

It's Time to Write a New Beginning

The Cornell 57 has reawakened critical conversations around violence, complicity, and the bystander effect. It also reveals the failure of the dominant stories we tell around gender, subjugation, dehumanization. This is an urgent reminder that another world is possible.

Parashat Bereishit 5787

I always imagined that I'd grow up to be a civil rights attorney. I dreamt of working with The Innocence Project or Bryan Stevenson on death row cases, hoping to help steer our bruised and confused nation toward what I imagined to be its destiny: a true multiracial democracy born of an honest reckoning with our past and shared commitment to build a better future.

At some point, sparked by a spiritual awakening yet still driven by many of the same commitments, I pivoted to the rabbinate. I entered Seminary because I wanted to understand how excavating and translating the wisdom of our sacred, ancient past could help us heal.

I'm deeply grateful for my six years in Seminary, when I traded tequila shots for 12-14 hours a day of Talmud.

Nevertheless, there were many points of friction for me in the long course of study, chief among them, my discomfort with what I realized too late was actually the dominant academic endeavor in our program: Biblical scholarship.

I don't mean the study of Torah, I mean the rigorous course of scholarship that examines the sacred text not as an expression of Divine authorship, but as a compilation of multiple authors, edited together over time, called the Documentary Hypothesis. And the analysis of contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern texts, rather than a deep dive into our own text and generations of *mefarshim* (interpreters).

My main objection was that dissecting sacred text with tweezers felt like trying to understand love through brain scans and flow charts. Interesting, maybe, but ultimately a distraction from what mattered most.

For the most part, I still feel that way, but over time, with some distance from the ivory tower, I find myself slightly more open to insights emerging from that approach.

Returning over the past few years to the scholarship of Tikvah Frymer Kensky, who wrote about Ancient Near Eastern mythology,¹ I have found myself deeply compelled by the *Epic of Atrahasis*.

¹ Tikvah Frymer Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9" (*Biblical Archaeologist* 40)

This story predates the Bible by probably more than 1000 years, and it's a precursor to some of the greatest hits of the Book of Genesis, including the creation story, which we read this morning.

In the Ancient Near Eastern version of the story, human beings are created when the gods decide they need slave laborers to work the land. So they turn on one of their own, slaughter him, and mix his flesh and blood with soil from the earth.

In the Torah, in contrast, God creates human beings in God's own image בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ (Gen. 1:27), blessed to be *like* God, and intended as covenantal partners. They are destined to labor only after disobeying God's command regarding the fruit of the tree.

In Atrahasis, the humans constantly irritate the gods with their endless chatter.

But while we certainly annoy God in the Torah, in much of our narrative, when the people cry out, God is moved to compassion for them. God hears the cries of Ishmael, of Hannah, and of the enslaved Israelite community (Exodus 3:9). God hears the cries of the righteous (Psalms 34:16), the oppressed and the orphans (Exodus 22:21-23).

The gods of Atrahasis dread human procreation because people are such a nuisance. But in our Torah narrative, humans are repeatedly instructed to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28, 9:1, 9:7).

I now read the Torah's version of this story as not only a revelation, but a revolution!

When the dominant, normative story being told in the ancient world was one of *disorder*, we chose to tell a story of *order*.

Whereas the pervasive story was one of divine cruelty, we imagined a world built by *hesed*—God's undeserved love.

They told a story of dominance; we countered with a story of covenantal partnership.

Now I can't help but read in Bereishit a rejection of the worldview of human exploitation and divine callousness, and instead an embrace of a God overflowing with love, and human beings pregnant with potential.

Cast in this light, the Torah itself is a polemic, a revolution against the norms of the ancient world. To tell *this* narrative, in *this* way, is an act of unmitigated *hutzpah*—an eternal invitation to work the muscle of writing a new ending, or in this case a new beginning, so that we might be able to build a different kind of world.

Now at this point in the sermon there are so many directions I could go. I could speak about what happened in Union Square on October 7th, when Israelis for Peace gathered to honor those who had been killed in the Hamas atrocities and in the devastation of Gaza were protested by extremists who could not bear to hear of any Israeli grief at all—the mirror

image of the far right protesters in Israel who disrupt joint memorial services every year at *Yom HaZikaron*. And how desperately we need to tell a different story.

I could talk about how ICE– agents of the US government– shot a man in NY while his 5 year old son sat in the back of the car, and how this barely broke into the news cycle because such cruelty is no longer surprising in any way. And how desperately we need to tell a different story.

I could speak about Israel's upcoming elections, and our own midterms, rapidly approaching, and the perhaps fleeting opportunity before us to tell a different story.

But today I feel I must begin a communal conversation about what happened at Cornell, as its reverberations course through the nation and into the most private corners of our beings.

Nearly a decade (and what feels like a lifetime) ago, we came out of the holidays and into Parashat Bereishit amid the hearings for a Supreme Court nominee who was credibly accused of sexual violence.

In our grief and our rage, we searched within these sacred stories for wisdom to help us navigate the *unreal* reality of a president who bragged about committing sexual assault appointing a justice facing multiple accusations of sexual assault, both of whom we knew were committed to denying women the right to decide what they might do, should they end up pregnant after sexual assault.

