

Adam, Astronauts, and the Meaning of Language

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On December 24, 1968, Astronauts Frank Borman, William Anders, and Jim Lovell spoke on live television from aboard Apollo 8, the first manned mission to orbit the Moon. With so many millions listening to their voices, they sought words which could somehow capture the meaning of the moment. The spaceship from which they spoke heralded the modern age, and yet the text they chose was ancient indeed. Taking turns, the three astronauts said: “For all the people on Earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send you.”

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

The astronauts, reading sacred scripture to an audience of millions, had no idea that soon one of them, on a mission known as Apollo 13, would become famous first and foremost not for his glorious journey into outer space, but for his desperate attempt to return home. This tale will teach us more about the beginning of Genesis than that of any other astronaut ever could.

It is well known that the Book of Genesis gives us, in its opening chapters, two different accounts of the making of man: one in chapter 1 and the other in chapter 2. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik famously argued, the Bible

provides us not with a contradiction, but a description of the two aspects of our nature, both of which define who we are; and I believe that one of the astronauts of Apollo 8 embodies these complexities. Let us begin the Bible together and discover how this is so, continuing the first chapter from where the Apollo 8 astronauts left off, after the first day of creation.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and let it divide water from water.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. (Genesis 1:6-8)

So creation, day by day, proceeds with purpose. What was once without form and void takes on definition and designation. What was murky mist is separated to sea and sky. What was mere matter suddenly becomes organic life, as well as the constellations of the heavens. Here is Genesis 1, verses 12 and 16:

And the earth brought forth grass yielding seed after its kind, and tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after its kind; and God saw that that it was good...

And God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: and the stars also...and God saw that it was good.

One senses as we read that we are building toward something, that one creature will crown creation. And, indeed, at the summit of the sixth day we find verse 26:

And God said, let Us make Mankind in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of

the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

Mankind, made last, is apparently the end of the Almighty's actions. Humanity's coming into being is followed by the Sabbath, the seventh day and close of creation. Humanity, we are further informed, is great, because it is in made in the image of the Almighty. This seems to signify that man resembles his Creator in some way, and based on what we have read thus far, we can conclude that humanity imitates the Almighty because it is bequeathed the power to create and innovate: to take what God has made and make it our own. Thus verses 27 and 28:

So God created Mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

Mankind shows that it is made in the image of God when it illustrates its dominion over all that God has made in the first place.

What this means, then, is that the astronauts of Apollo 8, who themselves read Genesis 1, were also embodying it. Is there any greater illustration of man being made in the image of the Almighty, of human greatness, than orbiting the moon only six decades after the Wright brothers first flew? The human urge to boldly go where no man has gone before is part and parcel of the original charge given to man in the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth.

"Fill the earth and subdue it." This is the first description we have of the creation of mankind; humanity as the great imitator of the Almighty. Every scientific achievement made by man can be seen as a fulfillment of this promise. And yet, in these biblical descriptions, a hint of warning can be detected. Throughout creation we are invariably informed of God's positive reaction to what He has made. With the heavens, the moon, and the grass, we are told that God *"saw it was good,"* but *not* with the

creation of man. Humanity is gifted with Godlikeness, and it is free. But in its freedom, it also has the capacity for extraordinary evil, and this the Bible will later make terrifyingly clear. But for now, the emphasis is on the positive. Man and woman, are made in the Almighty's image, endowed with profound power, charged with subduing, filling, populating, and conquering existence.

All this is in chapter 1. We turn now to the second chapter, where an entirely different emphasis is found in the Biblical description of man's emergence onto this Earth. Genesis 2:7:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Here, the original Hebrew is so important. And God made אדם, (Ah-Dahm), Adam, of the dust from the אדמה, (Ah-Dahm-Ah), the earth. Suddenly, in the very name for mankind, אדם, we discover a new meaning. Unlike in the first chapter of Genesis, here the emphasis is not on the image of God, but on the mere dust from which mankind is made.

I once co-taught a seminar on the Bible in Princeton and several students were devout Christians who had never read the Bible in the original Hebrew, and never understood the link between אדם and אדמה, between Adam and earth. When they realized this, their faces lit up, for it changes one's entire notion of the meaning of the name "Adam." It is a common idiom and insult in English to say of someone that "his name is mud." Whatever its origin, the phrase is not seen as high praise. But here, in the beginning of Genesis 2, Adam is literally named for the earth, אדמה. His name may not be mud, precisely, but his name is dirt. That is meant to connote his finitude, his vulnerability.

