

Origins of Man and God: A Midrash on Genesis 1:27

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TO THOSE DEVOTED TO BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP, the determination of the *p'shat* of a verse, its clear and plain meaning, is a primary undertaking. Every translation is scrutinized and judged by asking how true it is to the original intention of the text. *Drash*, on the other hand, is a tool through which a multitude of interpretations may be advanced without overmuch concern with the text's original intention. The genius of *drash*, or what we call *midrash*, is that it allows for the creative expansion of ideas which remain, nevertheless, rooted in Jewish tradition by virtue of their exposition through a Biblical verse.¹

Another way to look at the unique nature of *midrash* is to characterize it as eisegesis, as opposed to the exegetical approach of *p'shat*. That is to say, instead of taking a verse and using every philological tack to understand its true meaning, we begin, instead, with an idea or a question which we then seek to elucidate by finding a verse that will provide us with a good foundation for homiletical exposition.

The utility of *midrash* for modern interpretations of Judaism should be obvious. Much of what our ancestors saw as *Torah mi'Sinai*, revealed law at Sinai, no longer carries the weight of Divine coercion for many Jews. This is not to say that these Jews do not vigorously affirm the importance of Judaism in their lives. However, their need is to find interpretations of Judaism that are modern and believable while not being totally discontinuous with Jewish tradition. *Midrash* is the ideal tool in this process, for in its relation to the Tradition it is both conservative and liberalizing. It is conservative to the extent that it keeps us within the Torah's universe of discourse and continues to tie every new idea to that cornerstone of our religion. It is liberalizing because it reminds us that a verse takes on meaning only in its civilizational context, giving us not only the license, but the obligation, to interpret it in accord with our own dictates of reason.

Since we characterized *midrash* as eisegetical, it is appropriate that we begin this particular *midrash* with a question rather than a verse. The question is: Did God create man or did man create God? We could hardly

1. There is an interesting discussion on *midrash* which puts forth the view that *p'shat* and *drash* are identical but for the fact that the former gains greater acceptance. Cf., R. Brauner, "Rabbinics and Rabbinic Education" in *Shiv'im: Essays and Studies in Honor of Ira Eisenstein*, ed., Ronald Brauner (Philadelphia: The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1977), p. 69.

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expect that the Biblical author would have provided us with an answer that reflects all of the knowledge and sophistication of modern science. The Bible must be accepted on its own terms, as a lofty yet primitive religious worldview. Nevertheless, Genesis 1:27 may shed considerable light on our question through its *midrash*.

"*Vayivrah Elohim et ha'adam bezalmo, bezelem Elohim baro oto . . .*" The *p'shat* given by the New JPS translation is, "God created man in His image, in the image of God did He create him . . .". From this translation we derive the understanding of a human being fashioned by a supernatural God and placed on earth at God's will to inhabit God's world. However, there are many who, unable to accept such a supernatural formulation, would dismiss this verse as having nothing to say to them. The use of *midrash* on this verse, though, may allow the very same people to derive some lesson, albeit a more humanistic one, about creation from Genesis 1:27. The analysis which follows is offered in the aforementioned spirit of modern *midrash*.

Vayivrah: This word is most commonly accepted as meaning creation in the generative sense and, thus, a verb peculiarly reserved for God's supernatural power. Yet there is Scriptural support for translating the term in the sense of transformation. Evidence Psalm 51:12, "*Lev tahor be'ra li Elohim, ve'ruah nakhon hadesh be'kirbi*," "Transform my heart, God, that it be pure, and renew within me an upright spirit." Similarly, in Isaiah 65:18, "*borei et yerushalayim gilah*" must mean "for I transformed Jerusalem into rejoicing."² Thus, *vayivrah* here implies, not a miraculous creation, but some basic change or transformation in *adam*.

