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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

There is a deep question at the heart of Jewish faith, and it is very rarely asked. As the Torah opens we see G-d creating the universe day by day, bringing order out of chaos, life out of inanimate matter, flora and fauna in all their wondrous diversity. At each stage G-d sees what He has made and declares it good.

What then went wrong? How did evil enter the picture, setting in motion the drama of which the Torah -- in a sense, the whole of history -- is a record? The short answer is man, Homo sapiens, us. We, alone of the life forms thus far known to us, have freewill, choice and moral responsibility. Cats do not debate the ethics of killing mice. Vampire bats do not become vegetarians. Cows do not worry about global warming.

It is this complex capacity to speak, think and choose between alternative courses of action, that is at once our glory, our burden and our shame. When we do good we are little lower than the angels. When we do evil we fall lower than the beasts. Why then did G-d take the risk of creating the one form of life capable of destroying the very order He had made and declared good? Why did G-d create us?

That is the question posed by the Gemara in Sanhedrin: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create man, He created a group of ministering angels and asked them, 'Do you agree that we should make man in our image?'

"They replied, 'Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds?'

"G-d showed them the history of mankind.

"The angels replied, 'What is man that You are mindful of him?' [Let man not be created].

"G-d destroyed the angels.

"He created a second group, and asked them the same question, and they gave the same answer.

"G-d destroyed them.

"He created a third group of angels, and they replied, 'Sovereign of the Universe, the first and second group of angels told You not to create man, and it did not avail them. You did not listen. What then can we say but this: The universe is Yours. Do with it as You wish.'

"And G-d created man.

"But when it came to the generation of the Flood, and then to the generation of those who built the Tower of Babel, the angels said to G-d, 'Were not the first angels right? See how great is the corruption of mankind.'

"And G-d replied (Isaiah 46:4), 'Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient.'" [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38b]

Technically the Gemara is addressing a stylistic challenge in the text. For every other act of creation in Genesis 1, the Torah tells us, "G-d said, 'Let there be'... And there was..." In the case of the creation of humankind alone, there is a preface, a prelude. Then G-d said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness..." Who is the "us"? And why the preamble?

In their seemingly innocent and childlike -- actually subtle and profound -- way the sages answered both questions by saying that with (to quote Hamlet) an enterprise of this pith and moment, G-d consulted with the angels. They were the "us".

But now the question becomes very deep indeed. For, in creating humans, G-d brought into existence the one life form with the sole exception of Himself, capable of freedom and choice. That is what the phrase means when it says, "Let us make mankind in our image after our likeness." For the salient fact is that G-d has no image. To make an image of G-d is the archetypal act of idolatry.

This means not just the obvious fact that G-d is invisible. He cannot be seen. He cannot be identified with anything in nature: not the sun, the moon, thunder, lightning, the ocean or any of the other objects or forces people worshipped in those days. In this superficial sense, G-d has no image. That, wrote Sigmund Freud in his last book, Moses and Monotheism, was Judaism's greatest contribution. By worshipping an invisible G-d, Jews tilted the balance of civilisation from the physical to the spiritual.

But the idea that G-d has no image goes far deeper than this. It means that we cannot conceptualise G-d, understand Him or predict Him. G-d is not an abstract essence; He is a living presence.

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That is the meaning of G-d's own self-definition to Moses at the Burning Bush: "I will be what I will be" -- meaning, "I will be what I choose to be." I am the G-d of freedom, who endowed humankind with freedom, and I am about to lead the children of Israel from slavery to freedom.

When G-d made humanity in His image, it means that He gave humans the freedom to choose, so that you can never fully predict what they will do. They too -- within the limits of our finitude and mortality -- will be what they choose to be. Which means that when G-d gave humans the freedom to act well, he gave them the freedom to act badly. There is no way of avoiding this dilemma even for G-d Himself. And so it was. Adam and Eve sinned. The first human child, Cain, murdered the second, Abel, and within a short space of time the world was filled with violence.

