

Genesis and the conditions of creation

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One of my favorite *midrashim* suggests that God made the creation of the world conditional on the Jews' eventually accepting Torah at Mount Sinai. As this midrash tells it, God stipulates that if the Jews refuse to accept Torah, God will return the world to *tohu vavohu*—the state of chaos that precedes creation. Accordingly, at the moment of revelation, the earth trembles, awaiting its fate. (Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 3a and many other places in Talmud and Midrash)

The Jewish people, of course, choose wisely, and the earth is able to relax again. But the threat that the world might someday return to *tohu vavohu* never entirely disappears, but rather reemerges at the moments of God's greatest frustration with humankind. One *midrash* (albeit that describes a moment many generations before Mount Sinai) describes Cain (the Torah's first murderer) as trying to return the world to *tohu vavohu* (*B'reishit Rabbah* 2). Another suggests that if Abraham had not accepted the *mitzvah* of *milah* (circumcision), God would have instantly returned the world to *tohu vavohu*. (*Midrash Tanhuma, Lekh L'kha* 24) A Talmudic passage depicts an evil king, and then an evil generation tempting God to return the world to this state of primordial chaos. (*Sanhedrin* 103a)

We tend to take for granted that the world is a finished product: that is, that the world as it is is the world as it must be. These texts, however, ask us to view the world as constantly teetering between a state of creation and the possibility of destruction. Human actions have the potential to determine the fate of the world.

In this regard, the Talmudic discussion mentioned above is particularly insightful:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Why does the text say, "In the beginning (*b'reishit*) the kingdom of Jehoiakim son of Josiah" (Jeremiah 26:1) and "In the beginning of the kingdom of Zedekiah?" (Jeremiah 28:1) Until now, were they not kings? Rather, God wanted to return the world *tohu vavohu*, and then cooled down. God wanted to return the whole world to *tohu vavohu* on account of Jehoiakim, but then looked at his generation and cooled down. God wanted to return the whole world to *tohu vavohu* on account of the generation of Zedekiah, but then looked at Zedekiah and cooled down.

First some notes of explanation and background: In the case of both of the verses cited, the rabbis are puzzled by the fact that the biblical text uses the word "*b'reishit*"—"in the beginning" (the word with which the Torah as a whole begins) to introduce kings who have already appeared in the text. Given the resonance of the word "*b'reishit*," the rabbis seek to link the text of Jeremiah to the more famous text of the creation story.

The kings in question, Jehoikim or Zedekiah, both preside over a population engaged in idol worship and dismissive of the prophet Jeremiah's calls for repentance. Jehoikim himself demonstrates his rejection of the divine message by physically cutting up a scroll on which Jeremiah has written God's words. When the king and his prophets and priests condemn Jeremiah to die, it is only the popular support for the prophet that averts this decree.

Zedekiah, for his part, does little good, but does continue to pray to God, and does spare Jeremiah's life (even while keeping the prophet in prison). (Jeremiah 35-38)

Neither of these kings, nor their respective subjects, should serve as role models for our own leaders or communities. The talmudic description of God's fury and subsequent decision not to destroy the world does, however, offer us some guidance for thinking about the way in which we think about the responsibilities of our communities and of our leaders.

Very often, we feel powerless to change anything about our worlds. We believe that our leaders are the ones responsible for making change, and thus become frustrated with the inability or unwillingness of our leaders to do so. If we are in leadership positions, we find ourselves frustrated by the apathy of the masses. Thus, we may find ourselves descending into a pit of powerlessness and despair, rather than taking responsibility for making change in whatever context and from whatever position we are able to do so.

The world may always be in danger of returning to *tohu vavohu*. But, according to at least one talmudic discussion, even a small action either by a leader or by a community can make all the difference.

Parshat B'reishit, like the holiday season that leads up to it, demands that we think about beginnings. As we begin the Torah cycle and the new year, how will we begin again to create a world in which there will be no sign of *tohu vavohu*?