

Parsha Bereshit

Genesis 1.1-6.8

The parsha for this week is Bereshit, the first parsha in the Torah. We are at the end of the busiest holiday season in the Jewish religion. Besides Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, last Sunday, Oct. 11th, we just finished observing the eight days of Succot, the final harvest holiday, with Shemini Atzeret on day 7 and Simchat Torah on day 8.

Since Simchat Torah marks the time we conclude the reading in Deuteronomy concerning the death of Moses, it also marks the time we begin the Five Book of Moses, the Torah, all over again with the two Creation versions in the Book of Genesis. Bereshit, the Hebrew word for the first book, includes the Creation of the World, the Origin of the Sabbath, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, and the birth of Noah, who walked with God, thereby being selected by the Almighty to save the world in the upcoming Flood. A quick note is that Noah's name is derived from the Hebrew word for comfort. The Torah says that Noah was the first man born after the death of Adam, who was cursed by God and forced to toil as a result of his poor choices in the Garden of Eden. Hence Noah brings about some level of rebirth and reprieve for man, a comfort of sorts, and he is also credited with developing the plough to ease man's burden.

Besides the obvious stories in this parsha that most of us are familiar with, my Chumash notes 4 key points about Judaism that are presented here:

1. God is the Creator of the Universe
2. Man is the Goal and the Crowning Achievement of Creation as we are made in the image of God
3. Judaism is about Optimism. Although two-thirds of the 613 commandments are don'ts, living a Jewish life is a wonderful thing.
4. The Sabbath consecrates work and Hallows man's life

But Bereshit has 5 other chapters. Let's look at them briefly. While the first chapter tells of the Creation of the World in Seven Days, it is the stories that follow that tell of the history of the Jewish people, although the first peoples were not Jews. The second and more famous version of creation begins in chapter 2, where God creates Adam and the Garden of Eden, and then forms Eve out of one of Adam's ribs. In chapter 3, the snake tempts Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and Eve, making the first bad decision on record, eats from the tree and has Adam do likewise. Once they did that, their eyes were opened to the concept of sin. What is interesting is that God originally said that if one eats from the Tree of Knowledge, the punishment is death. But God did not kill Adam and Eve; rather, he punished them. He chose to expel them from the Garden of Eden

so that they would not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever. What I learned from this chapter is that although God punishes the sinful, he is full of compassion (and we see that throughout the Torah).

Note that Judaism rejects the early Christian notion that women are the root of sin. Adam and Eve were always mortal as they had not eaten from the Tree of Life, but by eating from the Tree of Knowledge they learned the consequences of making the wrong Free Will choice. Since Judaism is Optimism, it also teaches the Rise of Man, not the Fall of Man, and Original Virtue as opposed to Original Sin. We need to follow in the path of those who are virtuous.

Chapter 4 is the story of Cain and Abel. I am disappointed that God approved of Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's, but I am so disappointed that even after talking to God, Cain's jealousy of Abel made him kill his brother. Chapter 5 is the genealogy of Adam which ends with the birth of Noah and his sons. Of note in this genealogy is that Methusaleh is said to have lived for 969 years, Jared for 962 years, Noah for 950 years, and Adam was fourth at 930 years. And tossed in there is a man named Enoch, the father of Methusaleh, who walked with God when he was 365 years old. Much is made of Enoch's departure because almost nothing else is said of Enoch's life. In chapter 6, God sees that the earth was full of wicked men and decides to destroy all of mankind except for Noah.

The Haftarah comes from Isaiah 42-43. Its connection to the parsha is in its opening words, where Isaiah repeats God's words that he created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures in it. These later chapters in Isaiah may not have been written by him as they address the Jewish exiles in Babylon after 586 BCE, and Isaiah lived during the time of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE. In any case, Isaiah foretells of the Restoration of Israel in glorious terms, because he declares all Jews to be witnesses for and of God. Once again, true faith and belief in this one God will assure the people's return to the Promised Land.

It's the start of the Jewish New Year 5781. Our High Holiday services were unique because of the COVID pandemic, but Mike Duman did a great job managing the ZOOM portion, and with the approval of the UUCOB, we had around 10 people show up in person for each of the 3 services.

Shalom, stay safe, and have a Blessed 5781.