In one of the most searing passages in the whole of Tanakh, we read at the end of this week's parsha: "G-d saw that man's wickedness on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thought was only for evil, all day long. G-d regretted that He had made man on earth, and He was pained to His very core." (Gen. 6:5-6)

Hence the angels' question, the ultimate question at the heart of faith. Why did G-d, knowing the risks and dangers, make a species that could and did rebel against Him, devastate the natural environment, hunt species to extinction, and oppress and kill his fellow man?

The Talmud, imagining a conversation between G-d and the angels, is suggesting a tension within the mind of G-d Himself. The answer G-d gives the angels is extraordinary: "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." Meaning: I, G-d, am prepared to wait. If it takes ten generations for a Noah to emerge, and another ten for an Abraham, I will be patient. However many times humans disappoint Me, I will not change. However much evil they do in the world I will not despair. I despaired once, and brought a Flood. But after I saw that humans are merely human, I will never bring a Flood again.

G-d created humanity because G-d has faith in humanity. Far more than we have faith in G-d, G-d has faith in us. We may fail many times, but each time we fail, G-d says: "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." I will never give up on humanity. I will never lose faith. I will wait for as long as it takes for humans to learn not to oppress, enslave or use violence against other humans. That, implies the Talmud, is the only conceivable explanation for why a good, wise, all-seeing and all-powerful G-d created such fallible, destructive creatures as us. G-d has patience. G-d has forgiveness. G-d has compassion. G-d has love.

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have been looking at religion upside down. The real phenomenon at its heart -- the mystery and miracle -- is not our faith in G-d. It is G-d's faith in us. *© 2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, on the day that the Lord G-d made the earth and the heavens." (Gen. 2:4) Imagine, for a moment, a world conducted according to strict Divine justice: punishment immediately meted out to a person committing a wrongdoing. What kind of world would this be?

On the one hand, we would never have the question of why bad things happen to good people, because an evil act would be stopped in its tracks; after all, any innocent person's su?ering would violate the principle of Divine justice. Thus, the Nazi soldier's hand would wither in the process of unsheathing his knife to harm a Jewish baby, and the individual's voice would be silenced before he was able to articulate a word of slander.

On the other hand, if evil could not exist because of the all-encompassing powers of Divine justice, how would a human being di?er from a laboratory rat, conditioned to move down a certain tunnel, jolts of electricity guiding its choices?

For the world to exist with human beings granted the choice to wield either a murderer's knife or a physician's scalpel, with human beings not as powerless puppets but rather as potential partners with the Divine, G-d must hold back from immediate punishment.

Compassion (rahamim) must be joined with justice (din) so that the Almighty will grant the possibility of the wicked to repent, the opportunity to those who have fallen to rise once again, and o?er the challenge to a fallible humanity to perfect an imperfect world.

Indeed, Rashi, the Biblical commentator par excellence, notes that the first verse of Genesis, in describing the world's creation, uses not the Divine Name "Y-H-V-H" (Hashem), associated with the Divine attribute of compassion, but rather the Divine Name Elohim, associated with the Divine attribute of justice, because initially The Holy One, Blessed be He,

intended to create a world of strict justice.

However, the Almighty realized, as it were, that the world could not endure in such a mode, and therefore gave precedence to Divine compassion, uniting it with Divine justice. This explains, says Rashi, why the verse (Gen. 2:4) that leads this essay utilizes the Divine Names Hashem Elohim, combining the Divine attributes of compassion and justice.

There is, however, a steep price we must pay for this Divine compassion and human freedom of choice: the suffering of innocents. If people have the free will to act, then some people will take actions that harm others. And even those who act appropriately will not necessarily see the blessings of their good deeds.

In fact, the Talmud declares, 'there is no reward for the fulfillment of commandments in this world' [Kiddushin 39b], leaving Divine reward and punishment for the afterlife. In e?ect, Divine compassion allowing for free will and ultimate repentance must enable individuals to do even what G-d, in a perfect world, would not allow them to do!

In accordance with this theology, a Hasidic teaching provides an alternative way of reading the first three words in the Torah, Bereshit bara Elohim, usually translated, "In the beginning, G-d created…" Since there is an etnachta ('stop' sign; semicolon) cantillation underneath the third word in the phrase, the words can also be taken to mean, 'Beginnings did G-d create.' This reading provides hope and optimistic faith even in a world devoid of reward.

