

Has Not One God Created Us All?

Rabbi Andrew Goldstein

Andrew Goldstein is a Rabbi at the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue in Northwood, Middlesex, England.

Have we not all one Divine Parent? Has not one God created us?

A key thought of the Hebrew prophet Malachi (2.10) comes surrounded by verses that are quite puzzling - but this verse is there, a gem, and it expresses the essence of Jewish teaching on the integrity, the completeness, the wholeness of creation. There is one God who is the creator and guide and ruler of all that has, does and will exist. This being so, all that lives is bound in a unique relationship one to the other.

The mediaeval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1135-1204 Spain-Egypt) opens his *Book of Knowledge* in his code on Jewish law and belief as follows:

The fundamental principle and the pillar of all knowledge is to know that there is a First Being who brings everything into being and everything in the heavens and on earth derives from its existence.

Nothing can exist without this Being and everything depends on it for this Being can exist without the creatures of the universe but they cannot exist without this being.

This being is the God of the universe...

(Mishne Torah: Yesode Ha-Torah 1:1-5)

That God created all that exists is, of course, already made clear by the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis which also gives the clear impression that God intended to create the Universe—it was no mere whim—and that God considered creation to be good.(Genesis 1:31)

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible a clear and beautiful picture is painted of a world in which each aspect of creation has its purpose and part to play

and that they are deliberately inter-related, e.g. Psalm 104 (the whole Psalm, but especially verses 10 to 24).

You make the springs gush forth in torrents;
they make their way between the hills,
giving drink to all the wild beasts;
the wild asses slake their thirst.
The birds of the sky dwell beside them
and sing among the foliage.
You water the mountains from Your lofts;
the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work.
You make the grass grow for the cattle,
and herbage for human labour
that we may get food out of the earth -
wine that cheers the hearts of human being,
oil that makes their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their life.

The trees of the Lord drink their fill,
the cedars of Lebanon, God's own planting,
where birds make their nests;
the stork has a home in the junipers.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the rock-badgers.

God made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows when to set.
You bring on darkness and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forests stir.
The lions roar for prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they come home
and couch in their dens.
Humans then go out to their work,
to their labour until the evening.

How many are the things that you have made, O Lord.

We get the clear impression that the Psalmist believed that if any aspect of creation be tampered with, this would affect the whole. The Psalmist did not know our deep anxiety at the way we live in the modern world, unknowingly or knowingly, destroy part of God's creation and so

already see the havoc this brings to other aspects of our environment.

We human being tend to see ourselves as the most important feature of God's creation. The Psalms, however, often picture the physical, inanimate features of creation as having life and the ability to give witness to God's glory: for example,

Let the heavens rejoice and earth exult;
let the sea and all within it thunder,
the fields and everything in them exult;
then shall all the trees of the forest shout for joy.

(Psalm 96:11-12)

Let the sea and all within it thunder,
the world and its inhabitants;
let the rivers clap their hands,
the mountains sing joyously together.

(Psalm 98:7-8)

Does it take only a poet to view the beauty and majesty of rivers and mountains and to realize their integral part in God's good world?

The Bible does see a definite order in creation and sees human beings as the pinnacle of God's creative act. As such we have power over creation, but also great responsibility for it: e.g.. Genesis 1:28.

And God blessed them and said to them: "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth; subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over everything that creeps on the face of the earth."

A Rabbinic comment on this verse pictures God showing Adam and Eve around the Garden of Eden, showing them all of its beauty. Says God:

"See how lovely and how worthy of praise are my works. They have been created for your sake. Take care not to spoil or destroy My world, for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you."

(Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

Another Midrash (an early Rabbinic commentary) stresses the importance of all that God has created:

Even those things that you may hold superfluous in the world such as fleas, gnats and flies, even they are part of the creation of the world. God carries out His purpose through everything, even through a snake, even through a gnat, even through a frog.

(Genesis Rabbah 107)

Another charming Midrash sharply challenges modern world society that yearly allows the destruction of habitats and species:

Said the raven to Noah: “You hate me, for you did not choose to send a scout from the species of bird of which there were seven pairs in the Ark, but from a species of which there was only one pair. If the power of the sun or the power of the cold had overwhelmed me, would not the world be missing a species?”

(Talmud Sanhedrin 108b)

The Hebrew Bible believes that God’s creation should be left as it is, and that we humans do not have the right to change it, for example:

“You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, else the crop — from the seed you have sown and the yield of the vineyard — may not be used.”

(Deuteronomy 22:9)

Such laws against cross-breeding we might find difficult to accept today and much of the modern agricultural world is based on “improved species”. And yet our concern grows about where our ability to tamper with nature’s gene pool will lead.

There are many references in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature that could be used to urge us to conserve our natural resources, not destroy our environment; but the point we have been trying to make here is that in Jewish eyes there is an integrity in creation, a wholeness that was intended by God and that we should seek to preserve.

Samson Raphael Hirsch (the Orthodox Jewish theologian: Germany 1808-1888) summed up the matter as follows:

“One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all creatures; none is by or of itself, but all things exist in continual reciprocal activity - the one for the all: the all for the one”.

As a postscript to this section, we offer a prayer by the Hasidic Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811) that beautifully expresses the belief that in the integrity of creation, human beings can, through prayer and meditation, find a way to their and its Creator:

Master of the Universe,
grant me the ability to be alone;
may it be my custom to go outdoors each day
among the trees and grass, among all growing things,

and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer,
to talk with the one that I belong to.
May I express there everything in my heart,
and may all the foliage of the field (all grasses trees and plants)
may they all awake at my coming,
to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer
so that my prayer and speech are made whole
through the life and spirit of all growing things,
which are made as one by their transcendent Source.”

