fail' as a painter. Who do we remember to this day?
- I pray that we find the courage and strength to pursue tasks, even if they may be daunting and out of our 'comfort zone.' Even if we fear we will fail. We might just miss out on creating our own masterpieces.