Anyone who has experienced significant lifestyle changes—whether repentant Jews, recovering addicts, or marriages between widowed and/or divorced people— understands the significance of the challenge and opportunity of "another chance." Free will, the concept of making your own choices, implies that sometimes mistakes will be made and tragedies will occur.

But instead of Divine justice descending as a bolt of lightning, Divine compassion emerges to absorb the lethal voltage. Holding o? Divine justice is saying we always have another chance to better ourselves, to redeem the tragedy, to try again. And is this not what beginnings are all about?

True repentance means carving out a new beginning for oneself. Beginnings, therefore, go hand in hand with Divine compassion, and Divine faith in the human personality to recreate him/herself and to forge a new destiny. The sinner isn't shut out forever; he is always given another opportunity through repentance, another possibility of re-creating for himself and his immediate environment, a new beginning.

Thus, in the Torah's opening word, Bereshit ("beginning"), we find not only the theme of the Torah, but of the entirety of existence: G-d created an imperfect and sometimes unjust world to allow the possibility of change and growth. If change weren't possible, if human behavior were as fixed as that of all other mammals, then there would be no need for, and no uniqueness within, human beings. The Glory of G-d and humanity is to be found in the opening phrase of the Bible: "G-d created beginnings"—new opportunities and manifold re-awakenings.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

One of the wisest and most astute comments of the rabbis of the Talmud regarding life is that " all new beginnings are difficult." That certainly is true regarding the beginning of human civilization as described for us in this week's Torah reading. Everything that seemingly could go wrong did go wrong.

Death, murder, fratricide, autocracy and oppression all make their due appearance in the biblical narrative of this week. All in all, the narrative gives us a very depressing view of human life and subliminally raises the question of why did and does G-d bother, so to speak, with the whole project.

Nevertheless, the Torah emphasizes the resilience of human beings that has marked the trajectory of civilization from the beginning of time until today. Kayin, in spite of his great crime, ends up building cities and fathering generations. And in the midst of all of the evil and wicked people, there do appear righteous personalities who point to a better future and to a more noble society.

The Torah emphasizes a lesson here that it will repeat many times in its descriptions of human events. The lesson is that it is not the numerical superiority of evil people that determines the course of human events but rather it is that the dearth of good people who are willing to proclaim goodness as a way of life that determines the eventual fate of society. That was true in the generations of early human kind, in the generation of Sodom and in the events of the past century as well. Our task is to be that good person – the Abraham figure – who stands in opposition to the evils that always abide in human society.

A person should never say to oneself: 'Of what value am I and what's the difference what I do or say?' The rabbis have taught us that the reason that human kind stems from one ancestor is to teach the value of one person…and that one person can tip the scales of heavenly justice and human life. The rabbis have also taught us that one should always say to one's self that the world was created for me alone.

Now, naturally, overdoing this idea leads to hubris and arrogance and sin itself. But in proper measure, it is the necessary ingredient to making life meaningful and to propel us on the path of accomplishment and worthiness. The realization by an individual of one's own importance in the heavenly

scheme of life and generations is the key to one's sense of self-worth. Without that sense, one can almost never achieve either spiritual or temporal success.

It is this feeling of self-worth and the importance of an individual that creates the resilience that so characterizes human behavior and the history of human civilization. I think that this is one of the most important messages that this week's Torah reading can communicate to us. Especially in these turbulent times when nothing is clear to us any longer, we need to strengthen ourselves in our beliefs and our service to G-d and man.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

While some maintain that the human being is only physical form, the Torah, in one of its most important sentences, insists that every person is also created in the image of G-d "tzelem Elokim" (Genesis 1:26,27). On the surface, we see each others' outward appearance, but if we look deeply, we ought to be able to perceive a little bit of G-d in our fellow human being. In fact, it is the tzelem Elokim which makes the human being unique. In the words of Pirke Avot, "beloved is the human being who is created in the image of G-d."(Avot 3: 18)

Several fundamental ideas emerge from the tzelem Elokim principle. Bearing in mind that each and every human being is created with tzelem Elokim, it follows that all people-regardless of race, religion, nationality, age, mental faculties, handicap etc-are of equal value.

