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Creation

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Today's portion is Bereshit, so I will talk about creation. I want to make it quite clear that this has nothing to do with Nature, or Being, or the Universe, or any of that stuff. If this little talk had a title, it would be: Creation is mitzvot, Creation is generosity.

I'll talk about a word, a verb. It is *yehi*. According to Torah, this is the first word, in all eternity, which Adonai ever spoke.

When God said this first-ever word, no one heard it. Nothing heard it. There was nothing and no one to hear it. It is a very rare word in the Bible. In a couple of minutes, I'll mention another Bible portion where it shows up. As I say, it is a verb, a command. The *davar* of Adonai is always command and always creates.

A teacher I had says this verb means "to create," and I follow my teacher in this. We translate it into English as "Let there be..." as in "Let there be light." The "be" there bothers me a little. Linguistic scholars say that ancient Hebrew lacked the verb "to be." But English can't get along without it, so "Let there be" is the best we can do even if inaccurate.

God did not have to be so long-winded. In the Bible, God creates just by calling a name. So God could have just said "Light," like a theater stage manager does, and then the lights come on.

Then Light, if it could speak, would answer "Hinneni." This word means "Behold, I." It is a contraction of a verb—*Hinneh* or Behold—and *Ani*—I, so this answer is also a verb, the verb "to I."

It is usually translated as "Here I am," but there is no "here" in it. There is no "am" in it. It is a bare I. It is like the "I" which Adam and Eve said just after being created. It is like when, sometimes, you wake up in the morning and you are just a bare I, before the world rushes back in.

Incidentally, the Hebrew word for "to answer" is also pronounced *ani*, though it is spelled with an *ayin* rather than *aleph*. So to I is to answer.

There are parallels to this story elsewhere in the Bible. One of them is in Exodus 3, the story of the burning bush. When Moses asks the voice for its Name, the reply is "Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh." My teacher says this means "I create what I create."

The parallel is earlier in the story. The Voice in the bush calls, "Moses, Moses." And the answer is "Hinneni." Moses answers, "Behold, I." This too is a creation story.

In our prayer book, two prayers—Yotzeir Or and Nisim B'chol Yom—bless God for the daily renewal of Bereshit, the day by day renewal of creation. What does this mean, if anything? Certainly it does not mean that God is a maintenance engineer for the universe.

In the prayer Baruch She'amar, we bless God as the One who speaks and creates. This is present tense, our prayers say this happens now, today.

If God speaks, how come we don't hear anything? There are many answers to this, but I'll just mention four.

The first is to say that "God speaks" is a figure of speech. Alone, that is an evasive cop-out, as when we adults answer a child's question evasively. What figure of speech is it? It is not metaphor, a carrying across. It's not prosopopoeia or personification, a giving face to. It is catachresis, naming the unnameable. It is a naming, though, that we have stuck with for more than 3000 years. We say God speaks, and we say we will hear. We say we will listen. We say Shema.

Second: In the Conservative mahzor, a prayer for today begins, "O incognito God." God's speaking is not an object for cognition, not a thing for knowledge. It cannot be experienced, but it is the commencement of experience.

Third: When God speaks, maybe it is like god's first-ever word, yehi. There is nothing and no one there to hear it. But something happens just after. When the Voice spoke to Moses from the burning bush, there was a new Moses just after. Creation means something can happen, we aren't locked in ourselves where nothing can happen.

Fourth: Well, how long does it take God to say anything? From the stories about God giving construction instructions to Noah and Moses, it may seem like a long time, as Noah and Moses took notes, perhaps stifling yawns, as we may do when those portions are read to us.

But no. God's time is not our time. In Genesis Rabbah, R. Shimeon bar Yohai says, "Mortal man, who does not know his minutes, his times or his hours, must add from the profane to the sacred; but the Holy One, whose Name be blessed, who knows the moments, the times, and the hours of the Most High, enters by a hairsbreadth." In other words, the speaking of the Most High occurs in an instant of no duration.

And something happens just after that instant.

For example, a little while ago someone opened a door to let someone else in. A little while ago, someone smiled at a stranger. And that was light.