bezalmo: The issue here is not one of literal translation as much as of grammar. Traditional translations interpret this word as "His image," that is, in the image of God. We would suggest that *bezalmo* modifies the word *adam*, man, which immediately precedes it. This is not to suggest "creation in the image of man" but rather that, whatever is happening to *adam*, "his physical form remained unchanged."

bezelem Elohim: According to traditional translations these words begin a second segment of the sentence which, for purposes of emphasis, will repeat the notion found in the first part. We would suggest that this part of the sentence, while complementing the first, is not a reiteration. Sforno, a traditional commentator, understood this phrase to refer to the Divine spark given to man which differentiates him from the animals and allows his spirit to live beyond his mortal body. He saw the *zelem Elohim* manifest in man through his love and fear of God. Accordingly, we deny that this phrase implies the physical molding of man. The conveyed sense is, rather, that of *imitatio dei*, the molding of one's own life after the ethical model of God's attributes. The implication that such a task remains very much in the hands of man brings us to our last phrase.

2. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs. *Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston and N. Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1907) p. 135.

bara oto: First, *bara* here means neither "creation" nor "transformation" but "conception." *Genesis Rabbah* continually compares the Divine activity of creation with the model of a king building a palace; the king conceives and orders the plan but does not do the work himself. Thus, God's role in creating the world (*bara*) really involved laying out the plans through *Torah* and not the physical molding of every earthly being.³ Second, *oto* provides the same ambiguity as did our previous pronominal suffix. We would claim that, while God is the subject in the first part of the verse, man becomes the subject in the second. Thus, "... did man conceive," and not "... did *He* conceive."

In light of the above we offer the following *midrashic* translation of Genesis 1:27: "Homo was transformed by God even as his physical form remained unchanged; in accord with his highest idealization did man conceive of Him." With such an interpretation we may now proceed to address our initial question of whether God created man, or man, God. With no intention of evasion, our answer must be "yes," for both parts of the question have elements of truth. We suggest here a simultaneous creation of God and man by making God the actor in the first half of the verse and man the actor in the second half. Homo comes to a conception of a supreme Being and, at that moment, is transformed to man.

Philosophical anthropology seeks to determine a dividing line between the creature which we would call human and those animals that are our ancestors. A century of remarkable fossil discoveries has led to various theories on the genesis of the human species. Some speak of physical traits such as bone and spine structure or the size of the brain cavity, while others speak of social characteristics such as family organization and food-gathering techniques. All of these theories presume that man is a product of an evolutionary chain and not the object of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation from nothing, as suggested in Genesis. The question is whether such increasing scientific sophistication makes belief in the Bible obsolete.

We think not, for Genesis 1:27 may describe a symbolic moment in the history of the world during which we may say that humanity, as we know it, came into being. The second half of the verse suggests that it was man who conceived of God, but that this was probably only the culmination of a series of very profound observations. We may imagine that preceding the conception of God was the observation of cosmos, order. There must have come a point in the evolutionary chain of the genus, homo, when mental faculties were turned away from the necessities of getting food and shelter, in whose acquisition these beings must have already become quite proficient, and toward the contemplation of what was around them. The more perceptive among them noticed that there was a certain rhythm to the world. A short cycle existed which varied light and darkness; a longer cycle varied the strength of the sun and the

3. I owe this insight to Dr. Sol Cohen.

produce of the land. Water falling from the sky nourished the earth which, in turn, provided sustenance for them. Most remarkable was the very fact of life itself, the ability of fellow creatures to reproduce their kind and create new living beings to populate the earth. All of this magnificent order must have a source and a cause, thought homo, for it was too perfect to have occurred by happenstance. The only possible explanation for the cosmos was a supreme Being who personally shaped the universe with unknowable powers and imbued life itself with purpose. Judging by the world which He brought into existence, this Being had to be both perfect and infinite. In fact, He embodied all of the marvel and wonder of the very universe which homo inhabited. Homo called this supreme Being God. Here was primitive man's "highest idealization."

