

"Tell Me a Story" / on Parashat Berayshit (Genesis 1:1-6:8)

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This has been a particularly interesting time for me, as my wife and I bid farewell to our youngest child who went off to college. We are now empty-nesters - and frankly, for the most part, enjoying the blissful quietude. Yet, there are moments when I pine away for the days gone by. I can only look forward to grandparentdom to return to one of my favorite times of the day: our children's bed-time. "Read me a story, Daddy. No, read me two."

This was a constant refrain from our children. I don't know how it started, but two bed-time stories were required by our kids.

The important thing was not just the fact that one of our children's parents or grandparents or caregiver sat down to read to them. But the stories themselves were important. Our children loved to hear the story of the runaway bunny: about the bunny who runs away and the mother bunny rabbit says over and over again, "No matter where you go, I'll find you because I love you." Or the story of the glitter fish, about a fish that has special scales. The way he becomes friends with the other fish is by sharing his scales with each of them. These stories were of critical importance to our kids, not just because they liked the meter and the rhyme and the fact that they sat in a warm, comforting lap when being read to them, but because these stories began to give our children a sense of who they are and what their values are. Our children loved to know about the importance of sharing and it brought them great comfort to know a story about a mother who would never leave her beloved child, no matter what the child did.

These stories are far more than fairy tales for they helped our children become the persons they were destined to be. And it is this week that we begin again the story of our people, as we read the creation account as recorded in the Book of Genesis. So often this text is dismissed as mere myth or fairy tale. From the outset I would say that the account as recorded in Genesis is not meant in any way to be an accurate reporting of the scientific events that occurred at the beginning of nature. However, we have too often dismissed this story without stopping to realize its profound messages for us - they do inform us about who we are and who we are destined to be.

The first message that we discover in the creation story is that the over-arching mission of creation is to make something of meaning out of something that is chaotic--making something of substance from chaos. That, too, should be a message for us, for the true battle of our lives is to try to create meaning out of our own chaotic existence.

When the Biblical text refers to the universe as being *tohu v'vohu* (unformed and void) it doesn't mean that the universe was empty, but the universe was empty of meaning and empty of purpose. Matter existed but to no end. The start of the creation story occurs when the Divine will causes purpose to arise out of purposelessness. That, too, must be our goal: to give purpose and meaning to things in our life that seem to be devoid of meaning. When we become overwhelmed by the chaotic nature of the world in which we live we must decide to assert purpose and mission to our life--to give our life meaning.

The daily work of the World Union is to help foster our Progressive Jewish values - especially in those places in which the Reform voice has been heretofore silent, or drowned out by those in the more traditional community. Our Progressive values provide an answer to those who seek a warm and welcoming Jewish community - one that represents the best ideals within our history and heritage.

The next message that we uncover in the biblical account of creation is that everything in nature has value. Everything that comes in the natural universe comes with mission and purpose. Each thing is created; and, if something comes about through the will of a Creator, then it has a role to play in our universe. We might not understand the role; we might not see the sense to the role, but there is will and mission behind everything in the created universe.

Quite a number of years ago I read a strange article in the newspaper. It was a story about frogs in Minnesota. Now, the average reader could easily dismiss the impact of this story as insignificant filler. However, I could not put it out of my mind. It seems that in Minnesota a group of school children traveling around in swampy areas on a class trip decided it would be fun to capture some frogs and bring them back for examination in their classroom. The teacher, understanding the importance of creepy, crawly, slimy things in the life of young children, acceded to their request and allowed them to capture the frogs and bring them back to the class. Once back in an environment in which they could scrutinize these frogs, they discovered that a number of the frogs that they captured had either one leg too few or one leg too many. There were three-legged frogs and five legged frogs. The teacher then passed this information on to state conservation authorities and for a decade, Minnesota state officials had been capturing frogs throughout the state and discovered that in more and more places, mutant frogs were proliferating. As the number of these mutations increased, and as the geographical area in which they occurs widened, state officials became alarmed. They believe that these mutations have occurred because of human-made pollution. We should all begin to worry about the impact we have made on the environment and what the potential is for other creatures further up the food chain in this mass mutation.

We learn in the text that each creature is created according to its own design and purpose. But we must begin to worry when things that we do to our environment begin to create chaos out of an ordered environment.

There is another message in the story of creation, for it is on the final day of creation where humanity is created. In that chapter we are informed that we are created in the likeness and image of God. One way to read this is that our mission is to be God's co-creators in the work of perfecting this world. But there is another message in all of this which we have yet to learn. If we are all created in the likeness and image of God, then prejudice should be anathema to our mission and purpose in life. If I am created in the image of God and you are created in the image of God, then ultimately we must be equal in the eyes of God. And not just you and me: but those with disabilities, those with different skin colors or facial structures; those with different abilities and those with different opportunities. And an important part of the World Union's mission is to reach out to all communities and create partnerships and alliances and open pathways to

dialogue. Ultimately, in this creation story we find the notion that we are created as equals. Any notion that one person is better than another ends up in making chaos out of purpose.

I do not hope that the words we read this week will be read in public schools as evidence of the science of creation. But I do think that these stories are there to tell us about who we are and what we are in this world. They form the very basis of our ethos and our ethics. And too often we have paid this story scant heed. Perhaps in this week of new beginnings, in this New Year, we might consider the fairy tales of our past and realize that they are there to chart our future. So bedtime stories become life affirming and life directing. The story of our beginning should bring us closer to our destiny.

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