Human beings can relate to G-d "vertically" and "horizontally." In the sense that we have the capacity to reach upwards to the all powerful G-d through prayer and ritual, we relate vertically. Additionally, when we relate to our fellow person, we connect to that part of G-d in them. If one hurts another human being, G-d is hurt. Similarly, if one brings joy to another, G-d is more joyous. Hence, a horizontal relationship exists as well.

Even if a person holds him/herself in low esteem, he/she ought to have self-confidence. After all, G-d is in each of us. G-d, as the ultimate creator, has given us the capacity to be endlessly creative-lending an important ingredient to our self esteem.

As G-d is omnipresent, so too do people, created in the image of G-d, have the inner desire to reach beyond themselves and be present as much as possible. We accomplish this by developing lasting relationships with one another. In that sense, one's presence is expanded. Similarly, as G-d is eternal, we, created in the image of G-d have the instinctual need to transcend ourselves. This need is met by raising children. Unlike animals, human beings are uniquely aware of historic continuity.

The image of G-d points to life after death. As G-d lives forever, so too does the part of G-d in us, our soul, live beyond our physical limited years on this earth.

Of course it must be remembered that tzelem Elokim does not mean that every human being is automatically good. Note that the words ki tov (it was good), found after every stage of creation, are not recorded after the human being is formed. This is because the image of G-d is about potential. If properly nurtured, it takes us to sublime heights. If abused, it can sink us to the lowest depths. Whether we are tov depends on the way we live our lives; it is not endowed at birth.

And, the mystics add, that when we live our lives properly, the image of G-d in each of us merges with the omnipresent G-d to become One-Ehad. The tzelem Elokim is an eternal spark that is within each person, and whether it is lit is up to us.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Is this life all there is -- or is there something beyond our earthly existence? Does it make a difference what you do in this lifetime -- or can one do whatever he desires and just obey the "11th Commandment" (Thou shall not get caught!)?

The Torah teaches that we are more than just a body. "And the Almighty formed man from dust of the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the SOUL of life' (Genesis 2:7). On this verse, the Zohar states that 'one who blows, blows from within himself,' indicating that the soul is actually part of G-d's essence. G-d is eternal, the soul is eternal. King Solomon wrote, 'The dust will return to the ground as it was, and the spirit will return to G-d who gave it' (Ecclesiastes 12:17).

Intuitively we know this. Every species acts solely for its survival -- except mankind. We will sacrifice ourselves to save someone else or for an ideal. Cows may be content to chew their cud and be contented. We are driven to have meaning and purpose in our lives.

Moshe Maimonides, the Rambam, set forth "13 Essential Beliefs of Judaism". The Tenth and Eleventh Principles state that G-d is aware of our actions and that He rewards and punishes us according to our actions. Since we do not see evil always being punished or goodness always being rewarded, it is logical -- that if there is a good and just G-d -- that there is a World of Souls, an afterlife which is the great equalizer. There, evil which has not been punished in

this world is punished and good deeds which have not been rewarded are rewarded.

How is the soul judged? For every commandment one fulfilled and every transgression that one refrained, there is a spiritual reward of feeling a closeness to the Almighty. For the transgressions, one's soul is sentenced to Gehenom; one can picture Gehenom as a "spiritual laundry" for the soul. For up to 12 months the soul goes through a purification process. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler likened the experience to having a movie of one's "greatest" transgressions -- and then having all of a person's loved ones... parents, grandparents, spouse, children... watching it with you. Imagine the humiliation. Humiliation can be a worse punishment than devils with pitchforks!

There are allusions to an afterlife in the Torah, though it is not explicitly stated or described (the Talmud, Sanhedrin, Chapter 10 called Chelek, does discuss the afterlife). When the patriarch Jacob died, the Torah relates, "... he died and was gathered to his people" (Genesis 49:33). The Torah then informs us of the 40 day embalming period and the 70 days Egypt mourned Jacob before Joseph received permission to bury his father in the Ma'arat HaMachpela, the burial cave in Hebron. What does the Torah then mean that "he was gathered to his people"? It is a reference that his soul was gathered to the afterlife.

Later in the book of Numbers we have the story of Bilaam, the evil non-Jewish prophet, who hires himself out to the King Balak to curse the Jews. Instead of cursing the Jews, his prophecy blesses the Jews. He proclaims, "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my end be like his (the righteous Jews)" (Numbers 23:10). Do the righteous die any better than the wicked? Bilaam was saying, "Let me live my life on my terms and according to my desires, but when it comes to the afterlife, let my soul be rewarded as the righteous are rewarded.

I think that these two allusions are valid, but not emotionally compelling. If the afterlife is such an essential part of Jewish belief, why does the Torah only reference it obliquely? The Torah could have described the next world in detail, yet it refrained from painting a picture. Why?

There are two reasons: 1) The Torah is a guidebook for THIS life. It sets forth instructions on how to live a meaningful, holy life and how to improve yourself and the world. The Almighty wants us to focus on our obligations in this life; the afterlife will take care of itself. 2) Even if the Torah described in detail an afterlife -- how would one verify its existence? No one has ever returned from the next world to confirm or deny that vision.

Other religions paint a picture of the afterlife one will receive. The Talmud teaches, "He who wishes to lie says his witnesses are far away." For example, "I paid back the money I owed you, but my witnesses happen to be visiting Europe" -- or "Have faith in our religion and you will get Heaven." There is no way of validating the claim.

While Judaism believes in an Afterlife, a World to Come, the Torah makes no promises that are "far away." The Torah tells you about rewards and punishments in THIS world -- in response to your actions. You need go no further than this verse from the Torah: "If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them; then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit. Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your bread to satiety and you will dwell securely in your land. I will provide peace in the land, and you will lie down with none to frighten you... I will make you fruitful and increase you..." (Lev. 26:3-9).

Why is reward and punishment so important for us? As Rabbi Yakov Weinberg teaches: "A world without reward and punishment is a world of utter indifference, and indifference is the ultimate rejection. One cannot serve indifference. In order for there to be a relationship between G-d and man, G-d must react to man's actions. Our awareness of this reaction, reward or punishment, informs us that the Almighty cares, that our actions make a difference. Without reward and punishment life has no meaning -- for what man would or would not do would make no difference." (Rabbi Yakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith).

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And it was evening and it was morning, one day" (B'raishis 1:5). "And it was evening and it was morning, day two" (1:8). "And it was evening and it was morning, day three" (1:13). "And it was evening and it was morning, day four" (1:19). "And it was evening and it was morning, day five" (1:23). "And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day" (1:31). Although (aside from which day it was) these words seem identical, there are some slight differences. One (pardon the pun) difference is that instead of the first day being referred to as "day one" ("yom rishon"), it is called "one day" ("yom echad"), as in "day of the One," since G-d was the only Being (or being) that existed at that time (see Rashi; the angels are said to have been created on day two). Alternatively, until there was a second day, it was the only day, and not one in a series of days (see Ramban). Another difference is that day six is called "the sixth day" rather than just "day six," with the most famous explanation being a reference to "the sixth day of Sivan" (in 2448), when the Torah was given, since the Torah is the purpose of creation (see Rashi). Another difference is that for three of the days (3, 4 and 5), these words constitute the

entire verse, while for the other three (1, 2 and 6), they appear at the end of a verse, but are not a verse in and of themselves. Why do the closing words of some days get their own verse, while the others do not?

It can be suggested that only when what was created on a specific day was complete does the verse that completes the narrative of that day's creation stand as its own verse, while if what was created was incomplete, and had to be completed on a different day, it was added to an already existing verse, as if to say "this day has ended, even if the task has not yet completed." Let's examine each of the three "incomplete" days to see what was missing, and what was needed at a later time to complete the job.

On the first day, light was created, and separated/distinguished from darkness, with light attributed to daytime and darkness to nighttime. This part of creation was not finished, though, as more was added on the fourth day, when the celestial lights were created. They provided light (1:15, 1:17), distinguished day from night (1:14) and light from darkness (1:14), with one "ruling" by day and the other "ruling" by night (1:16, 1:18). It can therefore be said that the fourth day of creation completed what was started on the first, thereby explaining (according to the theory presented above) why the "evening/morning" ending the first day was not given its own verse.

On the second day, the "firmament" that divided the upper waters from the lower waters was created. On this day, not only is the "evening/morning" ending not its own verse, but it is the only day of creation that is not described as "good." Instead, the third day is described as "good" twice (1:10 and 1:12), because what was created on the second day was completed on the third (see Rashi on 1:7; see also Malbim on 1:8), when the lower waters that were separated from the upper waters regrouped to allow for the appearance of dry land. Since the third day of creation completed what was created on the second day, the "evening/morning" ending of the second day was also not given its own verse.

What about the sixth day? Wasn't everything completed by the end of the sixth day, when the six days of creation were over? Was the anticipation for "the sixth day," when the Torah was given almost two and a half thousand years away, enough to make what was created the first six days not really complete, or is there more to the story?

Although there were only six days of creation, after which creation was "complete" (2:1), we are told that the completion of creation didn't occur until the seventh day (2:2), making it seem as if something was created on the seventh day. Chizkuni, based on B'chor Shor, explains that it could only be known that creation was finished after six days, with nothing more to be created, when nothing else was created on the seventh day. However, if the expression "and G-d finished His work on the seventh day" (2:2) refers to His cessation from doing any more work (which thereby allows us to know it was really finished after six days), the next words, "and G-d rested on the seventh day from all the work that He did," seem superfluous. Weren't we just told that He didn't do any more creating, which is how we know that creation was complete after six days? [We are told again in 2:3 that G-d rested on the seventh day, so saying so in 2:2 can't be how we know that G-d didn't create anything new on the seventh day.] Additionally, if there no additional work was done after six days, it wasn't only on the seventh day that He rested, but the eighth day, the ninth day, and every day after that as well. Why is it only the seventh day that is considered the day G-d rested?

Rashi (on 1:1) quotes the Midrash that says the world was created because of the Torah and because of [the Nation of] Israel, both of which are referred to as "firsts." These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, and are dependant on each other (besides "the Torah, the Holy One -- blessed is He -- and Israel being one"), as the world's purpose can only be fulfilled when G-d's chosen nation fulfills the Torah. In other words, creation will not really be complete until we complete it by fulfilling G-d's word. "On that day, G-d will be One and His Name will be One" (Z'charya 14:9). We were given the responsibility of completing G-d's work. Until then, though, in the larger context, the world is incomplete.

G-d created the world so that we can finish the job, and become His partner in creation. After the six days of creation, the world was perfect in its imperfection, giving us all the tools we need to complete the job, while leaving just enough still to be done for us to be able to do it. G-d could have finished the job Himself, but then what would have been the point? He purposely left it incomplete, completing His part of the process in six days, and refrained from finishing it on the seventh so that we can do the rest.

It became apparent on the seventh day, when G-d didn't do any more creating, that He had "completed His work." But it was only because He rested on the seventh day despite the job not being finished (much as we cease from doing work on Shabbos even when we have more work to do) that we know He left it for us to complete. That He didn't complete it on the eighth day, or ninth day, or any day after that, doesn't mean that He "rested" on any of those days; it is only on the day after He finished His work, when He would have done more if He was going to, that His not doing any more work is considered "resting."

"And G-d saw all that He had done, and behold it was very good" (1:31), perfect in its imperfection, ready for us to complete the job. But because it wasn't really finished, the "evening/morning" ending is only part of a verse, not a verse in and of itself. Creation was not complete after six days; the part G-d didn't

complete was left for us to do.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

R' Avraham Ragoler z"l (1722-1804; brother of the Vilna Gaon z"l) writes: The Gemara (Makkot 23b) teaches that the Jewish People were commanded to keep 613 Mitzvot. This number is mentioned also in other places in the Gemara and Midrashim. [Yet, the Gemara does not identify the 613 Mitzvot, and there seem to be many more than that number of commandments and prohibitions. Which are the "real" 613?] The Rishonim / early medieval authorities--including Rambam, Ramban and the Sefer Mitzvot Ha'gadol--struggled to catalog them. Acharonim / later authorities also participated in this endeavor. Each source disproves part of the other one's list with very strong questions. Even the Rambam's list, which has been widely accepted, is not without difficulties.

