Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Bereshit

Why Ruin a Perfect World?

This week's portion, Genesis, the first of the new Torah cycle, begins with a description of God's creation of the world. After creating heaven and earth, the sun and moon, animals of all sorts, and more, God creates humanity:

בראשית א:כו-לא	**Genesis 1:26-31**
(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בִדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (כז) וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים	אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: (כח) וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (כט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב	זֹרֵעַ זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ פְרִי־עֵץ זֹרֵעַ זָרַע לָכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאָכְלָה: (ל) וּלְכָל־חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וּלְכָל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכֹל	רוֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה אֶת־כָּל־יֶרֶק עֵשֶׂב לְאָכְלָה וַיְהִי־כֵן: (לא) וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה־טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי:	And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God—creating them male and female. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." God said, "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food." And it was so. God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good. It became evening and it became morning, the sixth day.

- **Verse 27 states that "God created humankind in the divine image, creating them in the image of God." How might we explain the apparent redundancy in this phrasing?**
- **Verse 26 describes humanity's relationship with the rest of creation as that of a ruler. What do you think that means?**

Despite the positive note on which verse 31 ends, the first man and woman soon disobey the only command God has given them—not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge—and are

banished from the Garden of Eden. As time passes, humanity continues to disappoint God, until, at the very end of the portion, God decides to destroy nearly all humankind. This raises a difficult question: if human beings are destined to sin, why did God create them at all? The Talmud offers a surprising perspective on this question. It concludes that it would have been better had humanity never been created:

עירובין יג: תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים וּמֶחֱצָה נֶחְלְקוּ בֵּית שַׁמַּאי וּבֵית הִלֵּל. הַלָּלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוֹחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שֶׁלֹּא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשֶּׁנִּבְרָא, וְהַלָּלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוֹחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשֶּׁלֹּא נִבְרָא. נִמְנוּ וְגָמְרוּ: נוֹחַ לוֹ לְאָדָם שֶׁלֹּא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשֶּׁנִּבְרָא, עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּבְרָא—יְפַשְׁפֵּשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו. וְאָמְרִי לַהּ: יְמַשְׁמֵשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו.	**Eruvin 13b** The Sages taught the following *baraita*: For two and a half years, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These say: It would have been preferable had man not been created than to have been created. And those said: It is preferable for man to have been created than had he not been created. Ultimately, they were counted and concluded: It would have been preferable had man not been created than to have been created. However, now that he has been created, he should examine his actions that he has performed and seek to correct them. And some say: He should scrutinize his planned actions and evaluate whether or not and in what manner those actions should be performed, so that he will not sin.

- **The Talmud records both the debate and its conclusion. Why might it matter that the conclusion emerged from a prolonged disagreement rather than being presented as a given?**
- **The Talmud offers two related but distinct prescriptions for how people should behave. How would you characterize the worldview represented by each?**
- **Can you think of a time when you had to make the best of an imperfect situation? How did you approach it?**

This is not the only perspective found in the Jewish tradition. Genesis Rabbah, composed around 400 CE, provides a verse-by-verse commentary on the Book of Genesis. It portrays God's creation of humanity not as a fundamentally flawed decision of which we can only make the best, but as an expression of divine mercy.

בראשית רבה ח:ה אָמַר רַבִּי סִימוֹן, בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁבָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לִבְרֹאת אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, נַעֲשׂוּ מַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת כִּתִּים	**Bereshit Rabbah 8:5** Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One blessed be He came to create Adam the

כִּתִּים, וַחֲבוּרוֹת חֲבוּרוֹת, מֵהֶם אוֹמְרִים אַל יִבָּרֵא, וּמֵהֶם אוֹמְרִים יִבָּרֵא, הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב (תהלים פה:יא): חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת נִפְגָּשׁוּ צֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נָשָׁקוּ. חֶסֶד אוֹמֵר יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁהוּא גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים. וֶאֱמֶת אוֹמֵר אַל יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁכֻּלּוֹ שְׁקָרִים. צֶדֶק אוֹמֵר יִבָּרֵא, שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה צְדָקוֹת. שָׁלוֹם אוֹמֵר אַל יִבָּרֵא, דְּכוּלֵּיהּ קְטָטָה. מָה עָשָׂה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא נָטַל אֱמֶת וְהִשְׁלִיכוֹ לָאָרֶץ, הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב (דניאל ח:יב): וְתַשְׁלֵךְ אֱמֶת אַרְצָה, אָמְרוּ מַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת לִפְנֵי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, רִבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים מָה אַתָּה מְבַזֶּה תַּכְסִיס אַלְטִיכְסְיָה שֶׁלָּךְ, תַּעֲלֶה אֱמֶת מִן הָאָרֶץ, הֲדָא הוּא דִכְתִיב (תהלים פה:יב): אֱמֶת מֵאֶרֶץ תִּצְמָח	first man, the ministering angels divided into various factions and various groups. Some of them were saying: ‘Let him not be created,’ and some of them were saying: ‘Let him be created.’ That is what is written: “Kindness and truth met; righteousness and peace touched” (Psalms 85:11). Kindness said: ‘Let him be created, as he performs acts of kindness.’ Truth said: ‘Let him not be created, as he is all full of lies.’ Righteousness said: ‘Let him be created, as he performs acts of righteousness.’ Peace said: ‘Let him not be created, as he is all full of discord.’ What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He took Truth and cast it down to earth. That is what is written: “You cast truth earthward” (Daniel 8:12). The ministering angels said before the Holy One blessed be He: ‘Master of the universe, why are You demeaning Your very seal? Let Truth ascend from the earth.’ That is what is written: “Truth will spring from the earth” (Psalms 85:12).

