

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 13(B): EXPLAINING AWAY G-D

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Rabban Yochanan] said to them [his students]: Go out and see what is a good way to which a person should cleave. R. Eliezer said: A good eye. R. Yehoshua said: A good friend. R. Yossi said: A good neighbor. R. Shimon said: One who considers consequences. R. Elazar said: A good heart. He said to them, I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words.

Last week we discussed R. Eliezer's response to his teacher's query -- the value of having a good eye. As we explained, a good eye -- i.e., looking favorably on others -- does not develop in a vacuum. Only one who has a healthy attitude about himself will look likewise upon others. He will not begrudge them their talents or achievements. He will recognize that all of us are G-d's creations, precious in His eyes, and that each of us has his or her own unique contribution to make to mankind.

We now turn to the final opinion, R. Elazar's good heart. The Sages consider the heart to be the source of man's emotions and desires. It is not only the seat of man's baser passions. It is also the source of all man's higher emotions and aspirations -- love, compassion, kindness, inspiration. Acquiring a good heart means developing one's sensitivities and cultivating an appreciation for goodness and positive qualities. The good-hearted individual will naturally strive to perform G-d's will -- recognizing that the commandments of a G-d of infinite goodness are likewise the ultimate expression of goodness.

R. Elazar, whom his teacher considered the most incisive of his students (Mishna 12), recognized that all the excellent suggestions of his colleagues were included in -- in fact stemmed from -- a good heart. A person with a good heart does not behave properly because of external influences (friends, neighbors) or because of a lack of negative tendencies (good eye vs. jealousy, seeing consequences vs. shortsightedness), but because he has nurtured in himself a true appreciation for good values. His good traits are his own and come from within; they are not imposed by the watchful eyes of inquisitive neighbors. He therefore does not suffer the inner struggle and turmoil most of us endure. His physical and spiritual sides will not drag him in different directions. He will become a "whole" person; his entire psyche will merge into a unified whole. All the other means listed here are only external goads towards good behavior. None of them could ever equal or take the place of a good heart.

We read daily in the Shema: "And you shall see them [the tzitzis (the strings attached to the corners of four-cornered garments)] and you shall remember all of G-d's commandments and perform

them, and you shall not stray after your hearts nor after your eyes..." (Numbers 15:39). The Talmud (Brachos 12b) elaborates: What does it mean to "stray after your hearts?" This refers to heresy (denying any of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism).

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman was one of the great Lithuanian rabbis of the earlier part of the 20th century until he was killed by the Nazis in sanctification of G-d's Name. In a short article he authored on the subject of faith (published today together with his work *Ikvisa d'Meshicha*), he raised the following question: How can the Talmud consider heresy to be a sin of the heart? Isn't denying the fundamentals of our faith -- say someone claims to be an atheist -- an **intellectual** rebellion? How do the Sages see the heart as the cause of such philosophical skepticism?

His answer reveals the truly remarkable grasp of the human psyche our Sages had. Basically, we believe what we want to believe. Our thought processes are profoundly influenced by our desires. If we want to reach a certain conclusion -- say that there isn't a G-d so I can act however I please -- the logic and arguments will quickly fall into place. Say we are given a choice: Believe X or Y. X is infinitely more plausible and likely to be the case. Y, on the other hand, is much more attractive -- is what we'd **like to** believe. Y will invariably win out. If someone does not want to believe his eating habits are contributing to his heart condition, that smoking is harmful to him, or that his sports hero is a murderer, all the medical studies and DNA evidence in the world will not shake him. He wants to reach a certain conclusion (or not really consider the question in the first place). Everything else is what we'd call, "Don't confuse me with the facts."

Let's take a few more examples. Holocaust denial. There are intelligent people who truly believe and have staked their careers and reputations on the belief that the Holocaust never occurred, that it is the invention of a world Jewish conspiracy. (It's only convenient for such people to make reference to the Nazis and genocide as a way of describing Israel's treatment of the Palestinians -- gimme a break!) Rationally speaking, nothing short of an unhinged mind could deny a historical event so thoroughly witnessed and documented, survivors still being among us to tell their tales. It is tantamount to denying that the world is round, that man has landed on the moon, that J. F. Kennedy was assassinated, or that Abraham Lincoln existed. So how can (allegedly) intelligent people make such claims, authoring books and hosting conferences based on them?

