

“A Time for Evolving and a Time for Peace”

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Last week, four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens, were killed as gunmen fought security forces and set fire to the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. The attack came as protesters were demonstrating against an inflammatory video about Islam made in the U.S. At around 10:00 p.m., attackers pelted the complex's main compound with gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades. Within 15 minutes, the gunmen entered the building and set the consulate ablaze, killing Stevens and three others.

This morning, on this eve of a Jewish New Year, we read about the creation of the world and of Adam and Eve. But let's be honest. As Reform Jews we know the world is older than 5,773 years and that Adam and Eve were not the first humans. We must ask ourselves of what value is this biblical account of creation and all the stories that flow from it? Is it possible that these narratives have caused us more harm than good? The most serious conflicts that threaten to consume our world are between populations who hold radically different views with regard to these sacred narratives. Whether they are fundamentalist Muslims, Christians or Jews, they are each fighting to defend their version of the story because it's what shapes their identities and the world they are trying to create.

What can the biblical account of creation teach us? How can it help us? In the next few minutes, I hope to demonstrate, by way of another story, that all religions attempt to answer three basic questions: (1) Who am I? (2) How did I get here? and (3) Where am I going? Our sacred narratives, beginning with the story of Creation, shed light on these questions to teach us something critically important about what it means to be human.

There were once three brothers. They had grown to adulthood when their father died. Their father had made promises to each of them, but without a written will that each of them could accept as valid, they had to figure out between themselves who would inherit their father's estate and his precious vineyard. The oldest claimed that their father loved him the most and would have wanted him to inherit the estate and vineyard. The middle brother, following the example of his older brother, claimed that their father loved him the most and would have wanted him to inherit the estate and vineyard. And the youngest brother, following their examples, claimed that their father loved him the most and would have wanted him to inherit the estate and the vineyard. Each held firmly to his exclusive claim and passed this claim onto his respective children and their families, so they and their children and grandchildren failed to arrive at any consensus over who would inherit and care for the estate and the vineyard.

It wasn't long before some among the children and grandchildren of the middle brother became so convinced that only their claim was valid that they plotted to kill the oldest brother and his descendants. And there were some among the children and grandchildren of the youngest brother who were so convinced that only their claim was valid that they plotted to kill both the older brothers and their descendants. The oldest brother and his family just wanted to be left alone, yet still clung fiercely to the

exclusivity of their claim. In this way, the situation persisted and their respective claims were never resolved. As a result, many of the descendants of these brothers grew to live with a shared sense of unease and, in many cases, resentment toward the other families. No one was willing to accept responsibility for the overall care of the estate, and so it fell into a state of disunity and disrepair. And the vineyard – no one even knew where it was, so it had been completely neglected.

Now how could this situation be resolved? I'll tell you that many just gave up on the old stories and competing claims. Rather than worry about who should inherit the estate and vineyard, they sought only to claim for themselves a portion on which they and their families could live and just not worry about what happened to the rest of the estate, much less the vineyard.

I'm hoping that by now you can see that this story represents our current crisis, which has been ongoing between the three great monotheistic traditions of the West. With the animosity and violence that covers the front pages of our newspapers as recently as this past week, we find ourselves in an intractable situation. The death of our American ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, is only among the most recent in a conflict that is spreading with even greater intensity.

Has religion and our religious narratives helped us create a world of peace, or have they, instead, been fanning the flames of extremism?

Now, what if the oldest brother were to set an example for the others? Instead of promulgating his notion of “chosen-ness” which set this entire cycle in motion, he was ready to end the cycle by saying something like this:

“We are all in a very bad situation. The stories we tell about our past have helped us by keeping alive the memory of our father, whom we all loved very much. And we know that he loved all of us very much. But look at the situation we've created for ourselves. There is so much work to be done in the care of our father's estate but it's not getting done because we have been too busy fighting one another. And his precious vineyard – no one even knows where it is! Let us retell and celebrate our stories and find in them the parts that remind us of the love we had for our father and the love he had for us. By piecing our stories together, we may even discover where to find the vineyard. If I renounce my claim of exclusivity and embrace with my whole heart the belief that we are truly brothers, equal in our father's eyes and in our own, then I ask you to do the same.”

Now I am not suggesting that we “blame the victim.” And I'm not suggesting that we renounce our identity as Jews and our proud history. What I am saying is that it is time we see our role, as Jews, not as one of entitlement but as one of responsibility. If there is to be peace between the Jews, Christians and Muslims who are at war with one another, who is going to set an example for others to follow? It must begin with us and the first step requires great courage, like that of the eldest brother in our story.

