

John Denver, George Burns, and the Problem of Free Will: Parashat Bereshit

Over the past few years there have been a number of different “God” movies to hit the silver screen, but I remain partial to the 1977 classic Oh, God! starring John Denver and George Burns. For those of us who may not remember, Denver plays a non-religious grocery store manager named Jerry Landers who one day finds a note in his mailbox granting him an interview with none other than the Divine. Sure that this must be some kind of elaborate practical joke, Landers throws the invitation away but it keeps coming back with a vengeance. Eventually it becomes clear that Landers has been selected by God to help spread the Divine message – and much hilarity ensues.

Oh, God! may not have been designed as a work of theology, but the dialogue between Denver and Burns is not only humorous but often quite thought provoking as well. In one particularly poignant scene, Jerry asks God to explain the pain that exists in the world and this is God’s response:

“How can I permit all the suffering? I don’t permit the suffering. You do! Free will! All the choices are yours!”

“Choices? What choices?” asks Jerry.

“You can love each other, cherish each other, nurture each other, you can kill each other. You’ve gotta make it work.”

“You don’t care!” Jerry despairs while God gently counters “I do care.”

“Well then do something about it!” Jerry implores.

In the final line of the scene, God –as always – gets the last word: “I did. I made you. I got you to carry the ball.”

How many times have each of us felt like Jerry, looking out at the sorrows and injustices of the world around us and wishing they could be cured in a miraculous act of Divine fiat! It is no surprise that books like Rabbi Harold Kushner’s When Bad Things Happen to Good People become instant best sellers or that Oh, God! has spawned a variety of similarly themed movies, Hollywood attempts to grapple with the question of evil. While our rational selves may realize the wisdom of George Burns’ response – that it is no longer for God, but rather for humans, to meet wickedness with right, that the existence of bad in the world allows us to more fully appreciate the good and to exercise free will – we may still desperately wish that things worked otherwise. We are torn between believing in a God Who created the world and then empowered humanity to run it and desiring a God Who just might possibly fashion a utopian society where the good always prosper and the wicked always get their just desserts. In these hopes and these struggles, we should feel in good company. Indeed, this very tension is captured in the opening chapters of our Torah.

Today we begin *Parashat Bereshit*, the beginning of our grand narrative as human beings living on this Earth. Far from presenting a consistent and cohesive tale of how the world came to be, however, our Torah recounts the origins of the universe twice, in the first two chapters of the Bible, and the accounts could hardly be more different. First, of course, there is the presentation of Genesis One – a text which in both form and content describes an orderly and precise process of creation. In this version of the story, God’s handiwork is spread evenly over six days, with the seventh reserved for rest, and there is a

tidy parallelism between the beginning and the end of this first week with the light of day one followed by the celestial bodies of day four, the sky and water of day two mirrored by the birds and fish of day five, and the land of day three echoed in day six's animals and humans. Creation progresses in order of increasing sophistication from inorganic matter to the highest forms of organic life and is accomplished by way of successive divisions with darkness separated from light and water differentiated from dry land. The same sense of organization and harmony which characterizes the process of creation characterizes too the language with which it is described, and the entire narrative follows a highly stylized and uniform literary pattern, all organized around seven-fold repetitions and opening with a sentence of first 7 and then 14 words. The message of Genesis One is absolutely clear: Creation was the deliberate and purposeful act of a transcendent power absolutely sovereign over time and space. The universe is nothing less than God's grand design.

If chapter one of *Sefer Bereshit* portrays creation as the work of an awesome and omnipotent Divine Ruler, Chapter Two views the formation of the world in more personal and intimate terms. God breathes life into Adam's nostrils and molds the very contours of Eve's body, plants food for God's creatures to enjoy, and worries about previously unheard of vulnerabilities like loneliness and shame. While the humans created in God's image are commanded to "master" and "rule" the earth in Chapter One, these same characters are instead told to "till" and to "tend" it in Chapter Two. They are also finally given proper names, the grandiose majesty of an impersonal universe fading to reveal the private lives of two particular individuals. The message of Genesis Two is no less clear than its predecessor, although its theme is quite different: God cares deeply and intimately about the beings that God has created. The universe is nothing less than God's special project.

