



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Rosh Hashanah 5769 By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

I would have thought that the Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah would include the verse from Genesis 1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Yet nowhere in the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings is the centrality of the creation story mentioned. Moreover, nowhere in the trilogy of biblical verses that accompanies the prayers of *Malchu'yot*, *Zichronot* and *Shofarot* is the creation referenced. Rather than emphasizing the solitary act of cosmic creation, the rabbis chose to focus on human relations.

The Rosh Hashanah Torah readings deal with family dynamics: the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the awesome choice of Abraham before the altar of Isaac and the intercession by the angel to restrain Abraham's hand. The issues we struggle with through these texts are whether Hagar and Ishmael, dying in the desert, deserve the protective intervention of God's angel, and what is to be the destiny of the one less loved by the father?

Similarly, the introduction of God in the Ten Commandments does not open with "I am the Lord your God who created Heaven and Earth," but with the words, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt." History, not metaphysics, these texts teach us, is the place where we discover godliness.

Even in the act of divine creation, the Bible understands the role of human beings as partners. "Creation" is the first action, the first verb. Creation is born out of nothing and lacks human augmentation. "When the Lord God (*Adonai Elohim*) created earth and heaven — when no shrub of the field was yet on earth, and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rains upon the earth, and there was no man to till the soil ... the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:4-7). Here is the first time in the Bible that the Lord (*Adonai*) and God (*Elohim*) are joined together, and, not coincidentally, the first time that God's creation on earth calls for the human tilling of the soil.

God's creation calls for human collaboration. Creation carries within it the plenitude of potentiality that needs to be actualized. "All that was created in the six days of creation needs labor. The mustard seed must be sweetened, the wheat must be ground" (Yalkut Shimoni, Jeremiah 327). Without the work of the human being, creation is raw, inedible. With the activation of the human being, Adonai enters history.



The sacred time of archaic religions is symbolized by the circle. Jewish sacred time is symbolized by the arrow. In archaic time, one gazes at the circular trajectory of celestial planets. In Jewish sacred time, we do more than gaze. We hear and we respond. On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the interdependence of the creation of the universe and the birth of the human being.

Cosmic creation awaits the covenant between Divinity and Humanity. Nature is given. Ethical behavior is our response.



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