In the Image of God: Reclaiming Bereishit 1's Clobber Verse

Parashat Bereishit

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The Torah starts out with the creation story (actually, two creation stories, but that's for another time) in Parashat Bereishit. Towards the end of the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that on the sixth day, God created humanity, male and female, and made them *betzelem elohim*, in the Divine Image. It is among the best-loved lines in the entire Torah, the root of every sermon about human dignity. It is also, as I have learned from painful personal experience, a verse that can be turned into a weapon.

It is common to speak of "clobber passages" in anti-queer, homophobic, and transphobic discussions of Scripture. These verses are called that because they're often used simply to shut down debate, to say "Well, the Bible says X, so your point of view is wrong, debate over"—in essence, to clobber, rather than to engage. The two best-known and frequently cited clobber passages in the Hebrew Bible are, of course, Lev. 18:22 (and 20:13): "thou shalt not lie with a man as one lies with a woman", and Genesis chapter 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Another clobber passage one sees deployed against queer people is Genesis 2: the slogan "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" derives from this part of the second creation story. Many people have written about these passages from the perspective of how to engage with them fruitfully and reclaim them; I have no doubt that when Sodom, Leviticus, etc. come up in the cycle of Torah readings we'll talk about them. (For the moment, I recommend Amy-Jill Levine's article on this topic: "G-d," she notes, "also created Steve.")

But there's a clobber verse in the first creation story too. The verse is Gen. 1:27:

וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים | אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם׃

> And God created *ha-adam* in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (my translation)

Notoriously difficult to translate, of course, is the word *ha-adam*. It clearly doesn't mean "a person named Adam"; that's an anachronistic misreading of the text (see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler's excellent section on this topic in their book *The Bible With and*

Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently). It probably means "the first human being" or "humankind" writ large—or both. The verse's grammar is odd, too: it goes from singular *oto* to plural *otam*: "him" to "them"—and "male and female" are in the verse before any binary split. The midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 8:1) famously reads Adam as an *androginos*, and much has been written about the rabbis' attempts to square the halachic binary categories of "male and female" with the wide range of human sexual and gender experience. (A good start for exploring some of this is TransTexts from Rabbis Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman.)

None of this proves that Genesis 1 is "about" trans people, and I'm not claiming that the rabbis had us in mind. But it does mean that the verse is stranger and more open than the way it gets used. A text whose grammar slides between persons and pronouns, that names "male and female" as the Divine Image before it describes any division of humanity, and that the ancients could imagine as a single being containing both, is a poor foundation for a rigidly closed binary.

And yet I have had this verse thrown at me as a clobber passage. One doesn't have to look very far to find people proclaiming that trans people are tampering with the way God made us. God made you perfect, goes the thinking, in the Divine Image, so your body is exactly the way it's supposed to be, so altering that body is desecrating that image.

But the creation of humanity is not the climax of the creation story in the first section of Bereishit: the climax of creation is Shabbat. Shabbat is a day of rest, and it is through that rest that God and creation find their fulfillment and ultimate realization. Every Friday night, we say the Kiddush prayer to sanctify the Shabbat day, in which we refer to multiple aspects of Shabbat: *techila le-mikra'ei kodesh*, "the first of the sacred festivals", *zeicher litzi'at mitzrayim*, a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt, and of course, *zikaron lema'asei bereishit*, a remembrance of the works of creation.

There's something very instructive about the idea of Shabbat—rest—as the climax of creation. Rashi, citing the midrash in Bereishit Rabbah, notes a seeming paradox here: the Torah says that God finished working on the seventh day, which implies that God created something on the seventh day:

> מֶה הָיָה הָעוֹלָם חָסֵר? מְנוּחָה, בָּאת שַׁבָּת בָּאת מְנוּחָה, כְּלָתָה וְנִגְמְרָה הַמְּלָאכָה:

> What was the world lacking [on the seventh day]? Rest! Shabbat came, and rest came; thus was the work completed and finished. (Rashi to Gen. 2:2, my translation)

Genesis 1 tells us that human beings are created in the Divine Image, but it doesn't tell us what that image actually is. God doesn't get a physical description here. The only things we learn about God here are that God creates, separates, names, and rests. So here is my answer to the weaponization of "created in the Divine Image". If creation were finished and final on day six, the argument might hold: God made you, so don't touch it. But that isn't the Torah's full picture. The world on day six was still lacking something. It lacked *menucha*, rest, and Shabbat completed it. Creation is not over when the last thing is made.

The rabbis go further. The creation account ends with the statement that God rested on the

seventh day, "having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done" (Gen. 2:3, revised JPS). The final word is *la'asot*; "to do", "to make". The world is in a constant state of being created *and re-created*. The midrash takes this odd phrasing to mean that creation was left incomplete on purpose; God handed it to us to complete:

> כָּל מַה שֶּׁנִּבְרָא בְּשֵׁשֶׁת יְמֵי בְרֵאשִׁית צְרִיכִין עֲשִׂיָה, כְּגוֹן הַחַרְדָּל צָרִיךְ לְמִתּוּק. הַתּוּרְמוּסִים צָרִיךְ לְמִתּוּק. הַחִטִּין צְרִיכִין לְהִטָּחֵן. אֲפִלּוּ אָדָם צָרִיךְ תִּקּוּן.
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> Everything that was created during the six days of creation requires action: for example, mustard requires sweetening, lupines require sweetening, wheat requires milling. Even man needs *tikkun*. (Bereishit Rabbah 11:6, my translation)

Tikkun means something like "setting right" or "bringing to completion". As an example, consider the blessing we say over bread: *hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz*, thanking God who "brings forth bread from the earth". But bread does not come from the earth. Wheat does. Between field and table come plowing, sowing, reaping, threshing, winnowing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking. And yet we thank God for the bread, as though the grain and the loaf were a single gift. Our tradition has no trouble with human hands finishing what God began; on the contrary, our finishing it is the whole point.

Nobody applies "God made you perfect, don't touch it" to haircuts or eyeglasses, braces or insulin. It gets applied to trans people. Our tradition says the opposite of what the slogan claims: no one is born finished, and we are meant to be partners in the work.

And that brings me back to rest. When trans people describe transition, we often talk about it in terms of relief, settledness, coming home. I remember vividly the sensation I had, when I started taking estrogen, of finally feeling like I was letting out a breath I'd been holding my whole life, and letting my entire body settle. This is the language of *menucha*. The world wasn't complete until rest arrived, and maybe it isn't surprising that a person isn't either. The image of God in us isn't a frozen snapshot. It's something we're invited to bring, in our own time, to its own Shabbat.

So to the people who threw that verse at me: you were right that I was made in the image of God. You just stopped reading a day too early.