

Bible Stories

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

At this time of the year, we re-read the early chapters of Genesis with their fantastic tales of creation and early humanity struggling to cope with life and divine Authority. And every year I re-visit the issue of whether one should take these stories literally. Because that is what I get asked by so many who grapple with tradition and modernity. And I believe one should take these stories very seriously if not literally, superficially or without understanding the underlying message.

What was a "day" if the sun didn't make its appearance until the fourth day? And how does God talk and how do humans know? And what does "making man in God's image" mean? Does God have a human image? If man and woman were created simultaneously on the sixth day as it says in the first Chapter, why does the second chapter give us the story of Eve coming from a rib? Was she created twice? If God created Adam from the earth, why couldn't Eve be made of the same stuff? Did snakes really speak in those days and in what language? And if Eve was told she would bear children in pain after the fruit was eaten, did God have to re-create her physically to ensure she suffered or was she made that way at the start? And how did Noah get the kangaroos and Koala bears from Australia? Or every single species of spider or poisonous snake from Africa? Woolly Mammoths and Aurochs? And why did pussycats all die in the flood but crocodiles, whales and fish were allowed to survive? Why does the Torah keep on repeating and apparently contradicting itself?

It is not just me, but the Talmud and major traditional commentators who grapple with these kinds of issues. There are those who find different ways of reconciling all this to their satisfaction.

The literalist simply closes his or her mind to the problems. It is holy writ and that is that. *Emunah Peshutah*, simple faith, is much valued in certain circles. Most humans are not philosophers or rational thinkers. Not everyone wants to be challenged. And it is possible to find fault with almost any theory if one is inclined to. Dinosaur bones might have been planted by God to test our faith. Carbon testing is unreliable. Evolution lacks some missing links. And quantum anything, relativity or fuzzy logic can always be thrown in to claim there are no absolute certainties and scientific theories are no more than the best we have so far.

Yet the Talmud recognizes what appear to be contradictions. Thirty-seven times it says "The Torah does not follow normal chronology." God speaks to humans in dreams and visions. Notoriously unreliable. Humans mishear or misunderstand Divine messages. Animals talk too but we don't know in what language and whether this too was a vision or dream or metaphor dreams. We use language differently ourselves all the time. Instruction, laws, are given in very specific language. "Don't touch the fire". But we convey ideas and traditions and messages through language that contains narratives, stories even myths. These are conveyed and modified by human language and human

recounting. Each generation in its own way.

One of the most problematic references concerning our right to challenge and enquire is in the Mishna *Hagigah* "Whoever looks into what is above or below, inside or behind and anyone who does not respect the Divinity, might just as well not be born." Which sounds like the teacher we have all come across in our youth. "How dare you ask me such heretical/stupid questions. Just shut up and do as you are told."

And in fact, that response is not very different to how God answers Moses when he asks what God's name is. "I am what I am." I can't be described in normal rational terminology. I am different. Not matter. Not like human beings. You can encounter Me, imagine Me, reach out to Me but you can't describe Me the way you would a human being. We can approach God rationally or mystically. Two very different channels. Depending on our personal references. Only history can bear witness. To the good and the bad, for that is how humans see things. And of course, God will be blamed for everything we do wrong.

There are certain types of questions that the ordinary mind cannot answer or even fathom. I know when I see great mathematicians or physics professors lecture with complicated formulae, I am completely lost. I have no idea what they are talking about. I never understood Stephen Hawking at all. However many times I tried. Except of course when he wrote children's stories or picked quite irrationally on Israel and betrayed the ignorant child in him that I felt when I tried to make sense of his physics.

I take the Mishna in *Hagigah* to be saying that there are some kinds of questions that the ordinary person cannot ever answer. And if he or she tries too hard to fathom the unfathomable they will be wasting their time. In the meantime, one has to face the daily challenge of living a moral and good life. Most people should focus on going forward. Leave the scientists to try to work out how the world or we humans started. Or what outer space is and even try to get there. I am knowledgeable in my areas of specialization and interests. I try to study and read and think as widely as possible. But I know my limitations. And I also know that of this moment my priority is to focus on my behavior towards others near and less near to me.

Which is why the issue of what the Bible is trying to tell me boils down to the same as any other religious culture does. How to cope with life and bring a spiritual dimension into it. To see where I have come from, where I belong and whom I want to identify with. And use all this to help me go forward and not backwards. The common thread of all the Bible stories is really very simple. We are here on earth. We don't know precisely how it came about or where it is going. We know this world is made up of the material, the geological, the animal and human and the ecosystem. It runs according to its own rules. The rules are there to help us, not crush our spirits. Nothing, no one is perfect. Superman cannot solve every single human problem all at the same time. That is not how our world works.

But just as the Bible tells us how earlier humans tried to deal with issues. Some successfully. Others not. At different stages and times. It provides a

template, to develop skills, to find the right way to behave. It adds experiences and ideas into the mix from which we will choose the ingredients that help us most. Words, ideas have their place. But actions count. The Bible as the first Monotheistic Document whatever its origins, offers a vision, a structure and framework that we can either use or abuse.

I cannot pretend to know the mind of God (I distrust those who do). But when I want to know how to behave, I start with the Bible and see where it takes me. The world distracts me. The Bible guides me.