

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Bereishit, Genesis, Chapters 1-6

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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Adam's Family and the "Adams Family"

I.

In 1761, a colonist named John Adams fell in love with Abigail Smith. As he courted her, a new king, George III, ascended the throne. Noting the admiring glances Abigail bestowed on the picture of the monarch, Adams joked to her sister that he was jealous. He wrote in jest: "Altho my Allegiance has been hitherto inviolate I shall endeavour, all in my Power to foment Rebellion."

Some fifteen years after this romantic and prophetic note, on July 3, 1776, Adams wrote a letter to his wife Abigail from Philadelphia, about a document that would change the world:

You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth the Causes which have impell'd Us to this mighty Revolution, and the Reasons which will justify it, in the Sight of God and Man.

We consider John and Abigail's story as we inaugurate our new series, "*Parashah* and Politics." It is a tragic twist of our culture that thanks to a macabre 1960s comedy we have an entirely other association with the phrase "The Addams Family." In truth, reading Genesis through the lens of the lives of these patriots allows us to see why the ideas originating from the biblical Adam's family are so important to the Declaration, and to our time.

The Bible famously begins:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

It is a seemingly simple sentence; but as John Adams noted, no other nation had ever said anything like this:

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation. If I were an Atheist and believed in blind eternal Fate, . . . I Should believe that Chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and



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propagate to all Mankind the Doctrine of a Supreme intelligent, wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential Principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.

Why, for Adams, was this doctrine of creation so essential? The answer is given in the climax of the creation story in chapter 1:

And God said, let Us make man in Our image. . . .

And God made man in His image, in the image of God He made him, male and female He made them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Not only is God the Creator, but man and woman—all human beings—are equally made in God’s image. Thus is born the premise on which the Declaration’s concept of equality rests.

I first thought about this when the National Archives Website once charmingly offered the opportunity to print a copy of the Declaration with one’s own signature appended to the bottom. We added the “Soloveichik” name alongside that of Adams and Jefferson, and we sent out copies of this “improved” Declaration on the holiday of Purim—along with bottles of Sam Adams beer and the pastry known as Yankee Doodles—as *mishloah manot*, the festival’s traditional gifts. The act of signing inspired the question: how many throughout history subscribed to the notion that men are made in the image of their Creator, and that therefore all are created equal? The son of John and Abigail Adams, John Quincy, knew the answer:

Only creation in the image of God allows for the equality at the heart of America.

Almost all the Greek Philosophers reasoned and meditated upon the Nature of the Gods; but scarcely any of them ever reflected enough even to imagine that there was but one God—and not one of them ever conceived of Him as the Creator of the World. . . . But the first words of the Bible are “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the Earth.” This blessed and sublime idea of God, the creator of the Universe, this source of all human virtue and all human happiness, for which all the Sages and philosophers of Greece and Rome groped in darkness and never found, is revealed in the first verse of the book of Genesis.

Two centuries later, the educator Leon Kass similarly reflected on teaching both Greek classics and the Bible:

You don’t get out of Plato and Aristotle an account that would sustain the view of the equal dignity of every human being. You would not get the foundation for liberal democracy out of that; . . . it really rests on [what the Bible] first stated: both man and woman are equally made in God’s image.

Only creation in the image of God allows for the equality at the heart of America.



II.

But what does it mean to speak of God's image? We turn to Chapter 2, where the creation of humanity is described again:

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth; and He blew into his nostrils the spirit of life, and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Here, unlike with the creation of animals, mention is made of a spirit; this is the way in which we imagine the Almighty. For the medieval sage Moses Nahmanides, the key here is the Almighty's use of the first-person plural hortatory form: "let **Us** make man in **Our** image." God, according to Nahmanides, was speaking to the material world He had created; we are in the image of the Almighty **and** of the earth, we are not only material substance but also soul. To forget this is to render human beings into animals once more.

This is why, for John Adams, Jefferson—who had written the words "all men are created equal"—was wrong to see the atheistic French Revolution as akin to the American. Adams's critique of what was occurring in France was written while serving as vice president, a position he called "the most insignificant office that ever the mind of man contrived or his imagination conceived." With so much time on his hands, he reflected on what would occur when faith was effaced in the name of equality:

Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this all is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as shooting a plover?

