



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Bereshit

October 17, 2020, 29 Tishrei 5781

Torah: Genesis 1:1 - 6:8

Sunset at the Dawn of Time

Ilana Kurshan

The Torah tells us surprisingly little about the first human being following the banishment from the Garden of Eden. We know that Adam had two sons, one of whom killed the other, and that he went on to father Seth and other children until he died at the advanced age of 930. But how was it for Adam to experience living in the world after leaving the garden? What was it like to be the first person on earth? And can Adam's experience of sin and punishment shed any light on our own?

The Talmud begins to fill in this gap at the beginning of masechet Avodah Zarah (8a), the tractate about idolatry and pagan worship. The rabbis explain that two of the pagan holidays on which Jews are forbidden to engage in commerce with their non-Jewish neighbors were actually founded by the first human being. After Adam sinned and was banished from the garden—which took place in the autumn month of Tishrei, according to rabbinic tradition—he noticed that the days were getting progressively shorter. He wondered if perhaps the world were being returned to a state of chaos and disorder on account of his sin. In an attempt to repent, Adam spent eight days in fasting and prayer. But then the month of Tevet arrived with the winter solstice, and he realized that this is just the way of the world: the days grow longer and shorter depending on the time of year. At that point he observed an eight-day festival.

These festivals, which Adam established for the sake of heaven, later became the pagan holidays of Saturnalia and Kalenda.

This Talmudic account suggests that Adam, never having experienced winter, assumed that the whole world was being punished on his account. It was a sort of pathetic fallacy, a literary term for the attribution of human qualities to things found in nature that are not in fact human. With each shorter day, time seemed to be closing in on him, as if the newly-created world were soon coming to an end. His turn to repentance and prayer—perhaps the first instance of Teshuva in human history—was presumably an attempt to save not just himself, but also the world.

Why then, when the days began growing longer following the solstice, did Adam not assume that he had simply been forgiven? Wouldn't this be the natural extension of Adam's fallacious reasoning?

Perhaps with the arrival of the winter solstice, Adam came to the realization that he and the world are not coterminous. Although he was created from the earth, he became differentiated from it, and the earth would not be punished for his sins. This is the same realization that every infant must come to when it realizes that its mother is not in fact an extension of itself, but rather an independent being with a mind of her own and feet that can walk far away. An infant is no longer part of its mother, just as Adam was no longer part of mother earth.

Adam was learning a lesson that we all must learn not just in infancy, but throughout our lives: There are aspects of life that we can and must control, and aspects that we cannot and must not aspire to control. We are responsible for our own behavior and we will be held accountable for our wrongdoings; it is up to us to fast and pray and mend our ways. But there are many aspects of our lives that are utterly beyond our control, like the diminishing and lengthening days. Part of what it means to become a mature individual is to learn how to navigate a world in which the ship we steer remains at the mercy of elemental forces we can neither forecast nor forestall.

Only when we realize the limits of our own agency can we focus our attention on what we can change in ourselves. And paradoxically, once we do

the hard work of changing ourselves, we often end up transforming our relationships as well, thus widening our sphere of influence. After all, it was Adam's fasting and celebration that led to the establishment of festive holidays for generations to come. We cannot make the days longer, but we can make other people's days brighter. While there is much we cannot change about the world, we can nonetheless change ourselves, and, in so doing, transform the world.

Don't Eat from That Tree! So Go Ahead...

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 2:9-3:7

(2:9) And the LORD God caused to grow from the soil every tree lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge good and evil... (2:16) And the LORD God commanded the human, saying, "from every tree of the garden you may surely eat. (2:17) But from the tree of knowledge good and evil you shall not eat, for the day you eat from it you are doomed to die....

(3:6) And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate and she and she also gave to her man with her, and he ate. (3:7) And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked...

- What do you think that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil gave the person that ate from it?
- Why do you think that God forbade Adam to eat from the tree? Why was he not forbidden to eat from the tree of life?
- Do you think that God expected Adam to eat from the tree?

Midrash Tadshe chapter 7

Said R. Pinchas son of Yair: This tree, before the first Adam ate from it, it was merely call 'a tree', just like all other trees. But once he ate from it and transgressed the command of the Holy One Blessed be He, it received the name The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, because of what happened in the end.... And why did the Holy One Blessed be He command him to eat from all trees of the garden but prevented him

from eating from one of them? So that he will always see it and remember his Creator and recognize that the yoke of his Creator is upon him, and so he will not be high minded about himself.

- According to this Midrash, what knowledge does the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil impart to those who eat from it? What about the tree made that knowledge possible?*
- Do you think that it was a good idea to put such restrictions on Adam? Why?
- If you were in Adam's place, would you eat from the tree?

*A jumpstart hint: This Midrash is discussing setting limits. Was there anything in this specific tree that made it impart knowledge? What knowledge do we gain by living within limits?

Dvar Haftarah: I Samuel 20:18 - 20:42 | Shabbat Machar Chodesh

Bex Stern Rosenblatt

This week we read a special haftarah, the haftarah for machar hodesh, designated to be read any time that the new month begins directly after Shabbat. As such, this haftarah is not explicitly connected to our Torah reading, to Parashat Bereshit. We read it now because it begins with the timely phrase, "*Machar chodesh*, tomorrow is the new month." But by reading it in light of Bereshit, we reveal a certain obsession with the passage of time and how we observe it.

Our haftarah begins in media res. At this point, David has already killed Goliath, risen in stature in the eyes of the nation, and alienated King Saul, who has been trying to have him killed ever since. This week's haftarah marks David's decision to leave King Saul's court for good. He concocts a plan with Jonathan, son of Saul, to plan an escape route if he ascertains that Saul wants him dead.

The plan hinges on two time-based phenomena: Saul's observance of the start of a new month and David and Jonathan's assigning certain tasks to each of three days in their elaborate escape plan. Saul holds a feast to mark the start of the new month. The point of the feast is to mark the passage of the

time, to note that another month has passed. Saul observes the changing of the moon, notes that time is passing, and celebrates it as it goes.

The way that Saul marks time is in accordance with the description in Genesis 1:14 of the purpose of the heavenly bodies: "And God said, 'Let there be luminaries in the firmament of the heavens, to separate between day and night. And they will serve as signs and as appointed times for the days and for the years.'" The purpose of the heavenly bodies, of the sun and the moon and the stars, is to allow time to be measured, to serve as indicators for the passage of time. And Saul's monthly feast does just that. He observes and he marks that another month has gone by.

David and Jonathan have a totally opposite relationship with time. Time is not something to be marked or observed as it passes, but rather, to be used. Their plan hinges on their performance of certain tasks on certain days. The days are defined by the tasks to be done on them. They will know that one day has passed because David will have hidden from the court. They will know that two days have passed because Jonathan will have sussed out his father's intentions toward David. And they will know that three days have passed because they will meet each other again to communicate what they have learned.

Using activity to create time also has a precedent in Genesis 1. Each of the six days of creation occurs not because of the natural passing of time, but rather to mark that God has created something new. Time is born of action, just as it is for David and Jonathan.

Time has gone funny for many of us since the start of the pandemic. It has sped up and slowed down and sometimes seems to have stopped existing at all. As we begin this new month, the month of Cheshvan, may we find both models of time in our life: Saul's observance and celebration of time passing, and also David and Jonathan's action packed days. Let's look for the external moments of celebration and let's also find the motivation to act, to define time by what we can create in the world.