While it is possible to read Chapters One and Two of Genesis as different accounts of the same event, I would like to suggest that these opening verses might also be taken to represent two very different realities – the universe both with and without free will. Genesis One, of course, represents the world without free will. While everything is orderly and structured, perfect in both form and content, the relationship between God and human beings is distant and superficial. The name of God used in this section of text is *Elohim*, the general Hebrew word for deity, rather than YHVH, the personal God of Israel. God creates humans through speech acts, the same way that the Divine fashions other creatures, instead of physically forming them from the dust. Even the repetition of the Hebrew root *b.d.l* – separation – hints at the chasm that exists between God and humanity. A great separation exists indeed, alienating God from God’s creatures.

It is only in Genesis Two, when humans are given free will, that their relationship with God becomes close and familiar. While creation is not quite as organized in the second Genesis narrative, the words used to describe God are much more personal and intimate, and this spirit continues throughout the following chapters of Torah as well. God finds Adam a proper helper and then clothes him and Eve when they realize they are naked; God walks in the garden and speaks to the first humans directly, disciplining them for their sins. Chapter One of *Bereshit* may be neat and precise, a perfect example of drawing order from chaos, but it is also sterile and sanitized, lacking so many of the things that make life worth living. For while death, sin, and punishment are introduced in Chapter 2 of Genesis, so too do love, choice, and feeling only finally find expression at this point in our text. The message again seems clear – that life is a trade-off in which structure and predictability must be sacrificed in order to enjoy free will and to experience intimacy with both God and other humans. Said in another way, chaos is the price that we pay for truly being able to live!

There are so very many ways in which our Torah might have opened and so it is all the more significant that *this* is the way it selected – to inaugurate the annals of human society with a story which not only affirms God’s power but which affirms our own as well. From the beginning of time we learn that life will be filled with temptations and hard choices, that there will always be elements in our environment attempting to lead us astray and that our world will never be totally free from disappointment or pain. But imagine for a moment the alternative! What if God had muffled the snake when he began to coax Eve towards the Tree of Knowledge or stayed the woman’s hand as she reached for the fruit? We all would be more innocent, of course, our lives unsullied by sin and punishment, and we would be spared difficult emotions like shame – which result from our own poor choices – and hurt – which result from the poor choices of others. But so, too, would we never have the opportunity to experience pride or forgiveness, growth or redemption. Forever in the Garden fed by the hand of God, we would not know the satisfaction that comes from hard work or the sense of accomplishment that accompanies success; living in a world of predictability and order we would never come to know the joys of surprise and discovery, the sweet thrill of having a long-held hope realized or working towards a dream and finally watching it come to be. If we were still in Eden, our relationships with one another would be uncomplicated by manipulation and deceit, anger and cruelty. So too, they would lack the depth of connection that comes when we truly make ourselves vulnerable to one another, revealing our weaknesses and insecurities and placing trust in the other to treat us with kindness. Is it possible to imagine life without these things? Would such a life even be worth living?

To be sure, there are times when all of us wish that life were less difficult and painful, more predictable and just. The utopian world of Eden can sound like a very appealing place to visit with its quiet harmony and time for leisure, its reliability and order and total absence of suffering. I would like to suggest, however, that to live in the world of Eden would be far less rewarding and would require us to make a

great many sacrifices - of our rich and satisfying emotional lives, of our free will and autonomy, of our ability to partner with God to fix the brokenness of the world. For while God no longer cures the ills of the universe with acts of Divine fiat, neither is it as if God has absolved the Divine self of concern for society's injustices. As Burns reminds us, God got us to carry the ball. The lesson of *Parashat Bereshit* is that this is a responsibility not to be taken lightly, that our ability to make good choices is our most potent protection against the dangers of chaos. Such an important lesson this is, that it is given primacy of place and becomes the opening message in all of Torah.

I close this morning with a second sequence from Oh, God!, earlier in the scene after Jerry has been told that whatever happens in life happens, God doesn't get into the details.

"Ya mean there's no plan, no scheme to guide our destinies?" asks Jerry.

"A lot of it is luck" God replies.

"Luck! Just luck? You don't control our lives?" Jerry counters.

"I gave you a world and everything in it. It's all up to you!"

"But...we need help!" Jerry implores.

Again God gets the final line: "That's why I gave you each other."

How very lucky we are to have free will and to have one another to help us exercise it justly. Some might say this is even worth the price of chaos.

Shabbat Shalom!

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