Abigail wholeheartedly endorsed Adams's biblical views on equality, and the cause against England, which is why it is so striking that as her husband excitedly started serving in the Continental Congress, she criticized his colleagues by expressing, as Lincoln later would, that the American cause was irreconcilable with the widespread enslavement of those created in God's image.

It always appeared a most iniquitous Scheme to me—[to] fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.

In Abigail, John found an intellectual equal who was willing to challenge him, and who possessed emotional virtues he lacked. As the historian Joseph Ellis reflects, "he was neurotic and she was uncommonly sane. His inevitable eruptions would not threaten the marriage, because she was the center that would always hold."

This, in turn, teaches us something essential about the original "Mr. and Mrs. Adam" in Eden: genuine marriage is founded not only in similarity but also difference. When Adam finds no mate in the animal world, the Almighty announces:

It is not good for the man to alone; I will make him a **helpmate for him**. (Genesis 2:18)



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The Hebrew here, *ezer k'negdo*, literally means “a helpmate **against** him.” A true soulmate, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik reflected, is one who is different:

The *ezer k'negdo*, the helpmate, stands not alongside but opposite Adam. Only in opposition does man find help. Loneliness can only be ameliorated if lonely man meets lonely woman.

Rabbi Soloveitchik seemed to have John and Abigail's correspondence in mind when he reflected:

To understand himself, man must confide in another. Only woman, who is an independent person with her own I-awareness, can liberate the man from loneliness.

III.

Yet following the first marriage in human history, all is not well in Eden. Man and woman receive the commandment to refrain from partaking of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.” But is not knowledge *always* a virtue?

The answer, for Abigail Adams, was decidedly, “no.” To her brilliant boy John Quincy, when he was ten, she wrote:

[G]reat Learning and superior abilities, should you ever possess them, will be of little value and small Estimation, unless Virtue, Honour, Truth, and integrity are added to them. Adhere to those religious Sentiments and principles which were early instilled into your mind and remember that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions.

The 20th century taught us that a culturally and scientifically advanced society can utilize its knowledge for evil ends; and the enticement of the serpent to eat of the tree allows us to understand the danger its fruit represents:

“For the day on which you eat it you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4)

To partake of this Tree is to become one's own arbiter of right and wrong, to seek to cease seeing oneself as made in God's image, and to make oneself a god. As Adams understood, the French Revolution reminded us what occurs when the true source of equality is forgotten.

As Eden is lost, another hopeful note is sounded: Adam looks to his wife, and bestows upon her a personal name, seeing her as the mother of humanity, and himself as the future father:

And the man called his wife's name Eve [*Havah*] because she was the mother of all life [*hay*].
(Genesis 3:20)



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According to a striking Midrash, it was at this moment that God, amidst a paradise lost, bestowed on Adam and Eve radiant “garments of light.” For Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in an incredible speech delivered at the Vatican in 2014, the meaning of this Midrash is that it is through the love with which a family is formed that we reveal that we are more than animals, that we are spiritual beings:

And so it has been ever since, that when a man and woman turn to one another in a bond of faithfulness, God robes them in garments of light, and we come as close as we will ever get to God Himself, bringing new life into being, turning the prose of biology into the poetry of the human spirit, redeeming the darkness of the world by the radiance of love.

IV.

But even the love lavished in family bears with it a danger: that a child might grow self-centered, a danger a parent is obligated to address. When Abigail heard that John Quincy was putting on airs because of the knowledge he had acquired in his young life, she wrote to him with words of moral instruction:

If you are conscious to yourself that you possess more knowledge upon some subjects than others of your standing, reflect that you have had greater opportunities of seeing the world, and obtaining a knowledge of Mankind than any of your contemporaries. . . . How unpardonable would it have been in you, to have been a Blockhead.

Thus does a mother remind her son to see life as one of blessing and duty rather than entitlement. We bear this in mind as we read further in Genesis, of the first child ever born, whom Eve names Cain (in Hebrew, *Kayin*), which means “acquire.” For Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi, the name reflects the attitude of its bearer:

Kayin is the first to be born. . . . The whole world belongs to him. There is no room in his existence for anyone else: not for a brother, and not for the Creator. He himself is the world.

