



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bereshit 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

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When I was five years old, I developed a bad habit. My Jewish family was involved with a Tibetan Buddhist Temple, and while the adults were inside in silent meditation, I would occasionally sneak out to the lawn and ring the large ceremonial gong that was used to rouse the entire Temple into action. This problem came to the attention of the Rinpoche, the spiritual leader of the Temple, and he asked to speak to the small, chubby gong-ringer. I was braced to be humiliated by this religious authority figure. But the Rinpoche gently told me that the key to growing up is figuring out when to ring the gong and when to respect the silence.

Years later, even after rabbinical school, this simple teaching remains one of the most influential religious lessons that I have ever received. *Parshat Bereshit* teaches that within the very fabric of creation there are moments for silence, space and rejuvenation. We imitate God when we rest on Shabbat because “God blessed the seventh day and called it holy, because on it God ceased all the work of creation.”¹

At the same time, the *parshah* teaches that failing to sound a gong when the situation calls for it is a grave error. There are moments when we must call attention to the state of our world, when we must rouse people into action to change the world.

In the twentieth century, child mortality rates dropped significantly in almost every country.² This decline has been attributed to advances in immunizations, nutrition and rehydration therapy. These advances did not happen naturally; they grew out of prolonged gong-ringing, tireless action and advocacy by people all over the world—doctors and philanthropists, politicians and scientists. But our work is not done.

Over the past year, nearly three million people world-wide have died of AIDS.³ Over 850 million people around the world deal with food scarcity.⁴ And the U.S. has once again failed to meet the recommendations of debt forgiveness for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative set by the World Bank in 1996.⁵

As we begin the Torah again this week, these are some of the challenges we confront.

In *Parshat Bereshit*, the *adam*, the first human creature, eats a fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Afterwards, he is ashamed and he hides behind a tree in the Garden of Eden. God calls out to him, “*Eyekah?* – Where are you?”⁶

¹ Bereshit 2:3

² <http://www.scielosp.org/pdf/bwwho/v78n10/78n10a04.pdf>

³ http://data.unaids.org/pub/EpiReport/2006/2006_EpiUpdate_en.pdf

⁴ <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/009/a0800e/a0800e.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.scielosp.org/pdf/bwwho/v78n10/78n10a04.pdf>

⁶ Bereshit 3:9

The medieval commentator Rashi notes that an omniscient God would have known where the *adam* was physically located, so God's question must not be a query for information. Instead, it represents a call for dialogue and accountability.⁷ Like so many of us, the first human answers by evading responsibility for his actions and pointing to someone else's mistake. "The woman you put at my side," he says, "she gave me of the tree and I ate."⁸ As descendants of the *adam*, we have the opportunity, and in fact the responsibility, to not make the same mistake.

The temptation to blame others is enormous, but it is a temptation that this *parshah* clearly condemns. As we hear the question "Eyehah?" read from the scroll, we can hear it as a gong being rung – a call to respond to God's question by taking responsibility for where we are in this new year of 5768. How will we respond to the call this year? How will we call attention to our collective responsibility to ensure universal human dignity? How will we advocate for change?

There are times for each of us to sit in silent meditation. And then there are moments to act.

5768 is a time for gong-ringing. This year is a time to rouse our family, friends, lovers and elected officials from their silence. God is the one who "rings a gong" in the beginning of the Torah by calling out to the first human being. In the coming year may we have the audacity to both respond to God and to imitate God. May we shake up the complacency that surrounds us by calling out to each other: "Where are *you*?"



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⁷ Rashi on Bereshit 3:9

⁸ Bereshit 3:12

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