

Beray-sheet - Genesis- 2015

Delivered by RAK 10/10/15

According to scientists, orangutans share 97 percent of their DNA with humans! In fact, they are more closely related to us than previously thought. Chimpanzees share 98.5 percent of their DNA with humans. Chimpanzees use coconut shells as a cup to drink, they'll crack nuts with small logs or rocks, and they can walk upright. If tickled, chimpanzees giggle! But unlike humans, they have the ability to giggle while exhaling and inhaling. Try it out!

But seriously, are we 98.5 percent chimp and just 1.5 percent human? Interestingly enough, scientists did a study on a soil-dwelling worm called a nematode. Scientists found that the nematode shares 75 percent of its DNA with humans. So, if anyone asks you what you learned today in shul at the very least you can tell them, "I am 98.5 percent chimp, 97 percent orangutan, and 75 percent worm."

And yet, for all our shared DNA we are unique among everything created. In this week's parsha, after Gd creates animals, he declares them to be, "good," but after he creates man, Gd declares them/us to be, "very good". Why the difference? Why is the creation of chimps and orangutans good, while the creation of man is very good?

Of course, the simple answer is that human beings were telling this story... But there is far more to it than that. Another, more profound answer is repeatedly emphasized, four times, in Genesis 1:26-27. There the Torah says, "Then Gd said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' Yes, we are given supremacy, but this just leads to another question: Who is this WE? Who is Gd talking to???"

You'll read that some people say, "It's the Royal We." OK. Gd is a heavenly Monarch who is so much unlike us that Gd talks about Himself in the "Royal We..." But this Gd is remote from me. Most other explanations say that Gd is talking to the angels. OK - it's a high ranking conversation that's taking place above. But again, that's tough for me to relate to...

Instead, I prefer the Hasidic teaching that says something far more personal and intimate... That the "we" in this is "US and Gd Himself." This tradition depicts Gd as consulting with human beings before the act. "Let us make Man" with the potential to live in the image of Gd. Unlike animals, we've been endowed with a capacity to reflect the image of our creator! We reflect Gd's very likeness, His character, His attributes, His righteousness, and His holiness. This is what makes human life so special, so unique, and so sacred! We are the only creatures in all of creation capable of reflecting Gd's holy character and glory.

The human tragedy is that sometimes we identify more with chimps than with Gd, who created us to be holy. Chimps, and all animals live in the moment. They are hard-wired to follow their desires and thoughts, their cravings and their natural instincts. Chimpanzees cannot transcend their animal nature. They descend into it. But here is what is unique about human beings; Gd endows us with a spiritual capacity to transcend, to rise higher than our animal instincts.

As I was thinking about what to share with all of you this morning, this phrase "Na'aseh" Let "US" make man... kept repeating in my mind. And then it dawned on me. Where else is this

word "Na'aseh used famously in Torah? "Na'aseh V'Nishma - We will do, and we will listen." This is what the Jewish People say after Sinai when we accept the covenant relationship with Gd that the Torah offers. It's the same phrase! "Let Us Make" in Genesis is the original covenant between Gd and Humanity. It is the Torah's way of saying there is a plan, a bigger and deeper picture that you can tap into. And when the phrase is used again in Exodus it means to say that we are now agreeing to the covenant that will allow us to transcend that animal instinct and rise higher toward the level of the original "Na'aseh" through the mitzvot.

In between this first "Na'aseh" in this week's portion, and the next one in Exodus, a lot is going to happen. We are going to read the founding stories of the Jewish People. It's not always going to be pretty. You are going to see some dysfunctional families. You are going to read about some very stubborn and ungrateful People. It'll be one rebellion after another; there's going to be a lot of idolatry... Not everyone will live up to his or her Gd-ly potential. But the wording here in the founding story of humanity is: "Always remember where you came from, from that original pact." That's what separates us from the animals and allows us to aspire in ways animals never could.

And it is this opening message that informs all the rest of the Torah, and that is indeed what makes it holy. Animals cannot ask, "How shall I live my life? In a way that shows I am part of the "Na'aseh?"

Every day we have the potential, and the opportunity to reaffirm the Covenant; the Covenant that was made with all humanity and the Covenant that was made with the Jewish People. That is what makes the Torah so holy. It is not simply the laws and the stories in it, but the very aspirational nature with which it starts. We can be more. We can strive. We can elevate ourselves. We can be holy.