

The Evolution of Society

Bereshit 5782/2021

American Sociologist, Charles Wright Mills wrote that “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”¹ It seems that the opening chapters of the book of Bereshit, seem to have us looking at the development of humanity and the evolution of society in the same way.

In the fourth chapter of Bereshit we learn about the offspring of Adam and Chava, with several verses dedicated to human achievements: the building of cities, the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, the creation of music and the development of tools². Each of these are connected to specific inventors amidst a great list of names, and genealogical information. The Ramban explains that the Torah put special emphasis on recording the achievements of humanity³, they were after all the very first examples of humanity emulating their divine characteristics of not only being *imago Dei*, created in the image of God, but also *imitatio Dei*, imitating God. In other words, at the dawn of humanity and of civilisation, this was our chance to emulate God’s divine creativity.

What is important to note though, is that the achievements that were noted, and surely there were many, are not ones that impact the individual, but rather those that have fundamental impacts to society as a whole. As HaEmek Davar notes, Cain being singled out as the founder of the first city, named not after himself, but after his child, represents a substantial mindset shift⁴. This was, after all, the first murderer, who had thought only of himself in his first major act that would impact humanity, and now, after time has passed, we see a change in mindset, whereby protective and communal instincts come to the forefront of Cain’s creative engagement within the world.

This mirrors the development of society from a historical and scientific understanding as well⁵. The agricultural revolution is best seen as a dual revolution, propelling the change of not only humanity’s engagement dwelling, sustenance and living, but also, and perhaps more importantly for the overall evolution of humanity and society, the change of mentality. Suddenly we were not just living to survive and surviving to live, but rather were able to rapidly think, change course, and evolve.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks takes this one step further⁶, by stating that the power of the Jewish people, was to take that first lesson in human creativity and societal responsibility and transform it into not being an anomaly within human development, but rather *raison d’etre* of our people. By extension, the very mission of the Jewish people was to take inspire the rest of humanity to the commitment to society, a growth mindset, and the promotion of humanity dignity, equality and equity. After all, what would it mean to be a light unto the nations, if we did not take those early lessons of humanity, hone and craft them, and return to their very genesis point – humanity itself.

¹ The Sociological Imagination, 1959, C Wright Mills, Oxford University Press.

² See Source One in the Modern Page of Talmud Bereshit 5782

³ See Source Two in the Modern Page of Talmud Bereshit 5782

⁴ See Source Three in the Modern Page of Talmud Bereshit 5782

⁵ See Source Four in the Modern Page of Talmud Bereshit 5782

⁶ See Source Five in the Modern Page of Talmud Bereshit 5782