Bereishit

1In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth.

2Now the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the water.

3And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

“And god said, let there be light, and there was light”

These are the first spoken words, and light gives the prompt for god to then pronounce the word for “good”-tov.

The light of the stars and sun, which are in contrast to darkness, is of things that don’t change; in distinction, the light of creatures is of those whose life is temporary, limited, closer to death and darkness, and so to the hovering spirit. The word for “spirit of god” is ruach, wind. The translation changes everything. In this space where the spirit hovers, the wind blows, is where creation comes to fill the void, and where the joining of light and darkness arrives in an order, in a sequence, which is re-enacted continually in human life, so that all the stories that follow will end with death, and then by the next new life.

Emptiness and darkness, linked to spirit hovering over water. Conditions like Nineveh before Jonah arrives and god suspends their destruction. Nothingness in Nineveh is filled after the Word is proclaimed to them by Jonah. Creation, a filling of what was empty and dark, is like god’s creation of a plant to give shadow to Jonah, the point of which was to demonstrate god’s need to justify why he wouldn’t destroy the people and cows. i.e. a pattern with a pre-god’s presence, and then a post-god’s presence, or an absence of god beforehand and the presence, through the spoken word, afterward. Before, the void; after, that which is filled in w creation. After the people of Nineveh come into contact with god’s words transmitted by Jonah they are changed, and the conditions that made that change possible were the contact, like the spirit hovering over them.

Hovering spirit is ruach, wind. So the plant is killed by the wind, to justify god’s reasoning in intervening w people and caring about them. After this contact with the hovering spirit, creation as a movement away from death begins with the filling in of signs and then creatures with life, all signalled by light, the opposite of emptiness and darkness. The light became a burden for Jonah, and with it and the wind, the plant withered and died, angering Jonah. But that isn’t the end: God’s reasons for this are explained to Jonah, so that he might understand the need to be compassionate, to understand the words, which seems to be the point, not the conversion of the people of Nineveh, which is there only to justify us hearing the words.

The point of the story of Jonah doesn’t come till the end, and it is not about Jonah and his desire to see his prophecy carried out at the price of the lives of the people of Nineveh, but of god’s reasoning based on care, extended from the image of a plant that can be sacrificed so as to give rise to the statement of why caring more for people counts in god’s eyes. The statement of care emerges after the example provided by the hot wind is given; the wind functions as a metaphor, giving pre-eminence to the word over the action: the action of destroying the plant matters because it can be turned into a verbal statement.

The commentary in Soncino makes the same point about creation, i.e., that it is not for the material creation of the world that it matters, but for the word that then describes it, i.e. torah. I usually find the commentary operates from a frame of reference I don’t share, so it seems naïve or dumb or worse, that is, forced logic that can’t admit the plain sense of the text. I liked it here: “*in the beginning* (beresheet) *God created.* This is to be interpreted figuratively: God created the world for the sake of the Torah which is called “*the beginning of His way (Prov. viii.22*), … , the preposition in the word bereshit being understood as ‘for the sake of.’ If the text is rendered literally, the translation is: ‘In the beginning of God’s creation the heaven and earth…when the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters, God said, Let there be light.’ This translation is necessary because *reshit* never means ‘the beginning’ but the beginning of, and also god did not first create heaven and earth but the waters as is evident in verse 2” (1, fn.1).

Fox translates it, “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth.” In his footnote on this translation Fox says he used “creating” as “indicative of god’s power and not used in reference to making humans, although later in the chapter such words as “make” and “form” do appear.” I read ahead to verse 27 which uses the same verb “vyivrah” and Fox translates it as god created humankind in his own image,” and repeats “in the image of God did he create it, male and female did he create them.” Perhaps fox was crazy as a fox. Also he translates “when the earth was wild and waste,” whereas Soncino has it, as does Plaut, “the earth was unformed and void,” a boring rendition of “tohoo” and “vohoo,” clearly rendered terribly by chabad’s version “the earth was astonishingly empty.” Fox glosses tohu and vohu as meaning empty, but with the repetition and onomatopoeia it clearly must mean good and empty, or, in African pidgin I’d say, empty empty. That makes less sense in American English, but is far better than wild and waste, a dumb rendition. If the goat goes into the wilderness of Azazael, perhaps that wilderness is also tohu and vohu, a place over which the spirit would need to blow in order to remove the sins carried by the scapegoat.

The repetition, and god said, and god called, makes the act of saying and calling the basis of creating. One could read the statement, and god created light as the first act of creation, with what came before being there, like god, not created, but simply there; prior to a causative act. That means the earth and the deep, the water, were there alongside god, whose first intervention in existence is to create light and to use it to separate, with separation and creation following: day from night, creature from creature, earth from water, sky separating waters below and waters above.

Then god creates beings who create: “be fruitful and multiply.” The things then man and woman are to rule over are things that create (seed bearing fruit). Even earth is creative (let the earth bring forth living creatures). All this creation presupposes a god who wants these beings to exist and to continue their lines, as with the end of the book of jonah with the theme of life continuing for all beings in the city, naïve and simple people (not knowing left from right) and cows. Like creation: saved from the darkness and void, as was Jonah by the whale episode.

But when it is all over, creation, the filling of the void, itself meets its opposite, and that pattern of stopping creation so that we can gave darkness and tohu/vohu, fullness and emptiness, extends to life followed by death. No eating of the tree of life for Adam and Eve, that which god fears. So instead of living in the place of fullness, of plenitude, they are exiled and barred from re-entering. In addition, more important, we have to read this plenitude and void not simply materially, but as I attempted to do with jonah’s story, figuratively, as the Soncino commentary does with creation itself as a figure for the torah. That means that at the heart of plenitude, of creation, of the place created by god, there has to be the possibility for the space of the void, without which the creation would have no meaning. The place for that possibility of the void is the tree of knowledge. When adam and eve eat, they enable the void—the emptiness and the darkness—to inform their capacity to know. And as a sign of that, they must leave the place of fullness, and enter into a life now informed by knowledge of both plenitude and the void, that is, good and evil, light and darkness, a right hand and a left hand, the difference between that they, and the people of ninevah, now have come to know.

Does god know all this? does god know what is not plenitude, but the void, as now adam and eve know of it? Or is all god knows light and fullness? Does god need Jonah to complete his story? if Jonah gets the lesson from god, beaten into his skull by the hot light that destroyed the plant, what lesson does god get from Jonah, who cared only that his word would be fulfilled?

We could go on forever since this is all speculation. One way to regard it is to see the figure of god, who knows how to bless his people, with compassion, and to accept them in his rohun and khanun, as doubled in his endless curses for those who turned away. A god of creation, a god of war and destruction. Two sides which can be expressed only by the doubling, tohu and vohu, which in one sense reinforce each other, but in another express the notion of sameness in difference. If they were not different, we could not hear that they are two separate words. But if they are different, yet also evoke sameness, could it be the same with good and evil, light and darkness. The tree of knowledge is not called the tree of knowledge and ignorance, because knowledge is itself both tohu and vohu, good and evil, the same thing and different at the same time. That ends creation, as the torah says, on a day, day seven, in which creation is both fulfilled and stopped. “And on the seventh day god finished his work which he had made.” If god finished his work that day, that means he didn’t finish it the day before. Yet god also rested on the seventh day “from all the work which he had made.” The seventh day is then unlike the others because it is a day of both finishing work and abstaining from work, it is the hallowed day of difference. It is exactly, then, like the beginning when the earth and the deep were there, waiting to be acted upon by the spirit that hovered over them, a time when difference and separation had to be created by the speaking of the words, let there be.

Shabbat shalom.