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VAYEHI

FROM MADISON SQUARE GARDEN TO  
METLIFE STADIUM: TRANSFORMATIONS IN  
DAF YOMI SIYUMIM

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Over the past week, the whole world has been treated to celebration after celebration of the enduring love between the Jewish people and the book that shaped it more than any other, the Talmud Bavli. It has been a tremendous source of pride and inspiration for me, and I, an avowed *Daf Yomi* outsider, am finding it harder and harder to resist its temptations.

However, until I finally cave, this resistance has allowed me to observe the *Daf Yomi* phenomenon and its *Siyumim* every 7.4 years with a certain critical distance, and to notice certain important changes in the production of the main *Siyum* in the U.S. and in the culture of *Daf Yomi* over the past 30 years.

The most obvious change is the scale. As late as 1968, the “main event” in the U.S. was held at the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park, with an estimated attendance [as low as](#) 300. Half a century and seven *Daf Yomi* cycles later, this population squared itself, as some 90,000 people filled MetLife Stadium on January 1, 2020.<sup>1</sup> I attended my first *Siyum* at Madison Square Garden in 1990. There was astonishment that a *Siyum* could fill a 20,000-seat arena to capacity, especially since in 1982 the audience of 5,000 did not sell out the Felt Forum.

Yet many of the transformations have been subtle, flying beneath the radar. This account is impressionistic, guided mainly by memory.

My father started learning *Daf Yomi* in the late 1980s, toward the end of the ninth cycle, figuring – in true Fischer fashion – that the last tractates are some of the most arcane and challenging, so it would be best to get them out of the way first. There were not many Modern Orthodox laypeople studying *Daf Yomi* at the time – he attended a class in Yiddish at a Hasidic *shtibl*. Not long after he started – and not long after I became bar mitzvah – we went to the *Siyum* at Madison Square Garden.

<sup>1</sup> This relates to the largest of the American *Siyumim*. The main *Siyum* of the second *Daf Yomi* cycle was held on June 27, 1938, in Lublin, Poland, with an attendance of [10,000](#) according to a local Yiddish newspaper, a mere few months before Kristallnacht and the beginning of the Holocaust. No American *Siyum* (and perhaps no single *Siyum* anywhere) would eclipse the scope of the Lublin *Siyum* until 1990. For more on the history of *Daf Yomi*, see Zev Eleff’s *Lehrhaus* article.

On balance, it was a miserable experience. The awkward self-consciousness of the early teens was exacerbated by the fact that I was wearing one of very few knit *yarmulkes* in a sea of black. The vast majority of the speeches were in Yiddish, which was incomprehensible to me, and there was a simultaneous translation into Yeshivish English, which was not much better. The concession stands were closed, and I was hungry. The women were confined to a small part of the upper concourse, behind thick white curtains. My father was very amused when we walked up a ramp with the throngs, and there was some sort of construction or leak on the right side, so an Agudath Israel usher had the task of standing there with a megaphone and instructing everyone to “move to the left.”

My most vivid memory of the day is of the traffic to get onto the Holland Tunnel to head back to Baltimore. In all, we probably spent ten hours in the car that day, which could have been nice, except that at the last minute, a member of his *Daf Yomi* group needed a ride both ways. This leads to my second most vivid memory of the day: this extra passenger’s postnasal drip, head cold, or something. So instead of riding shotgun and bonding with my father, I was in the uncomfortable back seat of my father’s old Buick, listening to some guy try to dislodge a stubborn bit of mucus from a sinus.

At the time, I probably convinced myself that I had a blast. There are some positive memories – the recitation of *Shema* in unison, the silence as the crowd of 20,000 began the *Amidah* prayer – but they are all very serious. Making the event enjoyable, it seems, was simply not a priority of the producers.

The *Siyum* at the end of the next cycle had a lot more music and even some dancing. There were two large New York venues: Madison Square Garden again, and Nassau Coliseum. It was clear that MSG was primary: it was a more storied location, its speeches were mainly in Yiddish, and its list of VIPs was more prestigious.

