

## **Parashat Bereishit**

### **The Story of Creation and our Ecological Crisis**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### **A. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND THE WORLD**

Man is the only creature in chapter 1 of Bereishit who merits having God speak to him. The blessing bestowed upon him by his Creator (similar to that previously bestowed upon the fish and birds) is TOLD to him (verse 28): "And God blessed them, and God SAID TO THEM..." (This is not the case concerning the blessing to the fish and birds, which involved no direct speech and therefore represents simply a statement of the biological character of their reproduction.) Again God speaks to man and tells him what exists in the world to nourish him (verses 29-30).

In the story of Gan Eden and Adam's expulsion, in chapters 2-3, God gives him a mitzva, and berates him and his wife for having transgressed it. From here onwards, the relationship between God and man becomes the central focus of the biblical narrative.

What is the content of God's first statements to man? They do not contain commandments and prohibitions related to man's relationship to God. Rather, these initial statements are intended to mold man's relationship with Creation. This is clearly true of chapter 1, but also of chapters 2-3, where both man's sin and his punishment involve the relationship between man and the earth and what it gives forth.

The issue of the relationship between the human race and the world which it inhabits will be the focus of this shiur. In current times, this question has become a crucial one, owing to the ecological crisis threatening the world and its inhabitants – including man himself. It is human beings, having "filled the world and conquered it, and ruling" over all its elements (animal, vegetable, mineral), who have brought our generation to this crisis, which already threatens our world and places a question mark over the future of the generations to come.

## B. IS THE PURPOSE OF CREATION TO SERVE MAN?

In 1967, the historian Lynn White Jr. published an article in the respected journal "Science" (vol. 155, no. 3767), entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." A heated debate ensued between the supporters of his thesis presented and those who opposed it.

White's fundamental assumption was that "what we do with regard to the environment depends on our ideas about the relationship between man and nature." "Our environmental perception is deeply influenced by beliefs about human nature and the fate of the human race – i.e., by religion." White's statement that according to the story of Creation man "is not only part of Nature – he is created in the image of God, and he is a partner, to a great extent, to God's superiority over nature," is correct. For this reason, White's call for the democratization of all creations and the lowering of man from his position of reigning over Creation is in direct opposition to the biblical perception of man's status in the world according to God's intention.

But another of White's statements concerning the story of Creation requires careful study. He claims that according to the narrative, "God created the whole world, EXPLICITLY, for the sake of man, in order that he would enjoy this world and rule over it: there is nothing in physical Creation that was created other than to serve man's purposes." He therefore concludes that "the ecological crisis will worsen until we reject the AXIOM... that nature has no reason for existence other than to serve man."

In Bereishit Rabba (9:4) two Sages offer parables for the verse (Bereishit 1:31), "And God saw all that He had done, and behold, it was very good," as follows:

Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: This may be compared to a king who built a palace. He saw it, and it was pleasing to him. He said: Palace, palace, may you display grace before me at all times, just as you have displayed grace before me at this time...

Rabbi Yonatan said: [It may be compared to] a king who married off his daughter and made a canopy and a house for her, and he plastered it and paneled it and painted it; he saw it and it was pleasing to him. He said to her: My daughter, may this canopy display grace before me at all times, just as you have displayed grace before me at this time.

So the Holy One said to His world: My world, My world – may you display grace before Me at all times just as you have displayed grace before Me at this time.

What is the difference of opinion between the two sages? Rabbi Chama sees the world as the PALACE OF THE KING, built for His honor and for His purposes – as the Rambam explains (Guide 3:13). Rabbi Yonatan, on the other hand, sees the world as a CANOPY THAT THE KING BUILT FOR HIS DAUGHTER, i.e. mankind – as R. Saadia Gaon maintains (Emunot Ve-deot, beginning of section 4).

