

Introduction to Genesis 1

We make a big deal about reading the Torah from a Torah scroll, rather than just reading a translation. It's what we require of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students and it's what we do for public readings at worship, even if very few of those present can translate the Hebrew on their own. We do it because we recognize the gap between text and translation and aspire to understand the Torah without mediation.

The opening words of Genesis, our reading for this morning, illustrates well the issues in confusing the translation for the text.

Aviyah Kushner, a poet and columnist, who was raised in a modern Orthodox family in Monsey New York, the heart of Chassidic Judaism in America, writes about what is lost in translation in her recent book [The Grammar of God](#). The daughter of a mathematician father and a mother who was a student of Akkadian, she is well versed in science and in traditional Jewish commentaries, and has a lot to offer us in her unpacking of the text.

Kushner contrasts the King James Bible's translation of the first sentence in Genesis with the various Jewish translations. In the King James Bible the text is very definite, "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth," end of sentence. Here there is nothing to question, only to believe or disbelieve.

How different that is from the Hebrew. First of all, the Hebrew says in the beginning of, secondly the first verse is part of the second which continues the idea. A Jewish translation staying as close as possible to the Hebrew would read, "When God began to create everything (that's what heaven and earth mean- top to bottom, soup to nuts), the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water. " This text is ambiguous, even problematic- it's the beginning but there seems to be stuff there, it is evocative, it calls out for commentary. And perhaps that's the real story here.

The Torah is not a statement of principles or a dogma to be accepted or rejected. It is more like poetry, the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis is itself like a sonnet, structured and patterned, every word there for a reason. Nachmanides, who was the anti-rationalist in his opposition to Maimonides the physician and rationalist, still believed that the text was not meant to be read literally. Creation,

he explained from this text, was a process where everything was there but formless, and only given shape later. This is not the kind of reading of the Bible, which ties you into knots, requiring a belief that dinosaur bones were placed on earth to tempt our faith.

I am often asked if I believe in the Bible, sometimes in relation to this chapter itself. And I answer that I believe in Torah, in teaching, which is what the word means, and I believe in reading Torah in a Jewish way, the way our commentators have for two thousand plus years. We read Torah not like you read the newspaper, but in a way that takes us beyond the literal meanings of the text. We read Torah in a way that allows us to delve into its many facets, and to be part of the continuing revelation in every generation. This chapter teaches many important things – about the essential unity of humanity, about balancing work and rest, about dominion including responsibility- but none of these is a science lesson.

Introduction to Isaiah 55

500 years before Hillel coined the phrase, “If not now, when” and two millennia before it became the name of an album by the rock group Incubus, the prophet Isaiah challenges the Jewish people not to put off the work of repentance.

The best known sentence of our Haftarah this morning, “Seek God while God may be found,” is often understood as a reference to the High Holidays and the importance of doing the work of repentance before the gates close at Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur. It has also been understood as a reminder that we never know how much time remains to us in life, and thus the saying: repent the day before you die, is a reminder not to put off until tomorrow, the important healing words we mean to say to family and friends.

We are told that God’s forgiveness is superior to that of human beings, as when God forgives there is not a trace of a grudge, whereas humans often forgive without actually forgetting. Thus we come to God year after year, not worrying that God will respond, what you, again? Even with this sense of God’s mercy and kindness, we have work to do, for without giving up the old ways, there can be no new path. If we continue to do the same things in the new year, associate only

with the same people, think only the same thoughts, how can we expect anything to be different, ourselves included.

This Haftarah is new to the Reform movement for Rosh Hashanah, not having been included in Gates of Repentance. It is read by some Ashkenazi congregations on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah to begin the season. It is also read on the afternoons of fast days because of the upbeat tone of closing section. The myrtle with which the portion ends is an ancient symbol of victory—and a hint at the approaching holiday of Succot, when we will hold myrtle branches in our lulav, celebrating our personal victory in having come through the challenging High Holiday period.