Yeshiva University President and Rosh HaYeshiva Norman Lamm was seated at a secondary dais at the secondary venue. He had recently likened *yeshivot* that teach no secular subjects to a Talmudic sage who studied Torah for thirteen years in a cave, concluding that YU’s mission was for its students to eventually leave the cave. This speech became known as the “cave man” speech<sup>2</sup> and was aken as a grave insult by leading *roshei yeshiva*, most notably Rabbi Elya Svei of the

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this essay claimed that Rabbi Lamm used the term “cave men.” In the [published version of this speech](#), and in an [earlier exposition](#) of this theme, the term “cave man” or similar does not appear. Whether or not he used it in the speech as an impromptu witticism will only be clarified when a recording becomes available. I thank Menachem Butler for pointing out that the term “cave man” does not appear in any published account of the speech.

Yeshiva of Philadelphia, one of the most powerful figures in the American *yeshiva* community. I and many other YU students at the time attended the event at the Coliseum. We acutely felt the slap that Rabbi Svei had administered, and I recall trying to defend Rabbi Lamm from charges of heresy at and around the time of the *Siyum*. It certainly cast a pall over the celebration for us.

Along with YU, the women were also relegated mainly to the Coliseum, though a sizable chunk of the Coliseum was converted into a women's section, and it was not only the uppermost concourse that was reserved for them. One of the Nassau speakers, Rabbi Yissocher Frand of Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, praised the women who enable and encourage their husbands to attend *Daf Yomi* classes, even at the most inconvenient times. Every time he mentioned the word "women," he received a loud ovation from the back third of the Coliseum. After four or five such ovations, the avuncular smile that was pasted to Rabbi Frand's face as he watched *yeshiva* students dance on the Coliseum floor had been replaced by an unambiguously peeved expression. To the best of my knowledge, he was the first speaker at the main *Daf Yomi Siyum* to acknowledge the presence and role of women in the endeavor, certainly to devote an entire speech to it.

It was at this event that I realized that in addition to being a unifying force – having the entire Jewish people on the same page, connected by the same words, etc. – *Daf Yomi* and its *Siyum* were projects of Agudath Israel and reflected its values. It came to me as Rabbi Abish Brodt was singing, "*Ve-ye'asu kulam agudah ehat la'asot retzonekha be-levav shalem*," a line from the High Holiday liturgy that means, "They will all be made into one band to do Your will wholeheartedly." This rendition of an ancient prayer for unity repeatedly emphasized the word "*agudah*" over and over again. The dissonance between partisanship and unity was palpable.

Nevertheless, the uneasy accommodation of two groups – YU and women – signaled that Agudath Israel was straining to maintain its imprimatur on a flagship project and cultural phenomenon that was spreading beyond the community it represented. And this was just the beginning. [ArtScroll](#) was making Talmud accessible to new audiences, the [Internet](#) was making it possible to download lectures onto portable devices, and a generation of [Modern Orthodox laypeople](#) – mostly men, [some women](#) – who had spent formative years rigorously studying Talmud was coming of age.

I have not attended the main *Daf Yomi Siyum* since the late 1990s, but I have watched the phenomenon spread. By the time the next *Daf Yomi* cycle completed in 2005 (with simultaneous *Siyumim* at three New York-area arenas), I had become friendly with Conservative Jews who were studying *Daf Yomi*, and a group from Alon Shevut had a *Daf Yomi* class by and for women. When the new cycle started, I was an OU-JLIC educator at the University of Maryland, and we started a *Daf Yomi* class for college students. Upon completion of the first tractate, [Berakhot](#), a group of about a dozen students – men and women, Orthodox and Conservative, straight and queer – got up in front of their peers and made a *Siyum*. The class foundered during the extended summer break and eventually died when the Fall 2005 midterms coincided with some of the thorniest passages of [Eruvin](#). In hindsight, the steadiness of *Daf Yomi* and the peaks and valleys of university schedules are not well-suited to one another. And yet, a dozen students completed *Berakhot*, and a *Daf Yomi* class survived a semester and a half.

The 2012 *Siyum* marked its graduation from indoor arenas to an open-air stadium with seating for 100,000, but as it grew, it

diversified. During the most recent cycle, Tablet Magazine literary critic Adam Kirsch began studying "the *daf*" and writing a [weekly column](#) on it. Ilana Kurshan published an award-winning memoir, [If All the Seas were Ink](#), which weaves insights from *Daf Yomi* into the events of her life. Erica Brown has been tweeting [Daf Yomi insights](#). In London, artist Jacqueline Nicholls studied and then [drew each daily daf](#). *Daf Yomi* has become, as Kurshan's promotional material describes it, "the world's largest book club," a broad cultural phenomenon, and a vehicle for creative expression, an abstract communal center for a world in which people are increasingly "bowling alone." It even borrowed from the culture of marathon runners, as decals with the number "2,711" (the number of pages in the Talmud) adorn the cars of some *Daf Yomi* learners.