The answer is that admitting to such a catastrophe would imply the world owes something to the Jews, that we have been an oppressed nation, and that the nations of the world have a debt to pay up. (And perhaps even that G-d has some special plan for us -- having put us through so much yet still preserving us to rebuild again.)

Such people would much rather believe that the Jews are the ones causing problems -- manipulating the minds of mankind with their fabricated tales. The Jews owe **them** for that which they've forced upon mankind (such as morality and monotheism) rather than their owing us. And so, the Holocaust-deniers live on -- even while survivors are still among the living. And they will create

their theses and hypotheses, no matter how ludicrous, and will just have to force the facts to comply.

The same is true in the area of religion. At the most basic level, theology confronts us with the following decision. Believe in an omnipotent and omniscient G-d who created us, commanded us to live moral lives, reviews our actions, and will judge us for our deeds. Or believe that the world is an accident of fate. There is no purpose to existence; man is just another creature that happened to have evolved from the amoeba. There are no souls; our consciences are as accidental as the Big Bang. There is no existence beyond the grave. And so we might as well enjoy ourselves however we damn please during our fleeting and meaningless existences here.

Well, once upon a time there wasn't really a choice. No rational or realistic explanation could be found for a world of such beauty, design and ecological harmony -- from the atomic to the intergalactic level -- a fact we recognize today more than any past generation. More fundamentally, how can a finite world exist without an infinite Creator? And besides, our great-great-grandparents all witnessed G-d reveal Himself at Mt. Sinai. So there was no even remotely intellectually-honest way around it. And the unbiased person -- the one with a good heart -- was forced to ponder: If there is design, there must have been a Designer. Who is He? Why did He create the world? Does He have some plan for mankind? Did He provide us with instructions for carrying out that plan? Does He reward and punish? Why does He hide Himself? These are the thoughts that thinking man has pondered all throughout the ages -- and are precisely the ones our forefather Abraham had -- until he personally discovered G-d.

But now things have changed. Modern man, using all his intellectual genius and creativity, has come up with a masterful theory -- one smart enough to explain away G-d. The world is a cosmic accident; it has no Designer and no purpose. Where did its design, its complexity, its innate beauty stem from? From an infinite series of "accidents". A Big Bang happened to have occurred. Earth happens to be the right distance from the Sun. It happens to have sufficient atmosphere and water to support life. Intelligent life happens to have developed from amino acids (which happens to have developed from who-knows-what), etc. etc. ad nauseam. So, here we are -- let's have fun!

I'm not speaking from a scientific perspective -- whether or not such the Theory of Evolution is based on mathematically-sound probability (it isn't) or can be borne out with sufficient scientific evidence (it can't). But one point is clear: Why are there so many otherwise intelligent people among us -- and especially in the scientific community -- who accept evolution so dogmatically, with almost religious zeal and devotion? Because that is what man **wants** to believe. We can blind ourselves to truths right in front of our noses if we try real hard. And man is capable. He is capable of great acts of dedication and devotion, and likewise of incomprehensible bouts of folly and denial.

(By the way, I am not discussing the possibility of controlled evolution -- that G-d created the world through a multi-billion year process of development and evolution. Are there alternate ways of

understanding the story of Genesis -- with its clear progression from simpler to more complex creations? Torah scholars and commentators have for millennia claimed that there is far more to the story than meets the eye (also stating quite explicitly that the calendar as we know it only began with the creation of Adam at the end of the Six Days). As contemporary scholars have observed, there is great potential here for synthesizing modern science with man's spiritual yearnings, perhaps even culminating in "The Convergence of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom" to quote the subtitle of Prof. Gerald Schroeder's excellent book on the matter ([The Science of G-d](#), The Free Press, 1997). This might just be the True Answer, and it certainly provides us with fascinating food for further thought. But blind evolution -- an endless series of random occurrences -- is for the religiously and intellectually blind alone.)

G-d wants us to accept Him and has provided us with ample evidence of His existence. He does not -- and cannot -- openly reveal Himself to us -- for it would remove all challenge in recognizing and accepting Him -- and challenge is the purpose of man's existence. However, He has done His job; the facts are on the table. One with a truly good heart -- one sincerely ready to believe, unencumbered with personal biases and predispositions -- can honestly see G-d and His world for all it is and all it's truly meant to be.

(I heard the final two illustrations of R. Wasserman's principle from [R. Zev Leff](#) of Moshav Mattisyahu, Israel.)

Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and [**Torah.org**](#).