This brings us to the next difference. In Genesis 1, man and woman are created side by side: *"male and female He created them."* In Genesis 2, the man made from dust is alone and responds to his vulnerable nature by seeking a mate. Genesis, verses 18, 21, and 22:

And the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpmate opposite him...

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his sides, and closed up the flesh in its place,

And of the side which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made a woman, and brought her to the man.

Some translations describe woman being made from Adam's rib rather than from his side, but the precise material is immaterial. The point here is that, in the second chapter of Genesis, Adam is forced to give up something of himself. In the first chapter of Genesis, we meet man and woman at once: "*in the image of God He created them, male and female He made them.*" There the focus is on human greatness. Here, vulnerable man needs a mate, a spouse, and he has to *sacrifice* to bring another person into reality. He needs to give up something of himself in order to bring his wife into the world.

One more difference. In Genesis 1, man and woman are commanded to conquer and subdue the world. Here, in the second chapter in verse 15, we are told something very different after man's creation:

And He placed him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and guard it.

The garden, we are informed, is the home of the man and he is supposed to stay there.

We thus emerge from our brief journey through the first two chapters of the Bible with a complex picture. Genesis 1 gives us a story of mankind, created in God's image, which makes its greatness manifest in achievement, in conquest, in exploration. Genesis 2 describes man made from dust and speaks not of exploration or the conquest of creation, but of being bound to home through sacrifice for others, fellowship, and love.

Which of these descriptions best captures who we are? The answer, of course, is both. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 provide us not with a choice but with two sides of the same coin. For Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, these two accounts hint to two parts of our nature, what he called Adam I and Adam II. The *New York Times's* David Brooks has given us a succinct summation of Rabbi Soloveitchik's immortal work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*:

Adam I is the worldly, ambitious, external side of our nature. He wants to build, create, create companies, create innovation. Adam II is the humble side of our nature. Adam II wants not only to do good but to be good, to live in a way internally that honors God... Adam I asks how things work. Adam II asks why we're here. Adam I's motto is "success." Adam II's motto is "love, redemption, and return."

It is striking then, that one of the first men on Earth to leave the Earth, a man who reflected the teaching of Genesis 1 that humanity is created in the image of God, ultimately became famous for illustrating man's vulnerability as described in Genesis 2. Several years after embodying Adam I by orbiting the Moon in Apollo 8, Jim Lovell launched again in Apollo 13. He intended to land on the moon but ultimately, after an oxygen tank ceased to function, he suddenly reflected all that Adam II was about. He was a vulnerable human being who needed his family, and who desperately wanted to get home.

The film that Tom Hanks made about Lovell is seen as a space movie, but rightly understood it is the opposite. What makes the movie interesting is its inversion: it is a tale about astronauts whose mission was to imitate Neil Armstrong's accomplishment, but then something went wrong, (or as they famously put it, "Houston we have a problem..."), and the mission became to get them back to Earth. As the film shows, after Apollo 13 launched, when the mission was going well, the astronauts' broadcast from space was watched by no one on Earth, because the public had already lost interest in the moon landings. But getting Jim Lovell, a man who was over 200,000 miles away, back to his family—that had an emotional aspect with which all Americans identified, which drew the attention of the world once again.

The flight path of Lovell and his crew highlighted this reversal. Instead of landing on the moon, they instead utilized the gravity of the moon as a slingshot to launch them on a path back to Earth, reflecting how their sojourn was transformed from lunar odyssey to earthly-oriented return. Adam I became Adam II.

In 1968, Jim Lovell and Apollo 8 quoted the Bible to all of America. It is doubtful that astronauts on a broadcast

today would instinctively do the same. This goes hand in hand with something else that civilization has lost: our age offers us Adam I but not Adam II. Science has given us so much, but in our formation of families, in our sacrifice for one another, much is missing. Jim Lovell reminds us that for all the technological brilliance of the space race, there are eternal virtues that matter even more.

An article in the *USA Today* reports that upon Apollo 13's return home, Jim Lovell was asked if he wanted to aim for the Moon again. For a brief moment, Lovell relates that, "I was about ready to say, 'Well, I...' and then I look at the back of the audience and there was a hand that went up" giving a big thumb's down. It was his wife, Marilyn. "And so I said, 'Well, I think we better let some other people try it.'"

The article concludes by informing us that the Lovells would celebrate their 68th anniversary that coming June.

