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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

HOW OPEN SHOULD WE BE TO INTERPRETATIONS OF TORAH THAT YIELD CONCLUSIONS WE REJECT?

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We all censor Torah. We all have rigid rules about what Torah cannot mean, and tools to make sure it means something else.

Censorship is mostly about protecting ourselves from the text. Readers who genuinely feel bound by a text try to prevent it from teaching things they disagree with (*Rabbi, how can the Torah be critiquing Orthodox society?*), whereas readers who don't want to feel bound prevent it from teaching things they agree with, especially with regard to issues on which they stake their right to autonomy. (*If the prohibition against pork isn't an obsolete health regulation, do we have to keep kosher?)*

This is okay. It's necessary to come to Torah with rigid assumptions, for example with moral principles (*sevarot*). If you need a verse to tell you that you can't kill someone else to save your own life, i.e. if you don't intuit that "*what have you seen to make your blood redder than his?*" is a rhetorical question, then you can't interpret Torah properly at all. Your errors will cascade.

But I hope it's intuitively obvious that one should not have so many such assumptions. There should be lots and lots of space for Torah to challenge even deeply held convictions, or else what is the point of learning?

The areas of sex, gender, sexuality, and politics are especially fraught for Torah interpreters nowadays, because audiences who feel bound by Torah are more likely to censor than to consider ideas they disagree with, and the censoring is likely to be forceful. I presume that this is true of myself as a reader. And yet, I think it is vital that we maintain the capacity to learn from Torah on these issues. I also recognize that almost everyone in these conversations feels deeply threatened by interpretations they disagree with.

So I want to try something. This week's dvar Torah is a collection of raw, first-level interpretive observations – they provide ways of thinking through the Torah narrative without (I think) imposing any conclusions, so that defenses can be deployed after learning rather than before. You're welcome to send me your thoughts about what these interpretations could mean for these issues, or to politely post them (and equally politely critique such posts), and of course to challenge or support them at the level of the text.

1.

In the first creation narrative, the human male and female work together, facing the world, but have no need to be together and face each other. They communicate pragmatic instructions but not interiority. That's how it must be, because experience is incommunicable across difference.

In the second creation narrative, G-d serves as the miraculous common ground that enables communication across difference. Any intimacy between male and female therefore necessarily require G-d to be present in the relationship.

This is according to Rabbi Soloveitchik in "The Lonely Man of Faith". But that essay has an astonishing gap. That male and female are different is a vital element of the thesis. But the Rav never tells us anything about how male and female differ. Reversing the sex (and gender) of the characters would change nothing about his analysis.

But we can try to color in the Rav's portraiture within his lines.

Adam Two is lonely, and then discovers companionship. Eve Two is never lonely that we know of.

Adam Two is aware of the difference between being alone and being lonely, because he has experienced unsatisfying companionship. Eve marries the first being she meets.

Is this why Eve is vulnerable to seduction by the snake – because she suddenly realizes that Adam is not everything one could wish for in a husband, and she has no reason to settle for less than perfection?

Does Adam eat the fruit after Eve because he'd rather die than be alone again, and he does not believe that Eve is replaceable (=she is his *bashert*)? Does Eve eat the fruit because having never experienced loneliness, she has no fear of death?

2.

In the first creation narrative, humanity is commanded to be fruitful and multiply, but no actual children are born. So far as we know, every other created thing fulfills the promises and destinies that G-d assigns them (although sometimes with persnickety variations). But human beings do not. (Deborah Klapper claims that the same is true of everything else as well – no children are born to any species, etc.) Is this part of why Rashi understands the first narrative as a hypothetical, as what would have happened had G-d created the world via pure justice, whereas the second narrative is a metaphor for the world as we know it?

3.

Hashem Elokim took the *adam*

He placed him the arbor of Eden
to cultivate and protect it.
Hashem Elokim imposed a commandment on the *adam*, saying:
"From all the trees of the arbor - you ?may?must? certainly eat.
but from the tree of knowledge of good and bad - you must not eat from it
because on the day you eat from it - you ?may?must? certainly die."
Hashem Elokim said:
It is not good, the *adam* being alone
I will make for him a support parallel to him = *ezer k'negdo*.
Hashem Elokim formed from the earth/*adamah*
all the *chayot* of the field, and all the fliers of the heavens,
He brought (?each?) to the *adam* to see what he would name it
[alternative translation: He brought each to the *adam* to see what would call to him)
Everything that the *adam* called a *nefesh chayah* – that was its name.
The *adam* called names
to all the cattle and to all the fliers of the heavens and to the *chayah* of the field
but for the *adam*
he did not find a support parallel to him.

Immediately after commanding the *adam* to avoid knowledge of *tov* and *ra*, Hashem Elokim states that "it is not-*tov*, the *adam* being alone". This means that the *adam* would violate the command by becoming aware that he is lonely (unless one understands the command as forbidding only a specific means of obtaining the knowledge). Yet Hashem Elokim immediately sets out to make him aware of just that. Why?

4.

How does the *adam* become aware of his loneliness? He tries and fails to bond with other creatures from the *adamah*. The *adam* even goes on non-*shiddukh* dates with the cattle, i.e with domesticated animals, even though Hashem Elokim never brought them to him.

Rashi famously cites the midrashic reading in which the *adam*'s dates are actually assignations.

This might mean that the *adam* was capable of finding emotionally sufficient nonsexual companionship with other species (dogs? dolphins?), but that he could not connect emotion to *eros*, and only the combination could relieve his loneliness.

Or it might mean that the *adam* harbored the hope and belief that *eros* was sufficient regardless of the nonsexual relationship.

Is it obvious that G-d brings only the female of each species to the *adam*? If so, does the *adam* know that they have male mates of their own species, or does G-d take the Randian position that rational males can be expected to politely give way to a male who is a superior match for the female in question (because there can be no conflict of interest among rational persons)?

The underlying question is whether Hashem Elokim is leading the *adam* to discover his sexual orientation, as distinct from his sexual attraction. Moreover, does the *adam* know that he is expected to find an *ezer k'negdo*, or might he think that Hashem Elokim is genuinely interested in his Linnaean analysis of the animal kingdom? Why is it not valuable for the *ishah* to engage in a similar exploration before being giftwrapped and presented to the *adam*? (Deborah Klapper sees no reason for the experiences of "first human" and "second human" to be mapped essentially onto "male" and "female").

5.

Conservative: Human beings were created last because everything in the nonconscious world was created for the sake of human beings . . .

Liberal: Human beings were created last because their purpose is to care for the nonconscious world . . .

Conservative: . . . and therefore women are the apex of creation.

Liberal: . . . and therefore women are responsible to care for men.

Narrator: Are you sure that your positions haven't gotten muddled?

6.

Conservative: G-d gave us a perfect world. We ruined it by imposing our own independent notions of good and bad, and got cursed for our pains. That should teach us to leave well enough alone.

Liberal: So we should just leave it ruined?

Earlier this week, I posted a quote and a question about whether it's important for students to be taught that they can wreck the world as much as repair it, and whether this is a particularly Jewish lesson. There were a variety of serious responses to the first question, but interestingly, nobody seemed to agree that Jews and Judaism had something special to say about it. This seems interesting to me, as my sense is that *tikkun olam* is often taught *davka* to override this lesson, and as uniquely Jewish. So I'll frame the challenge more one-sidedly: What traditional Jewish sources, if any, have the theme or moral that one should be temperamentally cautious about bold moral movements because of the risk of unintended consequences?

Shabbat Shalom!