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Parashat Bereshit: The Creation of Ability

We're accustomed to thinking about the six days of creation as the story of God creating the world and everything in it. But I'd like to suggest another way to look at the story of creation. That in six days, God created abilities. Think about that for a moment, we all have abilities of various kinds, and some of us have challenges with certain abilities. But the abilities themselves didn't exist before the creation of the world, because abilities only have context in the world. So in creating the world, God created abilities.

On the first day, God famously declares "Let there be light!" ... And there was *sight*! Sight doesn't have any meaning or any context without light. We could have a lens, a cornea, a retina, and it would have no purpose. We would wonder why there were these round marbles in our faces. It's only in the presence of light that our eyes have any meaning. And in creating light, God provided the resource for such an important ability for us. Not all of us have the ability of sight. Some of us may have partial sight, or even no sight at all, living in complete darkness. It's interesting that the Torah does not describe the creation of darkness. Darkness apparently already existed, but God separated the light from the darkness and he gave them names – Day and Night. And humans, and all sorts of life, have evolved organs called eyes which can detect the light which God created. Eyes are extremely useful in the Day. Not so much in the Night. The separation of the light from the darkness defines a time where sighted people have a tremendous advantage. And it also defines a time in which the ability to see has no advantage. In the darkness, those with sight become afraid. Their dependence on sight compromises their ability to function. And perhaps those without sight, who are accustomed to functioning without light, find an advantage in the Night.

On the second day, God creates an expanse between the water above and the water below. He names this expanse Sky. In doing this, God creates our ability to hear. Without the atmosphere that surrounds us, sound has no meaning. As the water below moves, vibrations propagate through the air that fills the expanse. And the water above, with all sorts of phenomenon – wind, rain, lightning - cause all varieties of sound. And humans, and all sorts of life, have evolved organs called ears which can detect the vibrations that exist only in this expanse which God created. We know today that if we travel outside of the expanse, above our atmosphere, there is no sound. It simply doesn't have any meaning in a vacuum. Sound does have meaning for many animals that live in the water below, but human hearing is very poor at detecting sound in water. Each of us have different amounts hearing, and some of us have no hearing at all. And other animals that God created have hearing abilities far different than humans. Hearing different frequency ranges, or using hearing for echo location or sonar. Everything is relative – to a bat or a dolphin, all humans are quite hearing disabled! To such animals, hearing provides a detailed visual depiction of the world around them. They take for granted an ability that we humans can barely comprehend.

On the third day, God gathers the waters below together to expose dry land. And God causes the land to be filled with vegetation, seed bearing plants and fruit trees. God is creating the fundamental abilities which we may take for granted, but that all life depends on – photosynthesis and sexual reproduction. God doesn't just create plants. God explicitly creates seed bearing plants and fruit trees. In creating the system of stamens (male) and pistils (female), combined with the wind (see the 2nd day), God creates the ability for life to cross-breed and evolve. In doing this, God creates the ability for every life to be truly unique and express itself independently. And in filling the earth with fruit trees and pollenating plants, God creates the ability to smell. Our olfactory system has no meaning, no context, if the expanse is not filled with pollen.

On the fourth day, God creates lights in the Sky above the expanse – the stars, Sun and Moon. And God explicitly states that their purpose is to set the cycles of time – days, months, seasons, years. God creates the ability to understand the passing of time – to understand causation – what comes before and what comes after. This may seem like such an obvious skill that it wouldn't even be considered an ability. But some of us have tremendous difficulty with this. My own son, who just turned 13 years old, has very little understanding of the passing of time. He can't comprehend causation. *If you do A, then you will get B.* It doesn't matter how badly he wants B, he can't understand causation enough to do A.

On the fifth day, God fills the Water with fish and the Sky with birds. Swarms of creatures which will employ the abilities that were created in the previous four days in order to survive. God blesses them, and commands them to be fertile and increase. Though this is not stated, God has created ecosystems and food chains. In order for these life forms to be fertile and increase, they will need to eat. They will eat the plants and the fruit, and they will also eat each other. And they will require an ability to know which foods are good to eat and which are not. God has created taste.

On the sixth day, God fills the land with animals, and also creates humans in God's image. These animals employ all of the abilities that were previously created. They have one additional need. The land is vast, and animals need to be able to move around in order to find food and shelter. They also need to move in order to find each other for companionship and in order to reproduce. God has created the ability of locomotion. This is such a critical ability for most land animals. Those who lose it, quickly perish. But what about humans, created in God's image? It is only in the case of human civilization, when people's ability of locomotion is compromised, that we provide ways for them to live full lives. Perhaps that is the meaning of being created in God's image. That we have the ability to affect change in the world. We are not helpless in the face of the cruelty of nature. An animal with a broken limb or born

with a congenital abnormality has little chance of survival. But humans have created a society where we can thrive, even with disabilities.

And then came the seventh day. God ceased work. Creation was finished. Or was it?

On the seventh day, God created rest. This is an ability which is so critical to all life. And when we are unable to rest, it impairs our lives. Sleep apnea is a debilitating disability. And in the extreme, those who cannot sleep, die.

In giving us Shabbat, God also created the ability to experience joy and pleasure. To experience the beauty of all of creation. To have time to meditate and study Torah. These abilities are shared by all people, each in our own way, and each regardless of how *able* we are in other ways. God saw that all he created on the first six days was good. And that includes us, created in God's image, with all of our abilities and disabilities.