On New Year's Day, 2020, I tuned into the livestream of the latest *Daf Yomi Siyum* at MetLife Stadium. The production values were first rate, with lots of music and dancing (Rabbi Abish Brodt remains the featured vocalist) and lots of high-energy "sideline reporters" to highlight personal interest stories, like the man who studies *Daf Yomi* despite having ALS. The tome used for the *Siyum* was a "Survivors' Talmud," printed by the U.S. Army and the JDC in the American Zone of postwar Germany, symbolizing how, despite everything, Jews have not forsaken the Torah. On social media, people were posting pictures of tailgating parties and [a wise guy who dressed as Waldo](#). In all, it seemed like a truly meaningful experience and an absolute blast.

Most of the speakers acknowledged wives' roles in enabling their husbands to study *Daf Yomi*. YU *rebbeim* were featured prominently – as were Sephardic rabbis and rabbis from Hasidic groups unaffiliated with Agudath Israel. Promotional material listed OU and YU websites as repositories of *Daf Yomi* podcasts. The large stadium screens showed live feeds of other *Siyumim* around the world – including one from an IDF base. One recitation of *Kaddish* was dedicated to fallen Israeli soldiers. Another was recited by Jay Schottenstein, wearing the same sort of knit *kippah* that I felt so out of place wearing 30 years ago.

Such gestures may seem inconsequential, and, to be sure, it was still an Agudath Israel production. It reflects the successes and sensibilities of the American "black hat" laity. Women were acknowledged as enablers, but no women were pictured, nor was there any acknowledgment of women who themselves completed *Daf Yomi*. YU and the OU were featured, but other Orthodox institutions, and certainly non-Orthodox institutions, were not acknowledged.

Yet considering the trajectory of the *Siyum* over the past 30 years, Agudath Israel is clearly trying to make the event more inclusive and more enjoyable, and with a great deal of success. Whether this is a concession to demographic and economic realities or a true inclusion of those who were outside the Agudah tent a generation ago is a fair question, but largely beside the point. The Agudah's production, the MetLife *Siyum*, remains the main event.

However, this cycle, a large number of smaller *Siyumim* have cropped up all over the world, with no affiliation with Agudah. In Israel, the night after the MetLife *Siyum*, there was a *Siyum* produced by religious Zionist organizations. Its attendance was in the thousands, and it featured several women. In the U.S., at least three *Siyumim* highlighted the accomplishments of women. Institutions that do not affiliate with Orthodoxy made their own *Siyumim* as well.

On Sunday, January 5, a *Siyum* at the Jerusalem International Convention Center by and for women took place before a sell-out crowd of 3,300 – not much smaller than the attendance at the Felt Forum in 1982. My wife, who sat in the small, obscured women’s section of the MSG *Siyum* in 1997, stood on the stage and recited the “*hadran*,” the valedictory text of the *Siyum*, representing the [women’s seminary](#) where she teaches and trains teachers. She has started learning *Daf Yomi*. My daughters were there, too; the younger one is motivated to study *Daf Yomi* someday but is currently more invested in completing all of Mishnah before she becomes a bat mitzvah. And when they think back to this *Siyum* in 20 or 30 years, perhaps they will remember how historic it was, or how small it seems compared to the women’s *Siyumim* of the sixteenth and seventeenth cycles. Or perhaps they will remember the words of the emcee, Racheli Sprecher Frankel, thanking the husbands who encouraged and enabled their wives’ commitment to studying *Daf Yomi*.

## BETWEEN AVEILUT AND CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK: INTER-DISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS

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“Gone is the joy of our hearts; our dancing is turned into mourning (Lamentations 5:15).”<sup>3</sup>

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“The same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor (Esther 9:22).”

