In this week's parashah the world is created. First out of words, in Genesis 1, then out of physical acts – the shaping of a human form, the planting of a garden.

The world is from the very first created through biodiversification, the movement from homogeneity to multiplicity, as light is first separated from darkness and water from water, then land from water. Then light is further separated into stars and planets and moons, and waters and land each spawn yet more varieties of life. It is in fact a rough analogy with the scientific theory of evolution, except that there is a moral weighting: at each juncture, the affirmation is that this is very good.

Life is very good.

But then on the human end, things get wonky remarkably quickly, such that God has cause to question humanity twice in this very first parasha.

The first time is right after the humans have eaten from the one forbidden tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And so Hashem asks them "Ayeka?" translated as "Where are you?" the word "Ayeka" actually has the exact same letters as "Eicha" the Hebrew name of the Book of Lamentations, which could be translatable as "How can this be?!"

The commentators all take for granted that the question "Ayeka" cannot mean a literal "Where are you?" The Creator doesn't lose track of the creations just because they hide. One of the most interesting interpretations I have read on this, originating in Midrash Tanhuma, but citing by Rashi and many other commentators, is that "Ayeka" is an invitation to conversation, to confession.

But instead, Adam is defensive and blames Eve, Eve is defensive and blames the serpent, and Midrash Tanchuma suggests that it is that passing of the buck, rather than the actual act of eating the fruit, that invites the punishment. For how could they stay in the garden once they have alienated themselves from each other and from nature? The curse that Adam receives is telling: “Cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it All the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the ground— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”

The second loaded question that Hashem asks is less than a Chapter later, right after Cain has killed his brother, Abel. In Chapter 4, verse 9, Hashem asks, ‘Ei Hevel achicha?” Where is your brother, Abel? Again, the commentators say, this is not a question out of lack of knowledge, this is an invitation to confession, to dialogue. Instead, Cain answered flippantly, then defensively. And so Hashem curses him, “you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.”

Cain winds up founding the first city, and according to chapter 4, verses 20-24, Cain’s descendants respectively wind up being the creators animal domestication, music, metallurgy and gratuitous violence. As Rabbi Shai Held reflects, this chapter communicates a profound ambivalence about the progress of human civilization. He writes: “attributing these developments to people of such dubious origins as Cain and his descendants may be the Torah’s way of reminding us that technological advancement and moral progress are two very different things.

(After the horrors of the twentieth century, we shouldn't need any more reminders of that sad and sobering fact.) What better way to dismiss naïve faith in progress than to inform us that the man who invented cities also invented murder?. . . Progress in civilization and progress in cruelty are manifestly not mutually exclusive. People can adore Mozart even as they murder innocent children."

This is a timely reminder. This week we commemorate the anniversary of the murders as Tree of Life synagogue, an act accomplished by a weapon far more sophisticated that Cain could ever have imagined. This week, too, Google has announced the achievement of quantum supremacy, a milestone that exponentially enhances the power of computers to sort and make meaning out of data, and which google claims could "solve the world's greatest problems." Rabbi Held's reminder of the thin correlation between technological and moral progress is particularly necessary in a moment when we are tempted ever more to turn to advanced technologies to solve our problems.

I really appreciate Rabbi Held's insight here, but I think there is something even deeper going on in the text – an ambivalence not only about human progress, but about what it means to be human in this world.

This text, in its attempt to explain something about the human condition, tells us how our first generation was exiled from the garden in which we were blissfully naked. The text plainly says that God curses them, but the alienation occurs before God even asks “Ayeka?” when, as the beginning of Gen 3 describes, something in their consciousness shifts – they become literally self-conscious in a new way, and perceive their nakedness and are ashamed and want to hide, which seems like a pretty stark metaphor for the ways that humans have alienated ourselves from the rest of creation.

Rabbi Yael Levy, in her contemporary commentary, imagines Adam and Eve in dialogue with God, confessing:
“We were afraid because we were naked.
We were ashamed because we were vulnerable.
We were overwhelmed Because we saw the complexity of life
And the certainty of death,
So we hid.”
Hashem’s curse is, then, more descriptive than prescriptive; once Adam and Eve felt that shame, that desire to hide, they had exiled themselves from the garden.

And I suggest that we are still hiding. From the first technology of those fig leaves as meager covering, to the dubious hope of quantum computing, we seek to put barriers between our consciousness and the realities of our animal existence, the glorious precariousness of our lives, the limits of our control. And when we do that, we further alienate ourselves from our source.

But we read this every year. The reminder of creation, conveniently set out in a way that roughly mirrors the order of evolution. The reminder of our alienation, and the call that still comes to each of us, as it did to our mythical ancestors, Adam and Eve, as it did to Cain: Ayeka? Are we going to face the reality of our lives?

Rabbi Yael Levy continues her commentary by challenging us all:

. . .the Torah calls us to reach for a different response, To hear the call Ayekah, Where are you? And cultivate the capacity to respond: Hineni, Here I am. Hineni, Here I am, present in this very moment. Hineni, Here I am, open to whatever this moment asks of me. Here I am, willing to be in whatever is true. Hineni, Here I am."

For me, to get to that hear I am, is to go back to the very beginning, the assertion that the creations of the world in each of its days, including even, impossibly us, are good, are in fact, very good. That even with this mess and with the nakedness, the vulnerability – perhaps even more when we embrace the vulnerability and stop trying to be in ever more control – we can remember that this world is glorious, and that it is miraculous for us to be here.

Ken yehi ratzon.