R' Avraham continues: The explanation which I heard from my brother, the Gaon, is that there certainly are not only 613 Mitzvot, and no more. If that were so, the Book of Bereishit and the first two Parashot of the Book of Shmot would have only three Mitzvot between them, which is hard to accept. [Of the Rambam's list of 613 Mitzvot, only three--to procreate, to circumcise boys, and not to eat the Gid Ha'nasheh--are found in the Book of Bereishit.] Rather, every word of the Torah is a separate Mitzvah. Indeed, there are an infinite number of Mitzvot, such that a thinking person can find guidance in the Torah about every single detail of his life, no matter how big or how small. The "613" are merely the major categories--the roots, which subdivide into branches. True, we don't know for sure what those major categories are, but we don't need to know, because the Mitzvot are all intertwined with each other [see below]. (Ma'alot Ha'Torah)

We say in the prayer before putting on Tefilin: "May it be Your Will, Hashem... that the commandment of putting on Tefilin be considered worthy before the Holy One, Blessed is He, as if I had fulfilled it in all its details, implications, and intentions, as well as the 613 commandments that are dependent upon it." What is the meaning of the phrase, "the 613 commandments that are dependent upon it"?

R' Gedalia Schor z"l (1910-1979; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah Vo'daas in Brooklyn, N.Y.) explains: Every Mitzvah has at its root some element that applies to all other Mitzvot. For example, our Sages derive from the verse (Shmot 12:17), "You shall safeguard the Matzot," that one should not delay when given the opportunity to perform any Mitzvah. How so? The words "Matzot" and "Mitzvot" have the same spelling. By substituting the word "Mitzvot" into the verse, "You shall safeguard the Matzot/Mitzvot," we learn that, just as one should not delay when baking a Matzah, lest it become Chametz, so one should not delay the performance of a Mitzvah. Another example: Rambam implies that the special Mitzvah to rejoice on Sukkot is not only a Mitzvah for that holiday; it is a prototype for the joy that should accompany all Mitzvot. So, too, the essence of every Mitzvah has implications for how we perform every other Mitzvah. (Ohr Gedaliahu: Vaykira-Bemidbar-Devarim p.218)

"Hashem said to Kayin, 'Why are you annoyed, and why has your face fallen? Surely, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is toward you, yet you can conquer it'." (4:6-7)

R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon) writes that this verse teaches how the Yetzer Ha'ra operates: As long as a person is busy serving Hashem, the Yetzer Ha'ra bides its time. But, "Sin crouches at the door"--the moment a person opens the "door," i.e., as soon as he gives the Yetzer Ha'ra a small opening, it pounces like a lion. It is to remind us of the dangers of opening that "door" that the Torah commands us to put a Mezuzah on our doorways. (Aderet Eliyahu)

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (1847-1919; the Alter of Novardok) adds: The Yetzer Ha'ra doesn't attack a person head-on at first. Rather, Kayin's experience illustrates how the Yetzer Ha'ra first approaches a person with "kosher" arguments--even suggestions that sound like Mitzvot--and, once the person is in the Yetzer Ha'ra's grip, it drags him down until he can even commit murder (or other terrible sins). The Yetzer Ha'ra first seduced Kayin with Kinat Soferim, which loosely means, "jealousy among scholars." This is "kosher" jealousy, for our Sages say that Kinat Soferim increases wisdom. The Yetzer Ha'ra said to Kayin: "Why was Hevel's sacrifice accepted and not yours?" This caused Kayin to become upset and caused his "face to fall," as our verse relates. In fact, though, the Yetzer Ha'ra had fooled Kayin. Kayin's jealousy was not Kinat Soferim. It was ordinary envy, and it led Kayin to murder Hevel.

How was Kayin to know the difference between "kosher" jealousy and its non-kosher counterpart? Hashem Himself answers this question in our verse. Kinat Soferim is uplifting. It causes one to joyfully chase higher levels of spiritual accomplishment. If you are downcast and depressed, Hashem told Kayin, it is a sure sign that you are jealous of Hevel's spiritual success, rather than being focused on your potential growth. One who experiences Kinat Soferim asks himself, "How can I be like that Torah scholar or Tzaddik?" He never wishes that the other scholar or Tzaddik would be deprived of his accomplishments.