In late June, I completed my first *semikha* exam on *hilkhot aveilut* (the laws of mourning) at the [Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary](#) (RIETS). The previous semester, I had studied loss in the lifecycle during my (undergraduate) stint in clinical social work at the [Wurzweiler School of Social Work](#). My two experiences could not have been more different. When studying loss, be it the death of a loved one, divorce, sexual abuse, issues related to sexual orientation, etc., I found the experience overwhelmingly emotional and fraught with anxiety-provoking readings and class discussions. I would leave class mid-Thursday afternoon and need to unwind from the affective intensity. Too often, I would find myself reading about loss late at night and need a subtle human reminder that there is a lot of good in the world, notwithstanding the pain. My final paper for “Coping with Loss” described a horrific case of sexual abuse experienced by a friend of mine. Writing this paper took a lot out of me. On the one hand, I was writing an evidence-based intervention plan and resilience analysis for a survivor of sexual abuse. On the other hand, I was processing the bitter tragedy of a friend—a cataclysmic, life-altering tragedy. When I finished the paper, I took a deep breath and uttered a brief prayer.

In stark contrast to this hyper-emotional experience, my study of *aveilut* rarely provoked emotional responses. Each *shiur* (lesson), we would trace the origins of the modern-day practices and rituals back to the Tanakh and Talmud (and its attendant commentators),

<sup>3</sup> All biblical translations follow the 1985 edition of the JPS *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*.

sensitizing us to the halakhic corpus and key concepts. The major difference between my study of *aveilut* and my study of loss can be demonstrated by my introduction to each subject. My first reading for “Coping with Loss” was the authors’ introduction to our textbook<sup>4</sup>, in which they shared their variegated and profoundly sad encounters with loss. These dark, and often lonely, encounters determined that their lives would be devoted to helping others challenged by loss. I cried. It was real. I thought of my own loss (of which the wounds were still fresh); I could only imagine their heartache, their fractured spirits. In *hilkhot aveilut*, however, we began with a dry, legal analysis of the biblical and rabbinic sources for *aninut*, the pre-mourning stage in which a mourner is prohibited from engaging in *mitzvot* (*Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah §341*). No tears, no sorrow.

The following two exceptions deviated from the norm of our study of *aveilut*, and while they didn’t fill me with the same fervor, they did explore the humanistic dimensions of *aveilut* and loss. The first was the halakhic treatment of suicide. Many practical ramifications exist for a relative of an individual who committed suicide (*Shulhan Arukh §345*). Typically, these restrictions limit grieving rituals and expressions of mourning. Because of this, mainstream approaches attempt to mitigate the issue by narrowing the halakhic category of suicide, also known as “*me’abed atzmo la-da’at*.”<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, R. Yechiel Michel Epstein, the author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, approaches the topic of suicide from a highly psychological angle. His position (345:4) is that to qualify for halakhic suicide there must be an explicit (verbal) expression of intent followed by immediate action. Expression of suicidal intent, when not followed by immediate action, he believes is not sufficient. Moreover, he [writes](#) (345:5) that the act of suicide is so unfathomably heinous that only in rare instances can it arise from clear agency and autonomy.

This position greatly resembles some of the new research on modern suicidality, specifically the notion that there are risk factors other than suicidal ideations, thoughts of suicide. In fact, Dr. Thomas Joiner<sup>6</sup>, one of the leading researchers in the field of suicidality, developed a theory<sup>7</sup> that states the following: for an individual to successfully commit suicide, they must experience (a) **perceived burdensomeness** - they perceive their life as burdensome to others, (b) **low belonging/social alienation** - feeling deeply alone and removed from family, friends, or others in a group, and, critically, (c) have **an acquired ability to enact lethal self-injury** - have eliminated or minimized their fear of pain and thwarted self-preservation motives. In other words, Joiner’s theory requires that an individual

<sup>4</sup> Hooyman, N. and Kramer, B. (2008). *Living Through Loss*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Within early Rabbinic Literature, for example, see the two separate incidents reported in *Masekhet Semahot* (2:4-5), in which Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva, respectively, exonerate a *katan* (child under Bar/Bat Mitzvah) for committing suicide because the true cause was their fathers’ unhealthy and inappropriate discipline. In the contemporary literature, Arukh ha-Shulhan (345:5) explicitly writes that we should use all the tools in our arsenal to limit halakhic suicide.

<sup>6</sup> Many thanks to Dr. Alex Mondrow for sharing this research with me.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Joiner, “The Interpersonal-Psychological Theory Of Suicidal Behavior: Current Empirical Status,” *APA* 2009, <https://www.apa.org>. <https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2009/06/sci-brief>.

has the desire to die (a and b) and the ability to die (c).<sup>8</sup> Suicidal ideations, according to Joiner's theory, are not the sole predictor of successful suicide attempts—similar to the position of R. Epstein. Modern psychology and contemporary Halakha, disciplines with significantly different epistemological assumptions, surprisingly arrive at similar truths about the depths of human experience, consciousness, and agency.