*The Integrity of Creation in the affairs of human beings:
“Has not one God created us all?”*

To change the focus from the whole spectrum of creation to the variety of human beings and peoples; Judaism from its earliest stages made clear that the one God is concerned with all peoples, and not just with the Jewish people.

When Abraham is told of the imminent destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gommorah, he pleads with God that they be saved. He does not plead only to save his relatives, Lot and his family, but that it be unjust to destroy the city if there reside in it righteous people. It is unjust to punish the righteous with the wicked (Genesis 18:23-33). The potential righteous of Sodom and Gommorah were not Hebrews, yet still Abraham pleads for them and the assumption is that in God’s eyes it would make no difference: Justice is justice, and this applies to all people, for all are the one God’s creatures.

The prophet Amos declared God’s equal concern for all peoples:
“Are you not as the children of the Ethiopian to Me, O Children of Israel?”
Says the Eternal God. “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt.
And the Philistines from Caphtor. And Aram from Kir?”

(Amos 9:7)

Two passages from Rabbinic literature illustrate the belief that all people are equal in God’s eyes and that all are potentially precious to God. Individuals may look different, but inherently all human beings are God’s children.

For this reason a single human being only was created at the time of Creation: to teach you that whoever destroys a single life, Scripture reckons it to him as though he had destroyed a whole world; and whoever saves a single life, Scripture reckons it to him as though he had saved a whole world.

Also for the sake of peace among human beings, so that one person should not say to another: "My ancestors were greater than your ancestors."

And also to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One. If a human being stamps several coins with the same die, they all resemble one another. But the Supreme Ruler, the Holy One, stamps all human beings with the die of the first human being; and yet not one of them resembles the other.

Therefore every human individual is obligated to say: "For my sake was the world created!"

(Mishne Sanhedrin 4:5)

And each human being has the same value in God's eyes and rank or position does not make one more precious than the other. A favourite saying of the Rabbis of Yavneh (1st Century C.E.) was:

I am God's creature and my neighbour is God's creature.

My work is in the city and his work is in the field.

I rise early to go to my work and he rises early to go to his work.

As he does not pride himself on his work, so I do not pride myself on mine.

But should you think that I am doing more than he - we have learned:

"Do more, do less, it matters not, so long as one's heart is turned to heaven."

(Berachot 17a)

A key passage is found in Midrashnic Literature:

What was Deborah's character that she should have judged Israel, and prophesied to them at a time when Phinehas son of Elazar was alive? I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be Gentile or Israelite, man or woman, slave or handmaid, according to the deeds which he or she does, so will the Holy Spirit rest on him and her.

(Tan.d.b.E1. p.48)

Maimonides crystallises this universalistic view on the potential of all peoples:

The Pious of the Gentiles will have a share in the World to come.

(Hilchot Teshuvah 3:5)

Integrity of Creation: Relations Between Human Beings

If one Divine Parent created all human beings, all are this one God's "children", then surely it is clear that in this God's eyes harmony within the human family is the ideal state. This is beautifully expressed in a prayer by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav:

May the will come from You
to annul wars and the shedding of blood from the
universe,
and to extend a peace, great and wondrous, in the
universe.
Nor again shall one people raise the sword against
another
and they shall learn war no more.
But let all the residents of earth recognize and know
the innermost truth:
that we are not come into this world for quarrel and
division,
nor for hate and jealousy, contrariness and bloodshed;
but we are come into this world
You to recognize and know,
may You be blessed forever.

(Likkutey Tefillot)

The one Hebrew word that most non-Jews know is *Shalom*. It is usually translated as *Peace* and does mean peace. But it signifies more than the mere absence of war. The root implies "wholeness, completeness" and so the ideal state in which the world, human societies, human souls should exist is with *Shalom* — with completeness, wholeness — another way of expressing the "integrity of creation".

Last Words...A Covenant

The second part of Malachi's statement with which we began provides a sharp retort to the first half.

Have we not all one Divine Parent
Has not one God created us?
Why [then] do you deal treacherously one against the other, by profaning
the covenant of our Divine Parent?

What is this covenant? Jewish and Christian traditions know clearly what is the covenant they believe God has made with their people (with Abraham, with Moses at Sinai, through Jesus); but what of all humankind? If we speak on the One God, Creator of all that exists, then surely this God must make a covenant with all humanity? Surely the answer is found in the covenant God made with Noah after the flood.

“I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you — birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well — all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God further said “This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth.”

The early Rabbinic commentators looked at this passage and pondered on the details of the Covenant that God made with Noah. They knew of the Covenant made with the Jewish people through Moses and had carefully counted the *Mitzvot* (Commandments) incumbent on a Jew, and calculated that there were six hundred and thirteen Mitzvot. However, from a careful reading of the Noah cycle of stories, they concluded that there were seven basic laws that applied to all human beings and only if they were kept could society exist:

The establishment of a system of justice, prohibition of blasphemy,
idolatry, sexual immorality or incest, murder, theft and devouring a limb
of a living animal.

(Talmud Sanhedrin 56a)

How Jewish to try to define God’s relationship with all human beings in terms of Mitzvot, and how essentially Jewish to believe that God’s concern is for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles. How many societies and individuals do not even keep the seven basic “Noachite” laws!

But to end, let us look at the plain meaning of the text of God's covenant with Noah. Surely it says that God's side of the covenant is not to bring destruction to life and the world. Our side is to see that we do not destroy each other, the balance of nature, nature itself, our environment, our planet. God's rainbow still appears in the sky: will humankind be responsible for putting out its brilliant promise? That is the challenge we face in the decade and the century to come.