Of course, the same cannot be said for many. God said in Eden that it is not good for man to be alone. but today, we face an epidemic of loneliness. We live in an age of stunning technological transformation that has seemingly increased connectedness but also helped decrease community. We can cross the entire earth in less than a day and our emails arrive instantaneously, yet we have not found the fellowship that we need, and we have lost the biblical teachings about what lends life meaning.

Senator Ben Sasse recently wrote that:

The same technology that has liberated us from so much inconvenience and drudgery has also unmoored us from the things that anchor our identities. The revolution that has given tens of millions of Americans the opportunity to live like historic royalty has also outpaced our ability to figure out what community, friendships, and relationships should look like...

In 1972, Apollo 17 became the last manned mission to the moon to date. One of its astronauts, Harrison Schmidt, later ran for Senate. His opponent, running

against a national hero, created a brilliant negative ad which said "Harrison Schmidt. What *on Earth* has he done for you lately?"

Private space travel is one the verge of becoming a reality, but we are becoming ever more aware that our own lives need work here on earth. Perhaps a return to the Bible is the solution; perhaps it is this ancient text, filled with wisdom, that can teach each of us about ourselves, and thereby, like Adam and Eve in Eden, allow us to find each other.

Discussion Questions:

1. As Rabbi Soloveichik notes, at a moment that embodied the triumph of the human mastery of nature, the astronauts of Apollo 8 turned their minds, and the minds of the nation, to words of faith found in Scripture. Why do you think that was? Is there something about the achievements of “Adam I” that moves men and women to reconsider how “Adam II” might approach the mysteries of the cosmos?
2. The creation story in Genesis, chapter 2, highlights the paradox that only by acknowledging one’s limits and vulnerabilities is it possible to overcome loneliness. In this age of stunning technology triumphs, how can mankind recapture the sense of vulnerability that might help end our “epidemic of loneliness”?
3. *New York Times* writer Ross Douthat has argued that we live in an age of decadence and stagnation, an age that seems to call for the boldness and vision of Genesis, chapter 1. Do you agree? Is our society needful of the lessons of *both* Adam I and Adam II?

In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker describes an enigma for the field of linguistics: Why do so many related languages have entirely different words for the butterfly? Pinker quotes an extraordinary answer from the Linguist Haj Ross:

The image of the butterfly is a uniquely powerful one in the group minds of the world's cultures, with its somewhat unpromising start as a caterpillar followed by its dazzling finish of visual symmetry, coupled with the motional unforgettability of the butterfly's flipzapping path through our consciousness. Butterflies are such perfect symbols of transformation that almost no culture is content to accept another's poetry for this mythic creature. Each language finds its own verbal beauty to celebrate the stunning salience of the butterfly's being.

The ability to speak, to articulate, to describe, and to name lies at the heart of our humanity and can serve as a source of much joy. Yet, language also allows us to obfuscate, to make excuses, and to make situations seem less bad than they truly are. One is reminded of the *New Yorker* cartoon in which someone says, "Thank goodness for the word muffin, otherwise, I'd be eating cake for breakfast every morning."

What if, for the Bible, it is language that lies at the heart of mankind's first sin? What if it was language that allowed mankind at this moment of despair to discover the existence of hope?

The tale of Adam and Eve's sin and expulsion from Eden is enigmatic, and we could expend years of intellectual energy on it alone. We will not do that. What we *will* do is use the lens of language, an understanding of the gift of speech, to understand this famous story.

We pick up in chapter 2. Adam is created from dust alone, and he has given up part of his body to make a mate. He is introduced to Woman, and the first sentence in all of human history is spoken. Here too, as with Adam's original name, the Hebrew text features a sort of pun.

And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, [isha/אִשָּׁה], because she was taken out of man [ish/wִישָׁא]. (Genesis 2:23)

That's all Adam says. Note what Adam does *not* do. He does not engage the Woman in conversation. He does not talk to her about his hopes and dreams. He does not even say, "Madam, I'm Adam." All he does is name her: אִשָּׁה, איש. Man, Woman. She comes from *me*.

Adam does not speak to her, but about her, and the name that he gives her is all about him. He describes her but does not converse with her. Adam speaks at his wife, towards his wife, but not with his wife. Man has the power of speech, and Woman is similarly gifted, yet strikingly, they do not speak to one another.