The second issue that deviated from the norm was *Se'udat havra'a*, the first meal brought to the mourner following the funeral. There is a dispute among post-talmudic interlocutors about the prohibition for a mourner to eat his or her own food on the first day of mourning. Rabbeinu Yeruham (*Toledot Adam ve-Hava, Netiv 28: Helek 2*) is of the opinion that the minimum requirement is the first meal after the funeral. The mourner, he writes, is so distraught that s/he has no desire to eat - s/he feels lonely, dejected, abandoned, and purposeless - perhaps no longer wanting to live. In turn, the obligation to provide the mourner with a post-funeral meal is meant to fill a biological need, to prevent malnutrition. Rambam (*Hilkhot eivel 4:9*), too, follows this rationale and expands the requirement to provide food for the mourner for the entire first day of mourning.

Levush (*Yoreh De'ah 378:1*) also maintains the one-meal post-funeral requirement, but offers a different rationale than Rabbeinu Yeruham. The meal, according to Levush, is meant to minimize social isolation (and reduce yearning for and over-active thinking of the deceased). Friends and relatives, in turn, have an obligation upon them to provide a meal and offer comfort to the mourner. This not-so-dry halakhic controversy revolves around deeply-human concerns. Unlike Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's description of his grandfather's revolutionary talmudic methodology - "Suddenly the pots and the pans, the eggs and the onions disappeared from the laws of meat and milk; the salt, the blood, and the spit disappeared from the laws of salting"<sup>9</sup> - these two discussions brought back the death and the dying, the tears and the trials, the solace and the sorrow to the laws of mourning.

Reflecting on the study of *aveilut* and loss without seeing the texts and contexts speaking to one another would be a missed opportunity. Death and loss are fundamental human experiences. We cannot strip the *human* from the experience; this, of course, includes the accompanying human feelings. *Hilkhot aveilut* - the *dinim* and *se'ifim* (the laws and the sections) - cannot and should not be divorced from human suffering, anguish, apoplexy, and confusion. However, the breath-taking chill of intense human suffering cannot permeate the graduate student's study of loss. Clinical social work, too, must tone down the intensity and borrow some of the dryness of halakhic study. (I'm sure *Halakha* would be glad to share!) Although compassion fatigue, burnout, or secondary trauma is common among clinicians,<sup>10</sup> sometimes over-engagement with psychological materials, in my experience, leads to burnout for the student.

My second reflection on my inter-disciplinary experience is a sense of pride and humility. Jewish tradition has thought critically about mourning rituals, intervention plans, sensitivity to mourners,

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<sup>8</sup> See Joiner's groundbreaking work. Thomas Joiner *Why People Die by Suicide* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Soloveitchik, *Besod Ha-yahid Ve-hayahad* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Carol Tosone, Orit Nuttman-Shwartz, and Tricia Stephens. "Shared Trauma: When the Professional Is Personal," *Clinical Social Work Journal* 40, no. 2 (2012): 231–39.

resilience, social systems and social support, and more for hundreds and thousands of years. Let me share one example about resilience.

In "Coping with Loss" we frequently spoke about loss from a growth perspective. In other words, we asked how an individual experiencing loss can channel her past and transform it from tragedy to opportunity. A parent who loses a child, for example, has two options. First, he or she can forever mourn and lament the horrific and untimely death. Alternatively, he or she can harness their new-found sensitivity and empathize with other parents who have lost children. In the words of the late Dr. Phyllis R. Silverman, a revolutionary scholar of bereavement, about the role of the helping professional: "I learned that I cannot help the bereaved from feeling their pain. The goal of help is to promote the ability of the widowed to find new directions in their lives, to develop a new sense of competence in their ability to cope."<sup>11</sup> While thinking about loss from a growth perspective, I clung to Rav Yitzhak Hutner's famous letter in *Pahad Yitzhak Igrot u-Ketvavim* (128), in which he explicates the verse "Seven times a righteous person falls and rises up (Proverbs 24:16)" to mean that a righteous person rises up not despite but *because* he or she first falls. Metaphorical or spiritual "falling," for Rav Hutner, is the *sine qua non* of spiritual elevation and development (Rav Hutner's lucid and inspiring words, in fact, found their way into one of my essays for "Coping with Loss"!).

