

October 22, 2011

B'RESHEET (In The Beginning)

This very first *parasha* has a double role: it not only conveys its own story, but also sets the context for the entire Bible. It is a *parasha* that tells of many firsts: the first man and woman, the first sin, the first murder, and the first rainbow. It is also the beginning of the first history book. It is different from the epic poems of Homer, for example, in that the works of Homer are self-contained, whereas the narrative of the Bible is continuous and builds upon previous events. This may seem natural to us now, but the text of the Torah is the first text on earth known to do this. It establishes that this is to be a related, linear sequence of events through the generations and the relationship of *HaShem* and man. So, if you want to read Torah on any level beyond "beginner," it would be helpful if you have a sense of the whole when you read the parts.

Reading *B'resheet* is kind of like going to the movies. Do you remember the opening scene of "Forest Gump?" It began with a wide shot that focused on a falling leaf. It followed the progress of the leaf until it landed at the feet of Forest. Our *parasha* is sort of like that. It starts with the wide shot of the creation and then narrows down to individuals. The first chapters are like the movie in that it is about relationships. *HaShem* and man, man and woman, brother against brother, and so on. As the biblical narrative continues, every scene is laden - artistically, theologically, psychologically, and spiritually - with all that has come before. So later on, when we read of a man and his son going up a mountain to perform a fearful sacrifice, that moment in the history of a family is set in a context of the creator of the universe and the nature of the relationship between *HaShem* and humankind.

In *B'resheet* we find a new way of thinking about *HaShem*. The difference between the *Torah's* conception of God and the pagan world's conception is not just a matter of arithmetic. The pagan gods were known through their function. If you want to win a war, pray to Ares. If you want wisdom, just ask Athena to give it to you. If you were having a party, Dionysus was your man. Oops! Dionysus was your god, at least for the moment. But the God of the *Torah* was different. Since *HaShem* created all of nature, He could not be defined by any part of it. One does not know *HaShem* through different aspects of nature, but by the divine acts of history. One never finds out what *HaShem* is, but rather what He does and says. This conception, which informs all of biblical narrative, did not necessarily have to be developed at the very beginning of the story, but it was. The *Torah's* theology is inseparable from its history and from its literary qualities. Some people view the Torah as literature or as history, but ultimately, there is no such thing as "The Bible as Literature" or "The Bible as History" or "The Bible as anything else." There is just the Bible - the story of relationships; the story of man and *HaShem*.

Genesis 1:27-28 / Isaiah 43:1-7 / Revelation 21:1-5