Furthermore, when we next meet the Woman, the first conversation in the Bible is between herself and the Serpent. Her husband, after pronouncing possession through his linguistic power, seems to have left the scene. Who is this Serpent? Does it represent Satan, or our own inner inclination, or is it meant to be an eloquent animal? However we are to understand this sinister snake, it is eloquent indeed. His forked tongue reflects the duality at the heart of speech, and his eloquence assaults the single command given to mankind.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayst freely eat:

But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for on the day that thou eatest of it thou shalt surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

What is this tree? What is wrong with knowing good and evil? There are almost any number of interpretations, but the argument put forward by the Serpent, speaking to the Woman alone without Adam, allows us to intuit an answer.

And the Serpent said to the Woman, you shall not surely die, for God knows that on the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4)

To eat from the Tree is to make it our own, and what the Serpent is counseling is asserting independence against God. To partake of this Tree is to become one's own arbiter of right and wrong.

Whittaker Chambers, who once embraced and then abandoned Communism, wrote:

Communism is not new. It is, in fact, man's second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: "Ye shall be as gods." It is the great alternative faith of mankind.

This is apt. Communism spoke of mankind's liberation and brought about its diminution: it promised a paradise and delivered a hell. Through the forked tongue of the Serpent, the terrible power of language makes itself manifest as morality is redefined. As the great Jewish biblical commentator Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch put it, the Earth can become a paradise only under one condition: that we call good only that which God calls good, and bad only that which God calls bad.

The first sin is to call bad, good, and good, bad, highlighting how our linguistic gift of description contains a powerful peril.

The Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, cited by Steven Pinker, wrote a short story in which Chelm, the town known for its foolishness, faced a shortage of sour cream before the Pentecost holiday (a time when dairy foods are traditionally eaten). Their Rabbis had an idea:

"Let us make a law that water is to be called sour cream and sour cream is to be called water. Since there is plenty of water in the wells of Chelm, each housewife will have a full barrel of sour cream." Because of this, there was no lack of sour cream in Chelm, but some housewives complained that there was a lack of water. But this was an entirely new problem, to be solved after the holiday.

Language, in other words, allows us to ignore and redescribe reality; and calling bad good, and good bad, is the very source of sin.

Back to Genesis. The Woman eats of the Tree and gives her husband to eat. After this act of rebellion, they flee from the presence of God in the Garden, and the peril of language introduces itself once again. God says in verse 11:

...Hast thou eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

And the man said, The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

And the Lord God said to the woman, what is this that thou hast done? And the Woman said, The Serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

Adam uses language not to confess contritely but to deny all responsibility. "The woman *you* gave me, God, gave me the forbidden fruit, so it's really *your* fault."

Similarly Eve: "The *Serpent* beguiled me," or as we might put it today, "This isn't on me."

Man and Woman are expelled from Eden, and are informed that now, they are mortal. "*Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.*" (Genesis 3:19) A desperate doom descends as we realize that language here was an instrument of selfishness and self-centeredness, mischief and error, deception and falsehood.

What about us? Does not duplicitous language lie at the heart of so many things that we have done wrong? Have we not ruined relationships because we treated others as objects rather than people? Have we not made excuses, as did Adam, saying that we are mere victims of circumstance?

But suddenly in Genesis, the positive potential of speech reveals itself. Up until this point, Adam had not given his wife a personal name. אִשָּׁה/*ishah*, Woman, is all he called her. Facing his mortality, Man looks at his wife differently.

And the man called his wife's name Eve [Chavah/חַוָּה], because she was the mother of all life. (Genesis 3:20)

Chava/חַוָּה is linked to the Hebrew word *chai*, meaning "life." The name essentially means "source of life." The scholar Leon Kass puts it this way:

Woman alone carries the antidote to disaster—the prospect of life, ever renewable. With revelational clarity, the man sees the woman in yet another new

light, this time truly: not just as flesh to be joined, not just as another to impress and admire, but as a generous, generating and creative being with powers he can only look up to in awe...He names her anew, this time with no reference to himself: only now, at last, is she known as Eve, source of life and hope.

Eve is finally a true partner and together, Adam and Eve will have children, which for the Bible, is a response to mortality. But how will Eve see the children she is destined to bear? Their first progeny arrives, named by Eve in the beginning of Chapter 4:

And Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying I have created a man with the Lord.

Here, rather than turn to God in gratitude for her child, Eve, like Adam before her, uses language to celebrate herself. The chapter continues:

And she again bore his brother Abel. (Genesis 4:2)

Abel, *Hevel*, whose name means breath or transience, seems, Kass notes, almost an afterthought. The pride linked to Cain's birth, and the lack of interest in Abel, is reflected in the brothers' relationship. Each offers sacrifices to God. When only Abel's is accepted, and Cain is envious, language leads to violence. We are not told what Cain said, only that it was through speech that he lured him into a trap.

