

CHAPTER 1: MISHNA 2: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Shimon HaTzadik was of the remnants (last members) of the Great Assembly. He used to say: On three things the world stands. On Torah, on Service of G-d, and on deeds of kindness.

What is the significance of Shimon HaTzadik being one of the last members of the Great Assembly? This is another indication that ethical reproofs are tailored to each generation, and prior to the Great Assembly these reproofs were not necessary. The generation of Shimon HaTzadik, the last survivor of the Great Assembly, was the first generation to have only select individuals able to transmit the Torah. His teachings were motivated by the anticipated limitations of the forthcoming generations, which would have a particular need for them.

After the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah taught about rectifying deficiencies in state of the Torah in the world, Shimon HaTzadik comes to teach about the foundations of that world and how to ensure its continued existence.

But why are these three elements singled out as being the foundations of the world? While these are wonderful things, aren't there other things that also support the world?

(This kind of question is important to ask when studying the words of our Rabbis. We are likely to superficially read this Mishna, and be satisfied to think that the Rabbis are just telling us how REALLY wonderful are Torah, service of G-d, and deeds of kindness. But that isn't what they have told us. They have taught that these are the PILLARS upon which the world STANDS and is sustained. That requires a deeper understanding than simply saying that these are wonderful things.)

In the days of creation, the phrase "vayar Elokim ki tov" is repeated many times. After each species or group that He created, G-d saw "that it was good." This indicates that everything that was created owes its sustained existence to the "good" that is part of its essence.

G-d's creations exist in this world for the good that they contain. Something that lacks any good cannot have an enduring existence. The Torah concludes each step of creation with the words "Vayar Elokim ki tov," and G-d saw that it was good, as well as concluding the entire creation "Vayar Elokim et kol asher asah, v'hinei tov meod," and G-d saw all that he made, and it was very good. This is because the good contained in every creation was a fundamental element in its creation process,

and without this essence it has no enduring existence, doomed to extinction.

(The word "tov" which is translated as "good" forces us to confront the definition of "good." What is it? The root of the Hebrew word "tov" is tet-bet, which means to prepare something to receive. The classic example is "hatavat haneiros," preparing the wicks of the candles/lamps in the Temple to be lit by the Kohen. When G-d saw that what He created was prepared and suitable to fulfill the purpose for which it was created, He said about it "ki tov," that it was "good." If something isn't able to fulfill some purpose of creation, it is "rah" whose root word means unstable, with no sense of future and continuity. It has no basis for existence, and is doomed to extinction.)

Individual creatures may not fulfill their potential and as individuals may be deficient and lack endurance. But every *group* that G-d created was good, in line with G-d's ultimate purpose of creation, and as such every *category* of creation had endurance. On the other hand, when something doesn't fulfill its intended purpose, it is considered "rah," bad, and that is the source of its deficiency and ultimate disappearance.

G-d created and sustains every element of the world in order for it to fulfill its purpose. And that purpose is built on providing an environment for MAN to fulfill his purpose. Every creation is dependent on man, in whose service it was created. If man doesn't function as intended, the entire creation loses its purpose and becomes nullified. We are taught this from the flood, where it is written "And G-d said 'I will eradicate man ... from the face of the earth, from man to the animals to the crawling creatures to the birds of the sky.'" (Breishit 6:7) How does the decision to destroy MAN entail destroying animals, birds, etc.? This question is answered in the Midrash which illustrates the destruction of the animals due to man's failure. A king prepared a lavish wedding and fancy house for his son, only to have the son rebel against his father. After the king executed his son, he destroyed all that had been prepared for the wedding, bemoaning "My son (for whom all of this was made) is gone and this should remain?" (Breishit Rabbah 28:6; Sanhedrin 108a) Similarly, because of man's failure, G-d destroyed everything that had been created for him. Only when man is good, fulfilling his purpose, does he have endurance, which then gives endurance to the entire world that was created solely for man and depends upon him.

It should be noted the Torah does not state explicitly that man's creation was tov. It is only alluded to in the summarizing verse "v'hinei tov meod", where the Midrash teaches us that the letters of the word meod, mem, aleph, dalet, rearrange to spell Adam, man. Animals and other creations, fulfill their purpose by their very existence. Therefore G-d could write about their creation that it was "tov." Man, on the other hand, is created in an incomplete and deficient state, as an undisciplined creature. He must WORK at perfecting himself, at fulfilling his potential and purpose, until he develops to the level of tov.

In order to attain this tov, fulfilling his purpose and potential, he must perfect three different facets of his existence.

He must fulfill his potential in relation to himself, as a uniquely human creation. He must fulfill his potential in relation to his Creator, implementing the will of G-d who brought him into existence. And he must fulfill his potential in relation to his fellow man, fulfilling his responsibilities to the people with whom G-d surrounded him.

(You should see the connection between this idea and things we discussed in the Introduction. We will continue this thread next class, and tie together a number of things that come in trios in Judaism: The three forefathers, their three basic characteristics, the three foundations upon which the world stands, the three cardinal sins for which one must give up one's life rather than be in violation.)

The class is taught by [Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky](#), Dean of [Darche Noam Institutions](#), Yeshivat Darche Noam/Shapell's and Midreshet Rachel for Women.
