

Parshat Bereishit: The Sacred Narrow Gap

Shoshana Jakobovits, Class of '26

If you mention the name “Piccard” in casual conversation in Switzerland, everyone will know the great family of explorers you are referring to. Auguste Piccard, a balloonist, was the first to fly to the stratosphere in 1931. His son, Jacques Piccard, explored the depths and was the first to descend to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, in 1960. His own son, Bertrand Piccard, pursued his grandfather’s legacy by completing the first non-stop balloon flight around the globe, followed by the first round-the-world solar-powered flight.

A longform article about Bertrand Piccard, published in the New Yorker (*Close to the Sun– The making of Bertrand Piccard’s solar-powered air journey around the world*. By Ben Taub, October 3, 2022) describes his travels and his work in pioneering clean technologies. It ends with the following quote:

Each dawn of his twenty days in the sky during the circumnavigation was seared into his memory. “You have everything black, and then suddenly you have a little white line in the middle,” he said. “And then this line becomes wider and wider, until the sky becomes silver. Suddenly, the sun arrives, and makes everything red. And then you have a flash, and color lands on the Earth. For me, it was every morning as if I was at the moment of the creation of the world.”

I am struck by this quote. Not just for its poetics, for the arresting beauty of a sunrise witnessed from an aircraft, but for the way Bertrand Piccard describes himself beholding creation. Not just as an act that happened once, in the beginning, a long long time ago. But rather living “every morning as if I was at the moment of the creation of the world.”

Yes, our Torah opens with the words “Bereshit bara”—in past tense. Making it sound like we are about to hear a story of creation that once took place. But our tefilla offers another way of looking at ma’aseh bereshit: in birkat yotzer, we describe God as “hamechadesh betuvo bechol yom ma’aseh bereishit”—we praise God not for just having created the world once, but for renewing the act of creation daily.

What if we could read Bereishit not as the story of what once was, but as a story unfolding every morning under our eyes? How can we make a story about dividing light from darkness (day 1), about separating the waters above from the waters below (day 2), a story we can witness in this very moment?

The gemara in Chagiga 15a records the following curious encounter between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya and Ben Zoma:

The Sages taught: There was once an incident with regard to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was standing on a step on the Temple Mount, and ben Zoma saw him and did not stand before him to honor him, as he was deep in thought. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: From where do you come and where are you going, ben Zoma, i.e., what is on your mind? He said to him: In my thoughts I was looking upon the act of Creation, at the gap between the upper waters and the lower waters, as there is only *the breadth of a mere three fingers* between them [...] (Chagiga 15a).

The gemara is not quite satisfied with characterizing the gap between the upper waters and the lower waters as “only the breadth of a mere three fingers” and continues to debate how this width should be described:

And how much, in fact, is the gap between them? Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: *Like the thickness of a thread*; and the Rabbis said: *Like the gap between the boards of a bridge*. Mar Zutra, and some say it was Rav Asi, said: *Like two robes spread one over the other*, with a slight gap in between. And some said: *Like two cups placed one upon the other* (Chagiga 15a).

I do not know what difference it might make whether the gap is more like the gap between boards of a bridge or like the gap between two robes spread one over the other. But one thing is clear from this discussion: all sages are in agreement that the gap is vanishingly small. And so, according to this tradition/understanding, on the second day of creation, God opens a narrow gap within the watery mess of the world, a narrow sacred gap between the upper waters and the lower waters. And we, along with all the living beings and everything that will be created in the next four days, inhabit this sacred narrow gap.

Instead of describing the space of habitable human life as a vast expansion, one that would take humanity (and with it, family Piccard) many years and relentless work to descend and ascend, the gemara describes this gap to us as basically nothing. A thin little crust, a tiny tiny sacred gap in which life is possible.

Back to the New Yorker article about Bertrand Piccard:

All human settlements fall within a tiny band of the lower atmosphere, from the Dead Sea region to La Rinconada, a Peruvian gold-mining village in the high Andes, three miles up. At that altitude, half of the atmospheric pressure is gone, and, if you go a little higher, the air becomes so thin that your lungs struggle to inflate. Beyond five miles, there isn’t

enough oxygen for humans to survive. Hypoxia sets in. Twelve miles up, where there is barely any atmospheric pressure, your blood would start to boil. No one knows exactly where to define the limits of the atmosphere; by one measure, it extends nearly to the moon. But the range of what for us is habitable is astonishingly small—a mere film around the planet, making possible the formation of complex life.

Most of us have not spent days piloting balloons and aircrafts around the world, but many of us have witnessed an arrestingly beautiful sunrise. Can Parshat Bereishit and birkat yotzer give us the impulse to look at creation not just as a story that was, but as a story unfolding and renewed every day? Can we live with the consciousness of the tiny habitable gap in which we live our human lives between the waters above and waters below? Can we live with the knowledge that in the face of the immensity of the universe, our lives are but hanging in a tender narrow sacred gap, “like the thickness of a thread?”

Shoshana Jakobovits's passions are texts and languages (both human and computer languages). She is a software engineer by profession, occasionally a teacher, and consistently a wholehearted Jewish learner born in Geneva, Switzerland. She studied at Ein Hanatziv, Hadar, and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership and has a particular interest in the process of psak and halakha in general. When she's not in the Beit Midrash, Shoshana expresses her love for text by working as a software engineer in natural language processing at Google AI Research. She is fluent in English, French, Swiss/German, and Hebrew. Shoshana and her family live in Zurich, Switzerland.