And Cain spoke to Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were both in the field, and Cain rose up against Able his brother, and slew him." (Genesis 4:8)

If we understand that language is at the heart of all that is occurring here, the next verse is profound:

And the Lord said unto Cain: Where is Abel thy brother? And he said: I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?

And God said: What hast thou done? thy brother's blood cries unto me from the ground. (Genesis 4:9-10)

You, God says to Cain, have used speech to deny the truth, but the blood of your brother also speaks, crying out to me.

Cain is exiled, generations pass, and we are introduced to his descendant, Lamech. Whereas Cain used language to deny his crime, Lamech engages in exquisite expression to glorify violence.

And Lamech said unto his wives Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice: ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my bruising.

If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold. (Genesis 4:23-24)

I have, Lamech seems to say, killed all men who wounded me, all young men who bruised me. We have met thus far almost every aspect of language: To name narcissistically and to name with love; to communicate God's commands, and to defy them; to deny blame and to discover hope. But now, for the first time, something new emerges: poetry is composed and recited in celebration of violence. For Kass, Lamech represents in the Bible a new achievement for language: the epic poem. Of lauding the hero for his feats of strength. Lamech, as Kass puts it, is "a combination of Achilles-and-Homer...he seeks nothing less than immortal fame...apotheosis, by being master of life and death." An age of terrible brutality is suddenly upon us, and perhaps the linguistic glorification of violence helps lead to the immorality of the antediluvian age, one defined, as the Bible will tell us, by *hamas*, violence. But in the midst of all this, an entirely different family is formed. Adam and Eve have another child. Having lost Abel, and having seen Cain gone astray, the first woman bestows an entirely other name, one reflecting only awe: *Sbet*, Seth, meaning "gift".

And Adam knew his wife again; and she bore a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, has given me another son in place of Abel that Cain slew." (Genesis 4:25)

In contrast to Cain, Eve's new name recognizes the birth of her child not as a source of pride but of gratitude. Seth's descendant is a man also named Lamech. Lamech the Second has a child, and now another name is given:

And Lamech lived a hundred and eighty two years and begot a son; and he called his name Noah, saying,

This one shall comfort us for our work and toll of our hands. (Genesis 5:28)

Noah's name, linked to the Hebrew *Nehama*, consolation, reflects not pride or joy in violence but, like the name of his ancestor Seth, gratitude for life itself. A child providing joy in the face of life's troubles. It is therefore no surprise that Noah avoids the violence of his age, and it cannot be a coincidence that this man will serve as the sole source of hope for the future of life on Earth.

And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, for I repent that I have made them...But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis 6:7-8)

As we prepare for the tale of the Flood, we are left to ponder the power of speech, source of sin and hope. The late news anchor Tim Russert once published the letters that he had received from people about their fathers, and one piece of correspondence from a woman named Pamela Lazarus is all about language. She wrote:

I will always remember representing my elementary school in a state spelling bee. Dad and I spent countless hours studying the word list. I really thought I could go all the way, but I was eliminated early on [with the word 'absolute']. When I returned home after my devastating loss, under my pillow was a beautifully wrapped box. In the box was a gold bracelet and a note that said, "With absolute love, Dad." Oh, so that's how absolute is spelled. The bracelet is long gone, but twenty-seven years later, the note is one of my prized possessions. I still wonder how Dad got the gift and the note under my pillow before I raced to bed to wallow in my sorrow. He took my loss over absolute and replaced it with absolute love.

Just as flippancy with words can be destructive, carefully chosen language can have extraordinary power to heal. In an age of violence of man against man, Noah finds favor with God, perhaps because his very name reminds him of the gift that is life. Language sets man apart, and language leads man astray. But with the Flood about to begin, God's finding favor with Noah reminds us how one name, or one word, can lead to nothing less than the endurance of humanity, and the redemption of the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik points out that the first conversation in the entire Hebrew Bible takes place between Eve and the Serpent. What should we make of the fact that before humankind engages in dialogue with the Divine or in dialogue with each other, we engage in dialogue with temptation personified?
2. It is only after the expulsion from Eden and the entrance of mortality into the world that Adam gives Eve a personal name—one connected to her life-generating capacity. What, if anything, could Scripture be trying to communicate in connecting Eve's individuality to her procreative potential?