



Around the Shabbat Table Shabbat Bereshit 5764

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Introduction

This Shabbat we begin a new cycle of Torah reading as the opening Torah portion of Bereshit (the first chapters of the book of Genesis) is read. The portion opens with the creation of the universe, told in two different versions. The first focuses on the process through which creation occurred -- beginning with inanimate parts of the world, proceeding to lower life forms, then finishing with the creation of humanity. The second version does not give great detail about the creation of the world, but does provide a more detailed story of the creation of humanity.

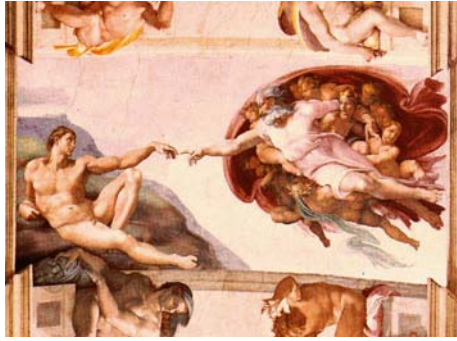
We are told that Adam and Eve were the first humans, placed in the Garden of Eden. Their job is to tend the garden, which in turn will provide for their needs. Only one limitation is placed on them: They were not to eat of the "tree of knowledge." God informs them that "on the day that you eat from it, you shall die" (Genesis 2:16).

Shortly after the creation of Adam and Eve, a certain "serpent" tempted Eve, who ate from that very tree, and also gave its fruit to her husband to eat. God opens a conversation with Adam about this sin, punishments are meted out, and they are forced to leave the Garden of Eden.

Shortly afterwards, we are told of the birth of two children: Cain and Abel. Abel became a shepherd, while Cain was a farmer. Each brought an offering to God, but only Abel's was accepted. This jealousy led to the first murder, as Cain killed his brother. As a result, Cain is to spend the rest of his life as an outcast, wandering the earth.

The Torah portion then tells us about Adam and Eve's descendants. It credits certain individuals with the origination of skills and professions: Jabal was the first nomadic shepherd, Jubal was the first musician, Tubal-Cain was the first person to craft items from copper and bronze.

The *parasha* concludes with an introduction to the story that will follow: Noah. The Torah tells us that the ways of the earth had become violent and corrupt and that, as a result, the very life forms that God had created at the beginning of the *parasha* were now facing extinction at His hands.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal over this holiday, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. What is the reason for having the story of Bereshit in the Torah? The famous commentator Rashi raised this question over 900 years ago, pointing out that, if the Torah was to be a book of religious laws and practices, it could have started with the first *mitzvot*, which do not appear until the book of Exodus! Why do you think the Torah begins instead with the stories of creation and of the ancestors of our people?
2. The Garden of Eden has always been viewed as an ideal place, a "paradise," in which people's needs are met easily. By later times, even the idea of an afterlife was sometimes spoken of as "Garden of Eden," with the belief that the soul would return to such an existence. What do you imagine when you think of a Garden of Eden? What does it look like? What goes on there? Are there ways that we can work to make our world closer to such an ideal place? Work with your family to suggest some ways.

Some Texts to Wrestle With

When God wishes to confront Adam for disobeying Him, he calls out to Adam in the following way:

- ☆ "God called out to the Man and said to him: 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9).
1. Clearly if God is all-knowing, He knows where Adam is located. What then is meant by God's question, "Where are you?"
 2. If God was to call to us today, asking us the same question: "Where are you?" what would your answer be? Would you word your answer in terms of your physical location? Your spiritual place? The point in your growth as a human being?

When Adam is confronted by God about the sin of eating of the tree of life, he responds:

- ☆ "The woman you gave to be at my side gave it to me, and I ate."
1. Is Adam accepting responsibility for his deeds? If not, who is he blaming?

2. Do you ever blame others for things that you have chosen to do?
3. Have there been times that you blame God for your choices?

Towards an Action Agenda

In the Midrash (rabbinic understandings of the Torah), the following teaching is found:

"When the Holy Blessed One created the first man, He took him and warned him about all the trees of the Garden of Eden, saying: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created - I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy My world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you.'" (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13).

This is one of the most important sources for Jewish concern with the environment.

1. You can learn more about Jewish concerns with the environment through the Coalition for the Environment in Jewish Life: <http://www.coejl.org/>
2. One of the most exciting new organizations involved in Jewish environmental awareness is Hazon. Learn about them, and their Jewish environmental biker rides at: <http://www.hazon.org/>



Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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