

Parashat Bereishit: Fake News

Dear Friends,

It is difficult for me to describe, and even more difficult to explain, how excited I am to return to Bereishit. Maybe it is the richness, maybe the depth, or perhaps it is that lovely sense of potential at its core and virgin state, just waiting to be explored.

This year the following verse caught my attention. It appears immediately following the creation of the first human being, just before being split into two, male and female:

“And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name.” (Bereishit 2:19)

This is a brilliant and deep idea - Divine, even! Humans give each creature its name, thereby determining that it is what it is, and not another. But by the same token, this is also a terrible idea - even diabolic.

It is deep because it placed human beings at the pinnacle of Creation. Yuval Noah Harari describes this stage of human development brilliantly in his book “Sapiens”. But Harari doesn’t tell us how terrible it also is, and how this process also imprisons us - how our narrow definitions narrow our lives.

To understand just how diabolic this can be, see how the term “fake news” has so embittered our lives. Fake news is not a new invention, and it didn’t start with Donald Trump. Not at all. Words, language, and names are in their very essence fake!

Let me explain.

Words and names - as one of my most significant teachers, the philosopher Eugene Gendlin wrote - are a system of symbolic representation. They are not “reality” itself. The word ‘serpent’, for instance, is just a word with two syllables, seven letters, and two vowels. That’s all. But somehow, when I say the word serpent, or snake, you immediately imagine a long animal that slithers on the ground. I could even scare you by yelling “there’s a snake behind you!”, and you would run away, I hope, or else freeze in place from fright. And it would feel so real, even though there was no snake in the area.

Fake news, indeed!

Another example: just saying the word “lemon” or even thinking about a lemon causes most of us to have a sour sensation in our mouth as if we had just tasted that greenish-yellow, sour fruit. Fake news, so to speak (because we aren’t actually tasting a lemon) truly changes our physical sensations!

An entirely different example is the thought of something bad happening to our children, God forbid - on the road, in the army, on the after-army trek. We immediately feel worried and stressed. These are very real sensations, even though my kid is only 11 right now, and he is fast asleep - and totally safe - in his bed...

In our experience, as soon as we give names to things (i.e., connecting a word or a name to an image, a smell, a sound or a sensation), they become that name. This is how our experience of reality is formed (this is not how reality itself is formed, because we don’t actually know anything about reality, we just know our subjective experience of it).

It appears then that everything, truly everything, is entirely imagined. Our entire worldview is symbolic rather than real.

The purpose of the education we receive from the moment of birth and throughout our lives is to instill in us an imagined reality that society has determined many years ago to be “real”. No one knows any longer who actually invented these imagined paradigms and norms that we follow today, but the way it got transmitted from generation to generation was with the use of words and names - language.

And this is a very good thing! Without words and names there is no society. Without language there is no intelligent communication, expression of opinions, development of ideas... nothing! Words are the most ingenious invention ever, and therefore this verse from Bereishit is so profound!

However, as I said, this invention is also diabolic, because at some point we begin to believe that the things we ourselves name are actually real; indeed, they become what we named them. We forget that we are the ones who bestowed that name - us or our ancestors. We think - we are even sure! - that these objects are real, and that the words simply describe them. Not so! The words formed them (in our own subjective experience)! The minute we are sure that our words and stories are descriptive of a factual reality, confusion sets in and slavery takes hold. We have created a mental prison for ourselves.

How ironic that we have become enslaved to our own creation, to language; that we become prisoners of our very own stories.

But there is a way out of this prison, and this is the reason the Torah of Israel is the Torah of liberation. It is also the reason we read Bereishit again and again, because it contains the keys to the prison doors.

It is not at all simple, and most people I know are unable to free themselves, primarily because they choose to make do with the superficial reading of the Torah. But since we're starting afresh, why not try?

All one has to do is remember what was, and still is: that we humans give names to everything; that we are the ones who made the subjective connection between our sensed reality and words and thus create our experience of reality, for good and for bad.

We don't have to change the story in order to get out of the prison of words (as is suggested by the narrative method), because by doing so, we are exchanging one prison for another. It is much simpler to remind ourselves that the stories we tell ourselves are all imagined. We can even enjoy them, but NEVER believe them! Because it is all fake news which we ourselves have generated.

It sounds simple - and indeed it is - but it is also the hardest thing we'll ever do. To break out of prison requires spiritual work.

So welcome back to the beginning of human experience. Welcome back to the words, the names, and the stories that formed our reality, and are transmitted from generation to generation.

And welcome back to the hidden keys to the prison gates.

Oh, and Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha