

**Rabbi Aaron Bisno, Congregation Rodef Shalom (Pittsburgh, PA),
Guest Speaker
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
September 30, 2012
“How Did God Create Himself?”
Genesis 1 | Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=216105860>**

In his new book *Why Does the World Exist* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), author Jim Holt describes how we tend to think of the world coming into being as akin to the way we may well have anticipated the start of today’s service. By way of analogy, the author suggests it’s if we are awaiting the start of a concert with those in attendance sitting in rapt expectation, fiddling with our programs until the music begins.

And so it does. This morning’s service opened with song and the selection shared this morning from the Book of Genesis all but sings... The Hebrew is so wonderful!

“B’reishit barah Elohim et HaShamayim v’et HaAretz...

In the Beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth...”

Ours is a most appropriate Torah reading for this season, for it was just within the last two weeks that the Jewish community celebrated the Holy Day of Rosh Hashanah, which our tradition understands the world to be the day on which the world came into existence. In Hebrew we call that day: *Yom Ha’Arat Olam*, the Day of the World’s Birth.

Now, this said, we ought to acknowledge that there are differences of opinion on this point. Some traditional commentators suggest that today is the day on which the world was conceived. Others argue that today is the day on which everything came into being. Still others posit the world began six days before Rosh Hashanah, as Rosh Hashanah, goes this line of thinking, celebrates human beings’ arrival on Earth. Which, as you’ll surely recall, occurred on the sixth day of Creation. But this, as I say, is a minority view.

Regardless, the point on which all of Jewish tradition agrees is that Rosh Hashanah is a day set aside for reflecting on the origin of things.

I feel so grateful to have been invited to be with you today, to have the privilege of not only learning with you this morning, but also to have the honor to preach from this historic pulpit. I have been made to feel so welcome and I thank you. Most of you have never heard me preach; it is perhaps why a good many of you are here this morning, but those of you who have heard me preach will know I only very rarely speak of my children in sermons.

We have two boys Adam, 7; and Michael, 4. And they almost never make it into my sermons. But a few months ago our younger son Michael asked, “Daddy, if God created the world, how did God create Himself?”

And so, I began by telling him that he had asked a wonderful question and that very smart people (such as he) have been asking and attempting to answer that question for a very long time.

And yet, I discovered that, in attempting to answer how (in Michael's words) "God created Hissel" – my efforts came up short. I had a problem.

A child's question about God's origins is a difficult question for a parent to answer because it calls on us to explain something complex with the most simple of words. And as challenging as it is to explain complicated ideas with common words, it can be harder still for young minds to comprehend what we would intend to express.

Nonetheless, I tried. But Michael made clear my efforts were unsatisfying.

God has always been here, I said. "Yes, Daddy, but how did God create Hissel?"

God isn't a person or a thing or an object, I explained. "Yes, but how did God create Hissel?" my son insisted.

No, no. I tried again. We come from our parents and they from their parents. But God is not like us. God is within all people and God is part of all of us...

"Yes, but how did God create Hissel?" he answered, by now exasperated.

I finally replied, "Michael, I'll need some time. Will you allow me to answer you by way of a sermon?" And he agreed. And so, here we are.

It is natural for children to ask questions such as how God could create God. After all, children instinctively assume that everything in the world was made by someone for some purpose. But how to begin to answer this important question? That itself is a question.

I began by asking Siri [the Apple iOS personal assistant app], but Siri told me she avoids theological discussions. I tried Googling the question, but though many answers were proffered, I quickly discovered the internet wasn't the place for me to locate what I sought. I was on my own. And so, in good rabbinic tradition, as taught in the Talmudic collection of wisdom known as *Pirke Avot*, the Ethical Teachings of the Sages, I decided: *Hafach ba, hafach ba, d'khula bah*: I decided to turn Michael's question "over and over again," convinced the question must contain its own answer.

"The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true." So wrote, Alain de Botton in his new book *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*.

This morning, as we embark on an exploration, not of the world's origins, but rather of the origins of God, let us (in the author's words), "...rescue what is beautiful, touching and wise from all that no longer seems true."

Contemporary Jewish theologian Neil Gillman teaches that all human characterizations of God are necessarily metaphors borrowed from familiar human experience. And, therefore, precisely because God transcends all human imaginings, we can speak of God only through the use of metaphor and poetry.

Consider the fact that in the ancient world, to become aware of God meant grasping the “eerie proximity” of God’s terrifying presence, as if God were waiting just on the other side of a curtain. Therefore, in the world of the Bible, if one wanted to see God, then one had to undergo a sudden, radical shift in perspective.

And so it is, Professor James Kugel, professor of Jewish History and Bible at both Bar Ilan and Harvard Universities, continues; so it is, that when the Torah describes angels visiting our patriarchs and matriarchs, we, the omniscient reader, know these mysterious visitors are angels, but Abraham and Isaac and Jacob invariably mistake these divine messengers for regular people. When our Biblical forebears eventually come to understand who their visitors truly are, the Torah stops using the term “angel” to describe them, thereafter identifying these characters more definitively as God.

Today, our ancestors’ discovery of God in their personal experiences of otherwise regular folks can serve us as the lens through which we can capture the experience of God in our own day.

And it is for this reason that in turning my son Michael’s question about how did God create Himself? over and over again in my mind, I came to the conclusion that the correct way to ask the question is not, what brought about God? Nor is it, how did God come to be? For when we ask the question in this way, we suggest that God entered the world in the distant past, a long, long time ago; once and forever, but never again. Instead, I suggest to you, we ought be asking of ourselves—and asking of one another: *What brings about God? How does God come to be?*

For in our asking the question in this way, we move beyond asking how God created God as if this were a one-time event, the way a thing or a person or an object is created, and instead, we allow for the possibility that God’s creation is ongoing. This is important, I think, because if God possesses any one quality worthy of the divine name, it must be timelessness. God, after all, is without beginning, and without end. That is, God cannot be limited to a single moment, for God is beyond and outside of time as we know it. And, therefore, God’s entering the world cannot be fixed to a defined point along the timeline. Therefore, to begin to answer the question as to How God Created God, we must be willing to imagine that that act...that occurrence...the occasions when God enters the world, the moments God enters consciousness... that these are all part of an ongoing series of acts of genesis and creation, which may be performed again and again and again.

“Now that’s all fine, Rabbi,” I can hear you say along with my Michael, but: “How did God Create Himself?!?”

Do you remember the story of the young student who comes home one day and asks of the parents, “Where did I come from?” To which the child’s parents, who have long anticipated this question, sit their youngster down and begin to explain how a child comes to be. The parents bring out an age-appropriate book, and describe how when would-be parents desire a child, they engage in activity that brings new life into the world. And then, when they have finished their explanation, and are feeling rather self-satisfied, conclude by asking if they haven’t answered their child’s question.

To which they are told, “I guess. It’s just that Billy’s from Cleveland. And I wanted to know where I come from.”

Where, then, does God come from? And how do we explain God’s existence? And how do we make it so?

Let us turn back to this morning’s Torah portion. For just a few verses after we read how God created the heavens and the earth, we come upon verses that describe how each of us—and every human being who has ever lived—was created *B’tzelem Elohim*, how each of us has been created in the image of God. That is, within each of us there’s a divine spark, a reflection, a part of God, if you will.

What this means is that God is discovered when we look around and recognize the divine goodness within all people. When we are able to see that within us and between us, there is something special, something precious, something holy: the image of God. And our having been created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine Image, means there is a connection between human beings such that we can truly care about one another.

In a very real way, God is the part of us that inspires acts of compassion and courage, empathy and all the emotions that create the bonds between people. And in this way, the God-like part of us, which allows us to have feelings in and for one another, is what permits us to heal one another when we are hurt, to understand one another when we feel misunderstood and alone, and it is this divine part of each of us that allows us to desire, to know, to share and to create love.

Before there was a world, God wasn’t anywhere, because there was no place for God to be. And then once the world came into being, and once there were people, to reflect the image of God, then God, as it were, came into the fullness of existence.

Does this mean, you might well ask, that if there were no people, then God wouldn’t exist either? Let me answer that question with another. This time the question is from our other son, Michael’s older brother Adam. Some time ago, Adam asked me if, when we hold hands, God is in our hands. I considered his question and replied, yes and no. We don’t refer to hand-holding as God. And yet, if you hold someone’s hand in order to keep them safe, or to reassure them, or to help keep them warm, or just to let them know you care, then the answer is yes. When we act compassionately, we can indeed say, God is right there in our hands.

And yet, when we raise our hand to one another, or when we make a fist in order to hurt someone, or when we selfishly close our hands, or when we use our hands to push someone away or to intentionally frustrate them, then, no. In the absence of our acting humanely, it is as if God does not exist at all.

In this way, we see that God can be realized or removed by how we behave toward one another and by how we treat and care for the world around us.

Remember when you would make an ugly face, and your mom or dad would warn you that if you weren’t careful, your face would stay that way?

Well, how you and I behave and how we treat one another will also determine if our world will stay the way it looks today. And so it is that when we behave well, we can truly say we have a hand in creating the conditions for God.

Given the political climate we currently endure domestically, and given the terrible, self-justified violence we read about each morning in our papers and see splashed across our screens, I don't need to tell you how desperately our world needs people who are thoughtful and sensitive and kind.

The world is waiting for us to be the people we are capable of being...

The world is waiting for us to be the people we were created to be...

Because when we act in good and loving ways, we reflect the image of God in which we have been created. And in this way, we make real in the world those God-like qualities we all have within us.

So it is that we can say, it is through our actions; it is as a result of how we behave that God "Hissself" is created.

And so, in answer to the question: How Did God Create Hissself? On this wonderful Sunday that brings us together, on this, the first day of the rest of our lives, I say:

We do it...

We create...

We actualize...

It is you and I who bring God into the world.

Each time we extend our hand to another person in friendship, each time we pause long enough to hear another's plea, or are humble and patient enough to hear another in their silence...And, too, each time we are sensitive to another's needs, and when we are slow to anger and are quick to forgive; whenever we act in these holy ways, it is as if God is right here with us. Within our hands and within our hearts.

And so, to my dear Michael and my Adam, and to you, my dear friends, and to all who, within the sound of my voice, are children at heart: In answer to the question "How Does God Create Hissself?" we respond in the best way we know how: With a little help from God's friends!

Amen