I stand here, as your rabbi, and announce publicly that I am a Jew – but, first and foremost, I am a human being. I regard this statement as a sacred truth. My identity as a Jew is important but it is secondary. This may seem like a simple and obvious statement, but it flies in the face of orthodox Jewish thought. Nonetheless, it is a statement I will stand by, and I hope you will stand with me.

Just look at what's going on in the Middle East and around the world and you'll see that our situation is the same as these three brothers and their descendants. There are many secular Jews, Christians and Muslims who choose not to concern themselves with our sacred narratives, like those who prefer to live off the land and use whatever resources they need for themselves. But religiously conservative Jews, Christians and Muslims still hold tight to their respective claims and the narratives that support them. Even those of us on the liberal end of the religious spectrum still hold onto some version of these stories, often standing in solidarity with our more conservative co-religionists. In a Jewish context, we raise the banner of "klal yisrael – Jewish unity" and do our best to accommodate the orthodox and ultra-orthodox for in the eyes of many, they represent "authentic" Judaism. Even though many liberal Jews do not choose to adopt their orthodox lifestyle, we all know there are secular and Reform Jews who donate millions of dollars to fund their outreach efforts. The claim is that without the ultra-orthodox, Judaism would disappear within a few generations. I call that line of reasoning into serious question. Do we really want to perpetuate a parochial worldview that ultimately leads to religious fanaticism?

So what I'm proposing is that we return to the three questions that religion seeks to answer, the first being "Who am I?" The notion of Jews being a chosen people was rejected over a century ago by the founders of our movement and soon after by Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement. Yet we must remind ourselves that this position sets us apart from religious conservatives. Yes, we affirm our identities as Jews but we recognize that, first and foremost, we are human. The implications of this statement are profound because it tells us not only who we are but who we are destined to become. My goal as the rabbi of this historically progressive congregation is not only to make people better Jews, but to make Jews better people.

When we ask ourselves the second question, "How did we get here?" our answer again sets us apart from religious conservatives who are still trying to defend their claims against science. The truth that we evolved from hominids does not make our journey to this point any less amazing. In fact, it suggests that we are continuing to evolve and that we have not yet reached the end of this sacred journey.

As Reform Jews, we know that we evolved from other species. We know that we are evolving and that there are still remnants of our past within us, like our fear of the dark, and our fight or flight instinct. But we also carry within us positive qualities like the instincts of a parent to care for and nurture a child.

There was once a little girl who noticed the hair on my arms. It must have been more than the hair on her father's arms. She asked me why that was and I told her that my great, great, great, great grandparents were apes. That actually isn't true. They were hominids – the ancestors of our cousins, the apes. But nonetheless, she was astonished.

Our tradition as well as science both indicate that there is a direction to this whole process; that it's not just random and aimless. I'm not talking about Intelligent Design, which says there's a supernatural God directing the course of history. Instead, it seems that there is something propelling this process of evolution which dwells within each and every creature which we might call the "evolutionary impulse." Our religions have given a name and a personality to this evolutionary impulse, recognizing that we are

intimately connected to it, not only through the patterns of our DNA but through our own growth and the development of consciousness and culture.

The last question is this: "Where are we going?" The traditional view is that a messiah will come to save us, bring all the Jews in the world to Israel and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. This narrative is just not helpful, not even a modified version of it. We would have to get rid of the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine built on that very site, for such a thing to happen. I share no such aspirations with my orthodox friends.

Instead, we know that evolution follows a path of greater depth and complexity. And we intuit that the culmination of this process is when consciousness becomes aware of itself. Our ancestors intuited this as well and described the birth and flowering of consciousness in terms of the creation of the world and of Adam and Eve. And all the history and stories that followed, true or untrue, has brought us to this moment; for the moment of truth has arrived: As Jews, we are the eldest brother in the story. And as Reform Jews, we are the ones to move the process of healing and repair forward. We are not practicing what some criticize as a watered down form of Judaism. We are the leading edge of this process we might call the evolution of consciousness.

We study Torah with a new understanding of our role and responsibility as Jews. This requires a great deal of study and practice; a commitment to scientific and spiritual inquiry and a passion for social justice, so I invite you to join me for our many ongoing classes, programs and services.

We as Reform Jews and members of Temple Israel are proud to lead by example. Our tradition, should you decide to join us in carrying it forward, is not so much a privilege or entitlement as it is a responsibility. This is the time to begin again; to find and reclaim that lost vineyard. This is the time to bring peace to our world; to discover what it means to evolve and become fully human.