The point, in the words of Rabbi Uzi Eitam, is that Kayin forgot that

a person is meant to see his existence in the world as a Divine *hesed*, or kindness, and he should exert a moral effort to become worthy of it.

The self-centeredness of Cain leads to fratricide, to Abel’s death; and Eve learns, as Abigail understood, of a parent’s duty. That lesson informs her naming of her next child: Seth, which means “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)



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In this name Eve reminds her child to see all of life—beginning with a parent’s love—as a sign of grace. It can be no coincidence that for the commentator Ibn Ezra what follows is the invention of prayer itself:

And to Seth was born a son; . . . it was then that men began to call on the Lord. (Genesis 4:26)

Even as Cain-like violence suffuses the world, a remnant shaped by Eve’s parenting can be found among the descendants of Seth: Enoch who “walks with God;” Methuselah, remembered by the rabbis as righteous; and ultimately Noah who “found favor in the eyes of the Lord,” and who bears in mind what Abigail wrote her son when he was ten years old: “remember that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions.”

Our culture has forgotten that human life is sacred, a defect that undermines the equality on which our politics is based. Forgotten as well is the godlikeness of parenthood, so that secular Europe has ceased to have children, and a plague of loneliness afflicts society today.

Thus do the stories of Adam’s family and the Adams family go hand in hand. When John Adams was sent as an American envoy to France, a woman at a party cheekily quipped, “Mr. Adams, by your Name I conclude you are descended from the first Man and Woman.” Adams replied: “Madame, my family resembles the first couple both in the name and in their frailties so much that I have no doubt we are descended from that of paradise.” We *can* learn from John and Abigail about Adam and Eve—but from their successes. Specifically, we can learn

how the biblical concept of equality shaped America, and how central the institution of the family is to our future as a nation.

These lessons need relearning. Our culture has forgotten that human life is sacred, a defect that undermines the equality on which our politics is based. Forgotten as well is the godlikeness of parenthood, so that secular Europe has ceased to have children, and a plague of loneliness afflicts society today.

One man who did not walk through life alone was John Adams, who in 1818 stood by Abigail as she lay dying. An eyewitness recalled:

She told him she was going and if it was the will of heaven she was willing—She had no wish to live but for his sake.

Adams reflected: “I wish I could lay down beside her and die too.”



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But he did not pass away until July 4, 1826, 50 years after the declaration that “all men are created equal.” Soon after, the bedroom in which he expired was visited by his bereaved son, who was then the sixth president of the United States. John Quincy Adams wrote:

That moment was inexpressibly painful, and struck me as if it had been an arrow to the heart. My father and my mother have departed. The charm which has always made this house to me an abode of enchantment is dissolved: and yet my attachment to it, and to the whole region round is stronger than I ever felt it before.

For the only time in American history, a sitting president mourned a president—not as a Founder but as a father, and a husband to his mother, feeling the reflected light of God that he had experienced there from parents who had raised him and taught him how Genesis was the greatest moral gift to mankind.

John Adams’s famous last words were “Thomas Jefferson survives.” Indeed he does, because the Declaration survives. But its teaching that all men are created equal will only endure if we ensure that the lessons of the lives of John and Abigail Adams—and of Adam of Eve—endure as well.

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The Achievement of the Hebrews: John Adams on Genesis and the Jews, Letter to François Adriaan Van der Kemp, February 16, 1809. [Click here to read.](#)

The Bible vs. The Ancient Greeks: John Quincy Adams on Genesis, Letter to his son, George Washington Adams, September 15, 1811. [Click here to read.](#)

The Mother as Teacher Part I: Abigail Adams on Knowledge and Faith, Letter to her son, John Quincy Adams, when he was ten years old, journeying with his father in France, June [10?], 1778. [Click here to read.](#)

The Mother as Teacher Part II, Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams when he was a student at Harvard, July 21, 1786. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Sacks at the Vatican on Genesis and the Family, Delivered at the Humanum Conference, November 17, 2014. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on Genesis, the Family, and Rabbi Sacks' Vatican Speech, "What Gentiles Can Learn from Lord Sacks," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2020. [Click here to read.](#)

