

Bereishit

Bereishit tells the story of the creation of the World in general and of Adam in particular. The fact that Adam was created last, indicates that humanity is the pinnacle of creation. Just as an honored guest is the last to arrive at a banquet offered in his tribute, so too Adam was brought into existence only after everything else had been created.

In his essay "The lonely man of faith" Rabbi J. B. Solovetchik z"l points out that in Bereshit there are two parallel narratives of the creation of Adam. The first presents Adam as a dominant outward-oriented being (Adam1), while the second presents a more passive and solitary man (Adam2).

These two accounts represent the duality of mankind's role in this world. On the one hand Adam1 has G-d-like creative abilities through which he must manage the physical world and subdue it. But he can't do it alone. He must work together with other Adams in society to perfect the World around him. It is for this reason that Adam1 was created within a social context (i.e. alongside Chava). On the other hand, Adam2 contemplates and admires the world both around and within him. He is commanded to watch over the Garden of Eden. He must explore and discover the hand of G-d in the World and proclaim His glory. To this end, Adam must function as an individual focused mainly on his relationship with his Creator.

Each and every one of us is both Adam1 and Adam2 (or Chava1 and Chava2), and must therefore foster and develop strong and healthy relationships both with G-d and other people. Adam1, the more rational and ambitious side of us needs to develop his utilitarian relationships to perfect the physical world, while Adam2 needs to contemplate and attempt to comprehend G-d's Creation to strengthen his own faith.

It is interesting to note that there are two events in this Torah portion in which people fumbled in these relationships: between a person and his/her fellow, and between a person and his/her Creator.

The first is the sin of Adam and Eve. The snake, personifying evil, persuades Chava to eat from the forbidden fruit of The Tree of Knowledge, and she convinces her spouse to eat from it too. Adam and Chava become aware of their nakedness and they hide (from G-d!). This awareness symbolizes the drastic spiritual fall that they have experienced into a world with the potential to perpetuate evil. G-d appears to them in the Garden of Eden asking not about their geographic location but about their spiritual state: "WHERE ARE YOU?" (Bereshit 3:9)

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The second event occurs between Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Chava, who are both preparing offerings to G-d. Cain offers from the fruits of the earth while Abel sacrifices from the first and best animals of his flock. G-d accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's. Cain confronts his brother and murders him. This time G-d asks, "WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER ABEL?" (Bereshit 4:9)

G-d's questions to Adam and Cain still resound in our ears. Where are we? And where are our brothers? These are questions that every Jew must ask himself. But more importantly, what am I doing in order to answer these questions? Eventually we need to provide answers for G-d and ourselves to both of these questions. WHERE AM I? and WHERE ARE MY BROTHERS? This is what Hillel meant when he said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am (only) for myself, what am I?" And if we want to know when to get started, "if not now, when?" (Avos 1:14)

Shabbat Shalom

The JSN Team