### C. "FILL THE EARTH AND CONQUER IT ..."

The Ramban explains the plan for man's creation in verse 26, "And rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the animals and all the land..." as follows:

The reason why man is told "and rule" is that they should RULE WITH A STRONG HAND over the fish and the birds and the animals and all the creeping creatures... And He said, "Over the all the land," meaning that THEY SHOULD RULE OVER THE LAND ITSELF, uprooting and demolishing and digging and hewing brass and copper. The term "rule" (rediya) refers to the rule of a master over his servant.

In a similar vein he interprets God's blessing to Adam and his wife following their creation in verse 28:

"And conquer it" – He gave man power and rulership over the world, to do as he wishes with the animals and the crawling creatures, and to build and to uproot that which was planted, and to hew brass from its mountains, etc.

According to this explanation, these verses express a one-sided relationship between man and nature: it is a relationship of rulership for the purpose of unbridled exploitation. The consideration of what is to be gained – the sole consideration guiding man's action in the world – makes no distinction between activities of building and planting and activities of destruction and uprooting.

It appears that this sort of perception is what caused White to claim that according to the story of Creation, "God created the whole world explicitly for the sake of man, in order that he should benefit from the world and rule over it," and "Nature has no reason for existence other than to serve man."

But in fact these verses, which describe the relationship between man and the world, in no way address the question of the purpose of Creation as a whole, just as they do not address the purpose of the creation of man. Concerning this point, the Rambam (ibid.) states:

The Torah tells man, "And rule over the fish of the sea etc." – this does not mean that he was created for this purpose, but rather it informs us of the nature that the Holy One implanted in him.

Nevertheless, one would be correct in asserting that these verses – especially as interpreted by the Ramban – express a relationship between man and Creation that is incompatible with moral responsibility for the existence and welfare of the world. These verses, as part of the story of Creation as a whole – which is one of the foundations of Western culture – had an enormous influence on the consciousness of Western man for millennia, and their influence continues to permeate his thinking, whether conscious or unconscious, to this day. Can the current ecological crisis be attributed to these verses, as White claims?

We cannot arrive at such far-reaching conclusions based on just two verses without examining their significance against the background of the immediate and broader context in which they appear, including the story of Creation and its continuation in the early parashiot of Sefer Bereishit, as well as the Torah as a whole.

#### D. "ADAM WAS NOT PERMITTED TO EAT MEAT"

Following the creation of man – male and female – God told them TWO things (only the first of which treated in the previous section), and they appear in immediate proximity. Let us compare them phrase by phrase in order to clarify the relationship between them.

First utterance (28):

And God blessed them, and God said to them:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and conquer it

And rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky

And every creature that moves upon the earth.

Second utterance (29-30):

And God said:

Behold, I have given to you every type of seed-bearing vegetation that is upon the entire earth, and every tree with seed-bearing fruit – I have given it to you for food,

And to all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the sky

And to every creature that moves upon the earth that is alive – every type of vegetation for food.

At first glance, the first utterance seems to present man with his mission – to fill the earth and to rule over it, while the second utterance seems to provide him with the means to achieve this – the food that will sustain him. But upon closer inspection, the second utterance turns out to contain two interesting phenomena. Firstly, the food that God assigns to man is vegetarian only: "seed-bearing vegetation" and "trees with seed-bearing fruit." Secondly, this utterance makes mention of the same creatures that were mentioned in the first utterance (with the exception of the "fish of the sea"), but in an entirely different context: here they appear not as subjects to be ruled by man, but rather as being nourished TOGETHER WITH HIM by the same dietary base – vegetation.

These phenomena cause Chazal (Sanhedrin 59b) to interpret verses 29-30 as follows:

Rav Yehuda said, in the name of Rav: Adam was not permitted to eat meat, as it is written, "For you it (the vegetation) shall be for food, and for all the creatures of the earth," rather than "the animals of the earth for you." In the time of the children of Noach, God permitted it (meat) to them, as it is written (9:3), "like the herb and vegetation, I have given you everything."

All of the early commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, etc.) agree with this interpretation of verses 29-30.

