

## The Book of Life

The Torah is the Book of Life, and, as we understand in retrospect, the Tree of Life. It is the forbidden fruit which God denies humanity so it will be able to discover it on its own. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the story of creation is told in two fabulously contradicting versions. The first version takes us through God's world. It is neat, organized, and meticulously planned. It is made of seven progressive, self-contained, and perfect units, each resting upon and improving on the previous. In this first version, man and woman are peers, created equally and simultaneously, blessed together, and as one being charged with the responsibility of governing the world. And that world is the world of God, who has created mankind in His image.

In the second version, we find ourselves in a wild ride on humanity's rollercoaster. There is no order and no planning, evil and negative words are rampant, and man appears as the absolute ruler, whose companion, the woman, is created only to serve him. Here the different segments of creation are in constant turmoil, debating and deciding their role in the newly formed world, while God is described in human terms. He is a gardener (planting and cultivating a garden), a potter (forming Adam from a lump of soil), a glassblower, and a constructor. This is man's world, where each human being envisions God as being like himself, and uses His name to control others and to wreak havoc.

The first narrative describes a perfect world in which God is the only active power and the absolute ruler. God's world is one where there is no room for mistakes and where evil is not to be found, and could therefore be governed by rigid justice (Elohim). In this perfect world man is created in the image of God and strives to emulate Him. In God's world, mankind understands that God has no physical form or shape and therefore humans of all genders and races are equal. This understanding is represented in the idea that woman and man are created simultaneously.

The second narrative speaks of the world after the introduction of mankind, a world fraught with evil and sin, trial and error, hypocrisy and lies. In this unplanned and haphazard world tasks are performed due to pressing circumstances (lack of vegetation, man's loneliness) and consequences are understood only in hindsight. This is the dangerous, very realistic world in which we humans live, a world where the fruit of the Tree of Life must be sought and found. It is in man's world that the weaker is oppressed and discriminated against, and in that world the

woman indeed is portrayed as being created after man in order to serve him and save him from loneliness.

The description of God's actions and handiworks in human terms (He planted, crafted, built) is the complete reversal of the first chapter's message. Whereas in the first narrative man was created in the image of God and introduced to a perfect world, the second narrative speaks of the flawed world in which humans fail to understand the divine and instead create God, as if it were, in their own image, breeding wars, animosity and oppression.

There are three lessons to be learned from the dual character of the creation narrative:

1. The goal of mankind is to recreate, as much as possible, the ideal state of things as they were in God's first creation, the perfect world. This lofty goal can be achieved by internalizing the concept of the image of God, respecting all humans, giving equal rights to women and the right of rest (Shabbat) to all workers. It will be achieved by adhering to the universal values of the Torah and to its famous golden rule: "love your brethren as you love yourself" – brethren being not only those who share religion and ethnicity but all of mankind.
2. The description of the creation process should not be understood literally. The important message is that God created the world, and the question of how is left to the scientists of every generation. Most of us have very little knowledge in cosmology, physics, biology or paleontology, so why should we assume that the Creator wanted to summarize them for us in the first 34 verses of Genesis? It is also noteworthy that Torah and science have something in common: they both cannot tell us the whole story. The Torah cannot tell us, despite the efforts of the best theologians, why God decided to create the world, and as science keeps reaching further back, whether it is one billionth of a second before the Big bang or before the appearance of matter, there will always be the question: "what was before that?" We should be able to distinguish between the "how" and the "why". We don't know why the world was created, but as believers we know what is our duty as dwellers of this world. We also know that logic and reason command us to accept scientific theories. Instead of objecting science, as some religious factions do, we should cherish it as a tool to contemplate God's wisdom and enhance the world we live in.

3. The message of the second narrative is that the responsibility for the well-being and proper functioning of the world is in man's hands. Just as the first man was put in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and protect it, so also his descendants have the obligation to guarantee the world's steady progress.

When Adam and the Isha (woman), are driven away from Gan Eden, the Torah says that God has demarcated and protected the path to the Tree of Life. We are sometimes fooled to think that God blocks our path to the Tree of Life, but we should know that it is the exact opposite. God wants us to enjoy the Tree of Life, the Torah, and we must overcome difficulties to do so. These difficulties might be our own demons, selfishness, the sense of entitlement, and the lack of will to change. When we muster the courage, however, to embark on a soul-searching journey, with the help of the teachings and the insights of the Torah, we can reach the Tree of Life. Lo and behold, it is the Holy Ark, protected by two Cherubim and containing the text of the Torah. When we discover that, we realize that we are charged with making this world into the Garden of Eden, by applying the message of "love others as you love yourself" and understanding that we were all created in the Image of God. This understanding should propel us to do good for its own sake and not for personal or religious benefit. We might not be living in a perfect world, but we would be laying the foundations of such a world, a true World to Come, for future generations.

Shabbat Shalom