Many times that semester I discovered that issues studied by modern clinical researchers were also thought about by the Tanna'im, Rashi, Tosafot, Rosh, Maharam, Noda be-Yehuda, Rambam, Ramban, Rabbeinu Yeruham, Rav Yosef Karo, Rav Moshe Isserles, Shakh, Taz, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Hutner and Rav Moshe Feinstein! Moreover, the biblical verses of the introduction, I felt, echo the ethos and cyclical pattern of joy to loss and loss to joy so central to the study of loss and found abundantly in Jewish thought. I am proud to be part of such a rich *mesora*, a relevant and vibrant tradition.

While halakha and Jewish thought contain enriching and ennobling perspectives on death and loss, the study of *aveilut* would benefit from some of the essential and repeating pedagogical and pastoral questions of "Coping with Loss." What social systems are in place? What are the risk factors or, conversely, opportunities for resilience of the mourner? Is the mourner exhibiting developmentally appropriate signs of grief? Does the mourner have a history of loss? How does his or her history impact their response to the current loss? What rituals can best help the mourner cope with their loss? What are the different forms of loss? Does *halakha* address secondary losses (for example, losing one's social circle following the loss of a spouse or partner)? How can we analyze the halakhic obligations of *nihum aveilim*, comforting mourners, with a sensitive eye toward social systems?

## FROM MASTER TO FATHER: THE EVOLVING CHARACTER OF GOD IN THE CREATION NARRATIVE

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The opening chapter of Genesis has been aptly described by Michael Fishbane as *theocentric* in tone; that is, God is the

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<sup>11</sup> Phyllis Silverman, "Lessons I Have Learned," *British Journal of Social Work* 43, no. 2 (March 2013): 227.

subject and focus of the narrative.<sup>12</sup> From start to finish, God’s voice is the only voice heard, and it is through His commanding yet effortless speech that He brings His world into existence. As Fishbane observes, “God’s speaking and creating are one and indissoluble.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, throughout the creation enterprise, God’s creative declarations are met with full and immediate compliance; God says, “Let there be light... And there was light.”<sup>14</sup> (Gen. 1:3) God pronounces, “Let there be an expanse within the water... And it was so.” (v. 6–7); “And God said, ‘Let the water from underneath the sky be merged into one place...’ And it was so.” (v. 9); “And God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation...’ And it was so.” (v. 11); “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky...’ And it was so.” (v. 14–15); “And God said, ‘Let the earth sprout forth living creatures...’ And it was so.” (v. 24)<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the focus in Genesis 1 is squarely on the power and dominion of God, the second chapter features a palpable shift away from God as subject and towards God’s most prized creation. There, the narrative once again returns to the foundations of the world—only this time with Adam taking center stage. In contrast to the first chapter where man is created last, here, the story begins with the origins of *man* and follows with God’s assembling of the world around him. As Leon Kass observes, “The first story ends with man; the second begins with him.”<sup>16</sup>

In redirecting its attention on Adam, the narrative in Genesis 2 also reveals a shift in the character of the Creator. In place of God as the transcendent, all-powerful deity who wills each of His creations into being, in chapter 2, God gets His hands dirty (as it were), forming Adam from the dust of the earth and intimately placing His mouth over the mouth of man and breathing into him the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). The God of Genesis 2 is the engaged and compassionate Creator who focuses all His attention on uplifting His most cherished creation.<sup>17</sup>

After bringing Adam to life, God turns His attention to the world surrounding man. Once again, there is a marked departure from the tenor of the first chapter. Although in each narrative God gives order to the world by dividing and organizing His creations, the imagery used in Genesis 2 is quite distinct from that of the first chapter. In Genesis 1, God brings form and function to His world through the rigid demarcation of boundaries; the light and darkness are sharply divided and the waters are violently pushed back to reveal the dry. In Genesis 2, however, God’s dividing of His creations is much more subtle and intricate. Here, God delicately carves out winding rivers that contour the land and which further branch out into gentle streams that nourish the lush vegetation of the landscaped garden (2:10–14). Furthermore, in place of God’s commanding speech that

causes the earth to sprout forth “seed-bearing herbage,” we find His gentle cultivation of “all trees pleasing to the sight and good for food.” (2:9)

Yet God is not satisfied with providing man physical sustenance and attractive scenery alone. The earth is abound with natural resources—gold, spices, and precious stones- all of which are put in place specifically for the benefit of man (v. 12).