The Gemara questions this interpretation, on the basis of the first utterance: does the command, "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every creature that moves upon the earth" not refer to food? The Gemara answers that the rulership referred to here pertains only to the use of these creatures for man's work and labor.

Accordingly, we find that God's second utterance is meant to qualify the first: there is a moral limit to man's rulership of animals. When performing labor, he is permitted to use all animals to help him, but when it comes to procuring food he is their equal, and he may not turn them into food for himself.

In this vein, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook zt"l writes at the beginning of his essay, "The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace" (seemingly with a view to "sweetening" the opinion of the Ramban quoted earlier):

There is no doubt in the mind of any educated and thinking person, that the rulership mentioned in the Torah... does not refer to the rulership of a tyrannical despot who deals cruelly with his nation and his servants, with the sole purpose of achieving his personal desires and fancies. Heaven forbid that there should be such an ugly principle of servitude, stamped with an eternal stamp in the world of God Who is good to all, and Whose mercies extend to all His works, Who declared, "Kindness shall build a world."

Since the Torah testifies that at one time all of humanity managed to attain this lofty moral state, as our Sages comment on the verses showing that Adam was not permitted to eat meat... It was only when the children of Noach appeared, after the Flood, that it was permitted to them... Hence, can we imagine the possibility that this greatly valuable moral good, which was once in actuality the way that mankind lived, will be lost for all time?

#### E. NOACH'S ARK

In many respects, the story of the Flood and of the salvation of Noach and his sons represents a "second edition" of the Creation story. In this story, man's responsibility for the existence and preservation of the animal kingdom finds clear expression: Noach is commanded to build an ark not only in order to save himself and his family, but also to save representatives of every type of animal in the world. Here man's dexterity and talents serve not to rule over Creation, but rather to serve and save it. Our Sages, in their midrashim, describe Noach and his sons as not sleeping for a moment for the entire year-long duration of their stay in the ark: "For he was busy feeding the creatures that were with him" – each animal at the proper time of day, and with the type of food best suited to it.

Noach's Ark should serve as the symbol of a philosophy that sees man as responsible for the maintenance and welfare of nature – specifically because of his moral and intellectual gifts.

#### F. CONCLUSION

Man's attitude towards the world around him is a central topic in the story of Creation (which concludes only after the Flood). Our discussion does not even approach a comprehensive coverage of the first two parashiot of Sefer Bereishit in this regard, while other biblical sources pertaining to this issue (such as Tehillim 104 and some chapters of the Book of Iyov) have not even been mentioned, for lack of space.

White's contention says something about medieval European history, but it says more about the consciousness of the 20th century Western intellectual, who reads the biblical story of Creation from a secular standpoint (and it makes no difference whether White himself is a religious person or not). This is White's most serious deviation from the context of the story of Creation – the biblical context, in which God is the center. Man does, admittedly, face nature as a ruler, but his rulership is limited. Infinitely higher than him stands the Creator, who awarded man his status in Creation as a gift (perhaps even as a loan), so that he may serve his Creator.

White's complete disregard for the theocentric context of the Creation story disqualifies his historical thesis. Europeans of the Middle Ages, as discussed by White, did not read the Creation story as White reads it: they were religious people, who would never have imagined for a moment that God created the world solely for their enjoyment and the fulfillment of their needs, without the religious dimension in which man is God's servant.

It is more likely that the roots of the ecological crisis facing us are actually to be found in the process of secularization that has prevailed in Western society in modern times. The factor that catalyzed the development of Western science was specifically its severance from religion. The rise of humanism and the banishing of God from Western consciousness turned man, in his own mind, into the supreme ruler of the world, with no obligation to give account to any factor outside of himself. Materialism and increasing consumerism in capitalistic society have doubtless been central factors in the development of the ecological crisis.

Pinning the blame on the biblical story of Creation is not only superficial and unfair, but also blurs the real reason for the crisis, and distances us from any possibility of finding solutions.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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