And now, eight years later, we learn about a chat group of 57 fraternity brothers inviting one another to brutalize a fellow student. And– as far as we can tell– not one of them offering a word of concern or pause, let alone contacting authorities.

And we see a university system more concerned with protecting the school's reputation than its students.

And a DA all too eager to close the case and move on... nothing to see here.

Meanwhile all of them knowing– even if they wish they did not– that while this story is exceptionally cruel, Jane Doe is not the exception.

When I was in school, the sobering statistic was that one in five female college students would experience sexual assault during their years on campus. And despite all our fierce advocacy and education, despite the MeToo revolution and the promise of national accountability, that number has not shrunk. [One in five](#).

In fact, according to the careful reporting by Emma Goldberg and others, Cornell's own [analysis](#) found that 35 percent of undergraduate women reported having nonconsensual sexual experiences during their time there.

Back then, during the nominee's hearings, we looked to two versions of the creation of the human person.

כֹּו וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּעֵלְמֹ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God created *adam* in God's image; in God's own image was *adam* created;
male and female God created them. (Genesis 1:27)

In the Genesis I version, man and woman are created together. *Adam harishon* is not *man*, but a unified being that is both male and female, two aspects of the same being.

Genesis II tells a different story.

יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא־טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבֶדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for *adam* to be alone;
I will make a fitting helper for him." (Gen 2:18)

In this second story, man is the protagonist, the central character of God's creation. Woman is secondary, born of man. He dominates in all ways. He is more powerful. More important. Her life's purpose is to serve and to satisfy him.

Their partnership is not one of equals. It is permanently defined by the power imbalance between them.

The Documentary Hypothesis might suggest that the inconsistencies between these two stories can simply be attributed to two different authors. But I chose to read it as an intentional offering of two different models for how we might choose to live.

The challenge of our time, I argued back then, was that people like many of us, those who hold a Genesis I mentality– who would stake our lives on partnership and mutuality– are forced to live nevertheless within Gen II structures and systems. Forced to confront, every day, the dissonance between these two value systems.

I worried a lot in those years, as a mother/ rabbi/ human being, what the embrace and elevation of Genesis II men to the positions of great power would mean for the rest of us, and for our shared work in building toward a just and loving society.

Those who live with a Genesis I mentality but are forced to live in a Gen II world are always going to suffer from a sense of deep misalignment with our culture.

We who believe in the dignity of every person, created in the image of God, will never adjust comfortably to a reality or a movement or a norm that rests on domination, subjugation, dehumanization.

...Not in international politics,
not in movements for social change,
not in personal relationships.

"I think if you're not angry there's something wrong," said one Cornell student.

That student is right. The anger is not misplaced.

But the irrepressible sense of misalignment could be the birthplace of cynicism, rage, and resentment. Or it *could* ignite within us the kind of vitality, of cognitive and spiritual dissonance that demands that we birth a new story.

And of course there is another story to tell here, one already embedded in the text itself in Genesis I.

On this *Shabbat Bereishit*, I hear the invitation to a new narrative, one that challenges– even overturns– the dominant assumptions of its time.

The kind of hutzpah that says: *this way is not the only way*.

When a journalist put out a public call for information about the survivor so that people could *independently evaluate her veracity*, social media was flooded with millions of posts saying: *You want to know who Jane Doe is? I am Jane Doe*. A spontaneous movement to protect the privacy of the survivor by confusing the algorithm. And– since many of those posting wrote also about their own abuse– this was yet another indication of just how pervasive this violence is.

In so far as shame, disbelief, and isolation are common responses to sexual violence, this outpouring of solidarity is a genuine gesture of love. Every one of those posts, a counter narrative.

The normative way is not the only way.

I've had hard and important conversations with survivors this week, a painful reminder of how news stories out there re-trigger trauma *in here*. Being tender toward one another, remembering that we have no idea what storm is raging beneath the surface, reaching out to loved ones and letting them know that we remember, and we will not turn away– all of this is a counter-testimony to the dehumanization of the 57, those who failed to see Jane Doe's humanity. Even still, we are saying, I see yours.

No, the normative way is not the only way.

And demanding accountability in our schools and shuls and work places, this, too, is an affirmation that the normative way is not the only way.

And this may be the hardest of all:

Speaking honestly about this with our children... Teaching our children– especially our boys– that even in a Genesis II reality, where structures are designed to grant them unearned advantage, they must be Genesis I people, they must be the ones who break the spell, who tell the secret, who intervene, who do what is right, even if that means breaking the code of brotherhood.

We must teach them– through our words and our model– that partnership is far more powerful, and rewarding, than dominance.

The Torah rejected the prevalent worldview of human exploitation and divine callousness of the Near Eastern mythologies, and instead told a story of undeserved love, covenant, and human striving. And we, too, can tell a different story.

It's the beginning of a new year.

The old story is threatening our bodies and damaging our souls. Let's write a new ending, or in this case, a new beginning. A story that will inspire us to manifest a very different kind of reality.