But all the goodness that God provides man—the breath of life, the food, and nature’s riches—is not enough to uplift Adam into a fully functional being. For Adam is lonely; he is in need of a companion.

And so, with single-minded focus, God sets out on a mission to find a helpmate for Adam. First, He forms the animals and the birds and brings them to man so as to offer him comfort<sup>18</sup>; “but for Adam, he did not find a suitable helpmate.” (2:20)

God then proceeds to do precisely what he does in elevating all of His creations into fully operative organisms; He separates Adam’s essential components—the male and female—into distinct bodies. However, once again taking on the flavor of the present chapter, the imagery here is of a doting parent who nurses a sickly child back to health. First, God gently induces a deep, comforting slumber upon man (v. 21) and then, without disturbing Adam’s tranquil state, carefully removes one of his ribs with which He fashions into Eve. God then tenderly sutures the flesh from where He made the incision so as to restore it back to its initial healthy state (ibid). Upon completing His forming of Eve, God presents this most perfect of gifts to Adam and awaits his response with eager anticipation.

Adam’s reaction demonstrates a vitality reminiscent of God’s other creations following division. Just as the seas and the land teem forth with life after they are divided, there is, similarly, a marked difference in man’s level of activity following God’s splitting of the male and female. What started out as a thoroughly passive being entirely dependent on his Creator for even the most rudimentary of functions,<sup>19</sup> the Adam we discover post-surgery finally begins to exhibit those distinctly human traits we are so familiar with. Now, for the first time, that uniquely human gift of speech is heard from Adam<sup>20</sup> and we see an energy in him that is so noticeably absent prior to God’s making of Eve. Adam exults at the sight of this being, so different from the animals that God initially presented to him, and

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture* (London: Oneworld, 1998), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Translations are taken from New JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh with some modifications.

<sup>15</sup> Also see my essay, “[Genesis 1: Creating Order with Boundaries](#)” *Times of Israel*, November 5, 2019, where I discuss the theocentric qualities to the Genesis 1 narrative.

<sup>16</sup> Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Rashi states that the name *Elohim*, which is used throughout the first chapter, reflects the God of judgment, while the name YHWH, which appears at the beginning of the second chapter, reflects God’s mercy (Rashi on Gen. 1:1).

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<sup>18</sup> This follows the view of Ramban (on Gen. 2:20) who states that God presented the animals to Adam in order for him to assign names to them according to their nature, through which he would figure out which would be an appropriate match for him.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, how God physically manipulates Adam in moving him in *taking* him and *placing* him in the Garden (2:15).

<sup>20</sup> Although the implications from Adam’s naming of the animals prior to God’s separation of the male from female are that Adam speaks, we do not hear his speech. What does he name the animals? What type of emotion does he express? The fact that the animals are not able to provide him companionship suggests that Adam speaks without much energy or enthusiasm. To be certain, he is clearly more developed and exalted than the animals even at this primitive state of development. But he is not yet the fully evolved species whose words we hear and whose enthusiasm we sense with his response upon seeing Eve for the first time.

so *similar* to himself. “*This time*, it is the bone of *my* bone, and the flesh is of *my* flesh!” (v. 23)<sup>21</sup>

Also, just as back in the opening chapter God’s other creations each receive a name and, with it, an identity after being partitioned, we find that man, too, acquires a name (“Ish” and “Isha”) that reflects a newfound identity and purpose.<sup>22</sup> Only now, as an exalted being, Adam takes initiative and names himself instead of relying on God’s intervention in the matter.

The story of Creation in Genesis 2 is very much *man’s* story. And as God’s unique love for Adam becomes clearly evident throughout the narrative, we are left to consider what it is about man that earns him God’s affection and personal attention unlike that of any of His other creations.

To answer this question we need to return to the opening chapter where on numerous occasions throughout the Creation narrative we read, “God saw that it was *good*.” What is this ‘good’ that God perceives in His creations?

