

Parshat Bereshit, 26 October, 2019

By Gilead Limor

How much do we – as average people - get done in a week? When we view our weekly schedule in a day-to-day perspective, it seems that we can get quite a bit done, balancing our work schedule with household tasks, shopping, school runs and other necessary chores. When the weekend comes around, all we want to do is put our feet up and do nothing.

Well, clearly there are some for whom all this dwarfs against their own colossal aspirations, and creative concept of time and what can be achieved in a short amount of it. Seriously: What has Boris been thinking all this time? However, lets put politics aside, lest we fall into the trap of discussing Brexit for the next few hours.

Throughout this week's Parshah, time itself seems to take on a very fluid and indeterminate nature. First we have six days, each of which sees a distinct stage in the creation of the world. If we were to measure up God's accomplishments in that solitary week in evolutionary terms, starting with the big bang and leading up to the appearance of our token homo sapien, Adam, roughly 200,000 years ago, we are looking at 13.6 billion years between Sunday morning and Erev Shabbat.

The first four days seem to be dealing with the after-effects of the big bang: expansion of the universe, the formation of our galaxy, then of our planetary system, Earth's atmosphere and topography, division of land and seas and the appearance of plant life and flora, although the Genesis narrative does not necessarily have these all happening in that order. First we have the seas, the trees, grass and other flora on Tuesday, with the sun, moon and stars appearing on Wednesday. I probably would have done things the other way around.

A significant landmark occurs on the fifth day: the appearance of animal life on the planet – sea monsters – Taninim, water dwelling creatures, creatures that crawl, and birds that fly. We can probably estimate this landmark to the emergence of the planet from a period known as the Snowball Earth Event, which began around 2.5 billion years ago following an increase in oxygen levels in the atmosphere, which eventually led to the evolution of more complex life-forms: invertebrates, vertebrates, reptiles and so forth, with dinosaurs gaining dominance during the Mesozoic period, and coming to dominate the earth roughly 200 million years ago.

It should be worth mentioning that during the dinosaur reign, mammals were yet to make an appearance both in the Genesis narrative and in evolutionary terms, since dinosaurs were reptilian – equivalent, one could say – to those Taninim.

Around 66 million years ago – early on Friday morning, the dinosaur dominion was all but wiped out with the impact of an asteroid, between 6 and 9 miles in diameter, on the surface of the planet. The only survivors of this epic event from

the dinosaur dominion were some of the avian dinosaurs, ancestors of the bird kingdom we are familiar with today (which, incidentally, includes our Shabbat Dinner chickens and Thanksgiving turkeys – yes, some of us eat dinosaur, and apparently it's kosher).

With the threat of the dinosaurs gone, the asteroid impact is also believed to have triggered the eventual emergence of mammals, primates, apes, hominids and finally the lineage that culminated in who we are today: homo sapiens. Not bad for a (66 million year) Friday's work. And the appearance of our biblical homo sapiens – man and woman he created them – just before Shabbat, marks the culmination of God's most epic working week. It's not surprising God decided to take a day off.

Interestingly, if that asteroid had not hit its mark and had missed the planet altogether, the world could easily still be the dominion of dinosaurs today, and mammals as we know them – including us humans – would probably have never evolved. It is almost as if God's creation of mammals, and ultimately man, was a deliberate asteroid slam-dunk into the surface of the Yukatan peninsula, sometime on Friday morning. The effects were complete by the time Shabbat came in.

After the verses we are familiar with from Kiddush Leyl Shabbat, in which God enjoys a well deserved rest, we have a recap of sorts: God's reasoning of creating man: all this land, but no one to toil it... After seeing so much parallel between the Genesis narrative and its evolutionary counterpart, this is an affirmation, if you like, that man's creation was deliberate and not an evolutionary coincidence. Those who authored Bereshit 2000 years ago must have known that many years in the future some troublemaker called Charles Darwin would come along and disprove much of what the world had come to know as "truth".

Anyway, from this point, the concept of time shifts to a much more modest scale and certainly more humanly graspable. We have another description of the creation of man, a description of the newly formed Garden of Eden and its perimeters marked by four rivers. Adam is released into the garden with specific instructions from God as to which trees he is permitted to eat from, and which not. He is also given the task to name all of the living beings that God has created. All on his own... My calculation puts us on either Sunday or Monday of the second week, we have a long wait until the next weekend.

Realising that Adam needs a companion, or someone to share his tasks, God puts him to sleep and creates a woman from his rib. Now, as much as I have tried, I have not found an evolutionary parallel to this, unless it goes to symbolise our evolution from androgynous invertebrates billions of years earlier... did our early biblical scribes have such a wealth of knowledge when they compiled the Torah?

The narrative takes us through the story of the Garden of Eden and the saga of Cain and Abel, then Cain's branding, bringing us to Adam's family tree, towards the end of the parshah. Even though the lives of each of Adam's descendants

spans approximately 10-12 times what we would consider a typical human lifespan, in evolutionary terms (or maybe God's own timetable), it was probably sometime on Monday morning when Adam and Eve got kicked out of the garden of Eden, and maybe a few nanoseconds later by the time God decided to flood the planet and wipe out all he had created a week or so earlier. Where are we today? Still on Monday, I reckon, just a few moments later.

It is only at the end of the Parshah, God changes the human life span to 120 years, seeing that man has become a bit too fruitful, and that having humans live to their 900s would result in rapid overpopulation.

While measured time is absolute, our perception of time is relative. When we are children, a typical day feels endless, our existence is faster and we perceive the adults around us as being slower and more sluggish. When we grow older, we find it hard to keep up with our children. They seem to speak quickly, think quickly, and are able to fit so much more into their day – if they want to, of course, than we can. We perceive time as flying a lot faster the older we get, it just seems to slip through our fingers. We have just celebrated the New Year, Sukkot and Simchat Torah, and before we know it, Chanukah and Purim will be over and we will be preparing for Pessach. Blink again, and Shavuot has gone by, and it's Rosh Hashanah again. Where does the time go?

In evolutionary terms, and indeed in God's world, our lives are probably but a few nanoseconds long. The ongoing evolutionary process of our planet and everything that dwells on it does not pause to give us a guiding hand, but it may give us clues on our journey to tell us what we are doing wrong, and inspire us to try and make things better.

Six days may not sound like a long time, but in contrast to the 13.6 billion years that those six days may represent, the damage we have done to our planet over the past few hundred years, are but a fleeting instant within that working week, remember, we are still on Monday of the second week.

Our individual nanosecond lives may not be sufficient in themselves to make much of a difference to our planet's wellbeing, but if we humans collectively combine resources and effort, we can possibly do our part to ensure that the planet – and life upon it – are still intact by the time God's second Shabbat comes around.

Regardless of how we perceive time, we need to cherish the time we have and use it wisely, both in our individual lives, and our collective life as a people and civilisation. Because once the time has gone, it's gone.

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