The Alter continues: Man has the bechirah / free will to analyze his feelings and discover whether he is experiencing Kinat Soferim or just jealousy. Nevertheless, because Kayin was deceived by the Yetzer Ha'ra, Hashem judged him mercifully as an

unintentional killer and sentenced him to exile ("You shall become a vagrant and a wanderer on earth") rather than to death. (Madregat Ha'adam: Tikkun Ha'middot ch.2)

"So said the Kel, Hashem, Who creates the heavens and stretches them forth, spreads out the earth and what grows from it, gives a soul [i.e., life] to the people upon it, and a spirit to those who walk on it." (Yeshayah 42:5 -- in this week's haftarah)

R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1783-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) writes: Why did Hashem create the heavens before the earth? He did this in man's honor, so that mankind would not be embarrassed by the decline in the quality of its leadership from one generation to the next. By creating the heavens before the earth, Hashem demonstrated that it is the nature of Creation for lesser things to follow greater things.

This, continues R' Kluger is alluded to in our verse: When someone does a favor for someone else, the beneficiary may say, "You have given me life itself." Thus, says our verse: "He creates the heavens and stretches them forth, then He spreads out the earth and what grows from it." Why does He do it this way? Because, in this way, "He gives life, i.e., a good feeling to the people upon it, and a spirit to those who walk on it," i.e., He revives the spirit of those who are depressed by the decline in the quality of leadership they see. (Shema Shlomo: Bereishit p.598)

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Spreading the Fate

What began as a good-will gesture turned terribly sour. Worse, it spurred the first murder in history. It could have been avoided if only...

The Torah tells us of Cain's innovation. He had all the fruit of the world before him and decided to offer his thanks to the Creator, albeit from his cheapest produce -- flax. Cain's brother Hevel (Abel) imitated his brother, by offering a sacrifice, too, but he did it in much grander form. He offered the finest, fattest of his herd. Hevel's offer was accepted and Cain's was not. And Cain was reasonably upset.

Hashem appears to Cain and asks him, "Why is your face downtrodden and why are you upset?" Hashem then explains that the choice of good and bad is up to every individual, and that person can make good for himself or find himself on the threshold of sin. Simple as all that. (Genesis 4:6-7)

Many commentaries are bothered by what seems to be another in a litany of questions that G-d knows the answers to. Obviously, Cain was upset for the apparent rejection of his offering. Why does Hashem seem to rub it in?

The story is told of a construction worker who opened his lunch pail, unwrapped his sandwich and made a sour face. "Peanut Butter!" he would mutter, "I hate peanut butter!" This went on for about two weeks: every day he would take out his sandwich and with the same intensity mutter under his breath. "I hate peanut butter sandwiches!"

Finally, one of his co-workers got sick and tired of his constant complaining. "Listen here," said the man. "If you hate peanut butter that much why don't you just tell your wife not to make you any more peanut butter sandwiches? It's as simple as that."

The hapless worker sighed. "It's not that simple. You see, my wife does not pack the sandwiches for me. I make them myself."

When Hashem asks Cain, "why are you dejected?" it is not a question directed only at Cain. Hashem knew what caused the dejection. He was not waiting to hear a review of the events that transpired. Instead Hashem was asking a question for the ages. He asked a question to all of us who experience the ramifications of our own moral misdoing. Hashem asked a haunting question to all whose own hands bring about their own misfortunes. Then they mutter and mope as if the world has caused their misfortunes. "Why are you upset, towards whom are you upset?" asks G-d. "Is it not the case that if you would better yourself you could withstand the moral failings and their ramifications? Is it not true that if we don't act properly, eventually, we will be thrust at the door of sin?"

Success and failure of all things spiritual is dependent on our own efforts and actions. Of course Hashem knew what prompted Cain's dejection. But there was no reason for Cain to be upset. There was no one but himself at whom to be upset. All Cain had to do was correct his misdoing. Dejection does not accomplish that. Correction does.

A person in this world has the ability to teach and inspire both himself as well as others. He can spread the faith that he holds dear. But his action can also spread more than faith. A person is the master of his own moral fate as well. And that type of fate, like a peanut butter sandwich, he can spread as well!