



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Shabbat Bereshit 5765  
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### **Introduction**

This Shabbat we begin a new cycle of Torah reading as the opening portion of Bereshit (the first chapters of the book of Genesis) is read. More than any other Biblical book, Bereshit is a book of narratives. Bereshit gives us the history of the first humans, followed by the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of what will become the Jewish people.

The portion opens with the creation of the universe, told in two different versions. The first focuses on the process through which creation occurred -- the focus is on God as the creator of the universe and its order. The second version focuses more on Adam and Eve as partners in sustaining and guiding the world, as it gives us a more detailed story of the creation of humanity.

The first detailed story of the book of Bereshit is that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their stay in Eden is curtailed as an aftermath of eating from a tree which was prohibited to them.

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: Enoch is the first person to build a city; Jabal was the first nomadic shepherd, Jubal was the first musician, Tubal-Cain was the first person to craft items from copper and bronze; Na'amah (the only daughter whose name is specified) is, according to one Aramaic translation, the first professional singer.

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, based on the list of professions whose origins can be understood from the text of this *parasha* - builder/city planner, shepherd, musician, singer, metal worker:

1. Can you suggest a reason that these areas of human endeavor are chosen to appear in the text?
2. What does this list tell us about humanity's role as partner in the world?
3. What does this list of professions tell us about those types of work that were valued at that time?
4. Does this list suggest ways in which the jobs and roles that people have today may have emerged from these types of jobs?

### **Some Texts to Wrestle With**

God commands Adam and Eve to take charge of the world in the following way:

"God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all living things that creep upon the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

The Hebrew word "chivshuha," which appears in the above quote, can mean that Adam and Eve are commanded to "master" the earth, or, that they are to "conquer" the earth. While both words are accurate translations, they imply different things.

1. How would you understand God's command if He said that humanity is to conquer the earth? What are our roles? What are our responsibilities? What are our limitations?

2. How would you understand God's command if He said that humanity is to master the earth? What are our roles? What are our responsibilities? What are our limitations?

The following text appears in the Talmud:

A favorite saying of the Rabbis of Yavneh was—  
I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature.  
My work is in the town and his work is in the country.  
I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work.  
As he doesn't presume to do my work, I don't presume to do his work.  
If you would say: I do much and he does little;  
We have learned:  
One may do much or one may do little, as long as one directs his heart toward heaven.

(Berakhot 17a)

1. Does the list of professions that appears in the parasha seem to prefer one over another?
2. How does this quote from the Talmud compare to the Torah portion's apparent view about different ways of earning a livelihood?



### **Towards an Action Agenda**

If we are to "master" the earth, then we have certain rights (and even obligations) to use the resources that we are given to improve human life. What might mastering the world mean in terms of a Jewish attitude towards stem cell research (a significant issue in the upcoming presidential election)? When does

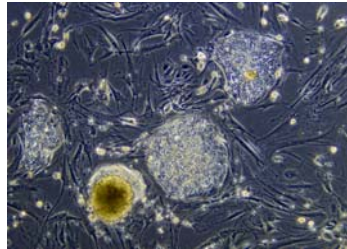
our partnership with God allow (or require) us to embark on radically new ways of using science?

A letter from the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America to President Bush summarizes the Orthodox viewpoint on stem cell research:

<http://www.ou.org/public/statements/2001/nate34.htm>

You can learn about the Reform movement's viewpoint, as well as suggested actions to take by going to

<http://urj.org/torah/ten/2socialaction/120203/>



## Shabbat Shalom!

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](mailto: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](http://www.bjeny.org)

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