To begin with, note that God’s recognition of the good always follows a stage in the Creation endeavor in which there is significant progress in terms of the development of life-sustaining conditions on earth.<sup>23</sup> The first instance comes after God’s creation of light (1:4). Both from a scientific and practical perspective, light has an essential role in the nourishment of life and wellbeing on earth. From the scientific angle, it is with light that the process of photosynthesis is initiated and, as such, light serves as the starting point to life on earth. On the practical level, light is so critical to our ability to function in any productive way. Imagine trying to forage for food in a world of complete and utter darkness. One cannot overstate the critical role that light plays in enabling us to navigate our way in the world.<sup>24</sup> Next, the goodness of His creation is recognized by God following the earth’s sprouting forth vegetation, another pivotal stage in the earth’s development as a source of life (v. 12).<sup>25</sup> Then, with His

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<sup>21</sup> See Ramban (2:20) who reads “This time” as “This time, as opposed to the *other* time” in which God presents to Adam the animals and birds.

<sup>22</sup> The names selected, *Ish* and *Isha* (“man” and “woman”), further attest to man’s newfound state of grandeur, in contrast to the name “Adam” which reflects man’s humble origins (from *adama*, or ‘earth’).

<sup>23</sup> Jon Levenson states that the primary message of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 is of God’s “establishment of a benevolent and life-sustaining order.” (Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994), 47.)

<sup>24</sup> I want to distinguish, here, between the light of the first day of creation with the sun that is formed on the fourth day, which is of course what we view as the source of light from a scientific perspective. As others have argued, the Torah is not intended as a scientific account of the earth’s foundations. I would suggest that the light of Day 1 comes to demonstrate the very basic life-sustaining qualities of light, regardless of its source. The significance of the creation of the luminaries is in their function to give order to our world through their contribution to the cycle of years, months, and days which organize our lives.

<sup>25</sup> Note that there is no mention of the good that God perceives on the second day of creation following God’s division of the lower from upper waters because, as Rashbam states, God’s work with the waters is not complete until the third day, when the waters on low

creation of the sun, moon, and stars, God sees more goodness (v. 18). It is these heavenly bodies that give a structure and order to our lives. “Day” is the time we are active, while “night” provides our bodies time to rest and recharge. As such, each has an essential role in enabling us to function effectively. Finally, just as the division of the waters from the dry gives life to the latter, so too, the waters flourish with aquatic life following that separation. And, once again, this burgeoning of life is seen by God as *good* (v. 21).<sup>26</sup>

However, with the creation of man we find that the *goodness* of the world ascends to an even loftier “*very good*.” What is it about man that enables for the life-sustaining goodness of the world to elevate even higher?

We know that man is distinguished from the rest of the created order in being endowed with a *tzelem elohim*; a Godly image (1:27). According to Sforno, this divine countenance is demonstrated through man’s superior intellect which closely resembles God’s *supreme* intellect.<sup>27</sup> In other words, man is unique in his capacity as an intelligent being to contemplate and recognize the life-supporting conditions of the world he inhabits. While the world prior to Adam’s arrival is certainly good, it remains a *silent* goodness. With man, there comes the potential to recognize, appreciate, and respond to all the good that God has provided. It is this capacity to contemplate and reflect that marks Adam’s transition from a passive and silent creature at the onset of the narrative to the animated and passionate being that responds so enthusiastically to laying eyes on Eve for the first time. Man’s unique capacity to evaluate the world around him is further reflected in the fact that of all of God’s creations it is with him, alone, whom God speaks *to* instead of *at*.<sup>28</sup>

With the alternative perspective of Creation offered in Genesis 2 we discover a clear direction for the Creation enterprise as detailed in the first chapter. We find that the message of God’s unrivalled power and sovereignty in Genesis 1 is intended not to intimidate and to frighten. On the contrary, it is to provide the comfort in knowing that this thing called ‘life’ that we cherish so much is brought forth with intention by a benevolent God who ensures its stability and preservation and who compassionately endows the most exalted of His creatures with the intellectual capacity to perceive the genuine goodness of the world and its Creator.

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are divided from the dry. Only then does the earth (and the waters) sprout forth life (See Rashbam on 1:6).

<sup>26</sup> Also see my essay, “[Genesis 1: The Good and the ‘Very’ Good](#),” *Times of Israel*, November 14, 2019, where I discuss the *good* that God sees in Creation.

<sup>27</sup> Sforno on 1:27.

<sup>28</sup> Lakser, *ibid*.