Such a suggested development, however, explains only the second half of our verse and would leave the impression of a *Deus alter homo*, God in man's image. This is only half true, for just as the verse has complementary parts with God as the subject of the first half and man of the second, similarly there is a sense in which we must understand how God, in fact, "created man." Let us elucidate by employing our own translation.

"Homo was transformed by God even as his physical form remained unchanged . . ." First we must speak to the process of transformation/creation. The term "God" here does not refer to the supernatural God of the Bible, but one should not, therefore, conclude that we are dismissing God as a factor in this process. If we may speak of the God-factor as opposed to "He," which conjures up images of a personal, supernatural Deity, we may say that God is *the* crucial criterion in the origin of man. Whether we speak of the God-factor in terms of process, power, or force, we must ultimately proclaim it to be quite real.

How does this God act? Here we come to the second point in this part of the verse — the nature of transformation. In our translation we have used the term "homo" because it is the genus common to whatever ancestor primitive man had. The second part of the verse, though, calls the same being "man." Our verse describes the point at which homo, overcome with awe at the order of the cosmos surrounding him, attributes that order to a supreme Being to whom he must pay homage. This cognition, in turn, transforms homo into homo sapiens — man with the ability to know. The very fact that he recognizes a God-factor in the universe is what makes this being human. In this sense we may see God as the creator as well as the created. This awareness of God radically transforms a primate mammal into that magnificent creature whom we know as a human being. The God-factor works no less actively in our own world, as it is only with our knowledge of God that God can be a force in our lives.

Finally, we address the part of the translation dealing with physical form. As this transformation took place we could perceive no change in the form of homo; it was, rather, a change in his soul/mind. Creation was, therefore, not a supernatural event in which man stood where once there

was dust; rather, the event was miraculous insofar as an epochal stride had been made in the development of spiritual and intellectual faculties that would civilize the world.

By understanding the verse to be in a sensitive balance between the activity of God and the activity of man, instead of an exclusive God-act, we point to a very important lesson for ourselves. *Genesis Rabbah* already points to the fact that man is a partner in creation by virtue of his completion and perfection of the things set in the world by God.⁴ From this same idea we may see that the creation of man, himself, is a joint endeavor of God and man. We are left with neither the supernatural *creatio ex nihilo* nor a totally God-less interpretation of creation which would lead to the distressing belief that man is the be-all and end-all in the universe. Instead, we suggest a spiritually-human concept of man.

One of the insights yielded through the consideration of our origins is a suggestion as to those characteristics that may be inherent in humanity, as opposed to those things that are learned through socialization. The term *homo sapiens* already suggests that knowledge is a primary way of differentiating man from his primate predecessors. The nature of this sapience is the contemplation of one's place within the cosmos. Upon the conceptualization of God, man discovers that there is order and purpose in the world. The realization that he is *bezelem Elohim* leads man to set God up as his spiritual model. Thus, he seeks to exert dominion over the natural world around him, just as God seemed to control the entire universe. More importantly, man sees his obligation to contribute to the order and purpose that God had wrought and begins to evolve basic laws of morality which can be said to be inspired by God but realized by man.

Man is *not* coterminous with God, but our verse teaches us that, just as our symbolic first human reached a consciousness of self in relation to the cosmos, so our own self-realization is intrinsically tied to our recognition of a Godly force in the universe. To make God that factor which transforms animal to man and the criterion with which we mark the start of human civilization is the declaration of *homo-religio*, religious man. To be a *homo-religio* means to strive for Godly values and to attempt to make them manifest in our lives. Therein lies the essential character of humanity.

Is this a diminution of the traditional concept of God? We hardly think so, for the implication of this *midrash* is, in fact, the antithesis of atheism. The denial of any Godly force in the universe or in one's life is not only an admission of total despair for the future of human civilization, but is indicative of a regression to a pre-sapient mentality in that being.

Zelem Elohim shaped by man, in turn transforms man into *homo-religio*. The ideal of God has been the focus of human strivings from the dawn of creation and continues to be the very purpose of human existence.

4. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 66.3.