- **The angels offer four characterizations of humanity: we perform acts of kindness, are full of lies, act righteously, and are full of discord. Do these descriptions ring true to your experience of human nature? Can they coexist?**

Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto (the Ramchal) was a leading eighteenth-century Italian rabbi, kabbalist, and philosopher. In his book *Da’at Tevunot*, written as a dialogue between the intellect and the soul, he offers an even more radical answer to the question of why God created humanity:

דעת תבונות טז–יח אמר השכל—הטעם פשוט, והוא תלוי בתשובת שאלה ?אחרת, שהיא, למה רצה הבורא ב"ה לברוא נבראים אמרה הנשמה—תשיב אתה לך ולי מלתא דשויא :לתרווייהו אמר השכל—מה שנוכל להשיג בענין זה הוא, כי האל ית"ש הוא תכלית הטוב ודאי. ואמנם, מחק הטוב הוא להטיב, וזה הוא מה שרצה הוא ית"ש - לברוא נבראים כדי שיוכל להטיב להם, כי אם אין מקבל הטוב אין הטבה.	**Da’at Tevunot 16–18** Said the Intellect: The reason is simple, and it is dependent on the answer to another question, which is, why did the Creator blessed is He, want to create creations? Said the Soul—Respond for you and for me something that equal to [answering] both of them: Said the Intellect—What we can grasp in this matter is, that HaShem may his name

	be blessed is certainly the perfection of good. And indeed it is the rule of good to do good, and this is what He may his name be blessed wanted—to create creations in order that he could do good for them, for if there is no one to receive the good then there is no giving of good.

- **Why do you think the Ramchal has the Intellect, rather than the Soul, answer this question about humanity's creation?**
- **The Ramchal's argument rests on the assertion that "if there is no one to receive the good, then there is no giving of good." Do you agree? Why or why not?**

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, takes the Ramchal's idea one step further. He frames God's creation of humanity not only as an expression of divine goodness, but also as an expression of God's faith in humankind.

***Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, Bereshit: "The Faith of God"**
This goes to the core of the dilemma even God could not escape. Were He not to create humanity there would be no one in the universe capable of understanding that he or she was created and that God exists. Only with the birth of humanity did the universe become self-conscious. Without us, it would be as if God had created billions of robots mindlessly doing what they have been programmed to do for all eternity. So, even though by creating humans God was putting the entire future of creation at risk, God proceeded to create humankind.

This is radical theology indeed. The Talmud is telling us is that the existence of humankind can only be explained by the fact that God had faith in man. As the *Sifrei* explains the phrase in Moses' song, "the God of faith" (Deut. 32:4)—this means, "the God who had faith in the universe and created it." The real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us.

This is the extraordinary idea that shines through the entire Tanakh. God invests His hopes for the universe in this strange, refractory, cantankerous, ungrateful, and sometimes degenerate creature called Homo sapiens, part dust of the earth, part breath of God, whose behaviour disappoints and sometimes appalls Him. Yet He never gives up.

- **What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he calls the universe "self-conscious"?**

- **Can you think of a time in your life when you had faith in someone or something even when others might not have? What made you have that faith?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. The first source describes humanity as having been created in the image of God. How do you understand this concept? Do you see it as a responsibility, an honor, or something else entirely?
2. The sources on this sheet offer different explanations for why God created humanity despite its flaws. Which approach, if any, resonated with you most? Can you think of any other possible answers?
3. What is one idea from your study of this Torah portion that will stay with you?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Bereshit, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Bereshit page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Bereshit topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Creation, Creation of Man, Free Will, and Truth.

This portion presents two different stories of the creation of humanity, first in Chapter 1 and then again in Chapter 2. You may find it interesting to read through these two accounts, and compare and contrast the views of humanity they represent.

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