

CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 1(B) : SPIRITUAL GLOBAL WARMING - PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

The world was created in ten utterances. What does this come to teach us? Could not the world have been created in a single utterance? It was in order to exact punishment from the wicked who destroy the world which was created in ten utterances, and to give reward to the righteous who sustain the world which was created in ten utterances.

Last week we began exploring the concept of G-d's ten utterances. We explained very briefly the manner in which G-d created the universe -- to the shallow extent we understand. To begin with, the world contains far more than heaven and earth. We are taught that there are myriad levels of existence between G-d's domain and the physical universe we know -- simply because the physical is too far removed from the spiritual for the gap to be spanned in a single step. The universe, according to the kabbalists, is actually an entire hierarchy of "worlds". Each world below is a slightly more concretized version of the one above. And each world below is controlled by the spiritual, energizing forces of the world above. We could imagine it as a very large vertical or pyramid-shaped machine, with G-d at the top providing the spiritual forces which then trickle their way down the worlds until they energize the physical world at the bottom.

I don't want to dwell on this concept further since it is basically a kabbalistic one. Simply, however, the Ten Utterances of G-d correspond to the ten "Sefiros" -- emanations of His reality and the ten primary levels of creation. Every time G-d uttered a directive at Genesis, another level of reality was created -- each time one step further removed from Him. With the tenth utterance, the physical world we know came into being.

Thus, G-d created a physical world at least appearing many steps removed from Him, and as a result, man would at least imagine that he is granted some freedom down here -- that he has the free will to act as he chooses.

However, since these levels of creation are so inextricably bound, man's behavior, whether good or evil, does not only affect himself or even the physical world about. How man behaves down here directly affects the spiritual worlds above -- reaching the highest heavens. If I act with goodness I do not only improve myself and become deserving of Divine reward. I actually "fix" the worlds above me. I strengthen the bonds between the worlds, thereby allowing heavenly beneficence to rain down uninterrupted upon the physical world. Further, my good deeds themselves become forces of

good, which work their way up through the worlds and then themselves showers good upon mankind.

Conversely, a wicked deed destroys the bonds between the worlds above. It creates what kabbalists refer to as "crooked pipes". The spiritual channels above are interrupted -- and the evil forces created by my sinful deed come in to fill the vacuum.

I've gotten more graphic about this than I originally intended. It is not for us to understand the inner workings of G-d's complex universe in any real detail. But it is important to have some awareness of the basic structure. The stakes of our behavior are far greater than we ourselves can comprehend -- or than we would probably care to imagine. In this multi-layered universe G-d created, man was granted huge powers. We fix or destroy the universe. And, as our mishna states, G-d will exact punishment from the wicked who literally destroy His world, and He will reward the righteous who literally build it up. And as a result, man's ultimate reward and punishment will be all the much greater.

A common but tragic misconception many people have is that their behavior is their own business. If I want to sin in the privacy of my own home -- so long as it does not affect the neighbors -- it is my own prerogative. Why should anyone else care about my own personal failings? What gives them the right to butt in, lecture, or even pay attention to my behavior? It's my own life, and I have every right to ruin it in any way I feel!

This issue often goes far beyond the personal. It in fact has plagued the State of Israel almost since its inception. Although the majority here in Israel believe in many of the basic tenets of Jewish faith -- the sanctity of the Sabbath, that the sale of pork is inappropriate, etc. -- there are die-hard secularists who complain bitterly about "kefi'ah datit" -- religious persuasion. Their argument is a familiar one: What right do the "ultra-orthodox" have to impose their own views upon others, attempting to close public transportation or theaters on the Sabbath? "Forcing" others to observe the Sabbath is an infringement of their G-d-given(?) rights!

And to Westernized Jews this argument runs deep. Personal liberty is a precious and inalienable right -- one which we Jews in particular have benefited from immeasurably. Thankfully for us, religion is viewed in the West as a matter of personal conscience -- one which governments and lay people alike may in no way coerce or inhibit. If so, religious persuasion would seem an infringement of our sacred democratic rights in the most fundamental way.

Unfortunately, though, religious persuasion is based upon some very sound religious principles. (Whether it is the right approach in a specific situation -- will it do more good or create more resentment -- is of course a legitimate practical question we are not addressing.) The world and its inhabitants are related -- to each other and to unknowable spiritual worlds above -- in ways we could not possibly imagine. We all affect the well-being of our world and of one another. If any one of us fails to fulfill his or her mission, the world does not reach its fulfillment -- its "tikkun" in

Kabbalistic terminology. When one of us fails we all suffer, and the world, as a result, is that much further from spirituality and godliness.

Only today does man appreciate the extent to which this is true in the physical realm. If one person burns a rain forest in Brazil, releases CFC's into the atmosphere, or pours used engine fluid into a quiet suburban sewer, the health of the world as a whole will be the worse for it. The environment, the world and its ecosystems contain complex interrelationships and interdependencies we can hardly fathom (and often discover only after the fact).

And the spiritual realm is no less complex. Spiritual deeds, both good and evil, influence our spiritual "environment" no less deeply. We all share this world together. Each and every one of us must perform his or her duty -- do his share to bring the world to its perfected state. United in service of G-d we move forward; divided we all fall.

With this in mind, the many verses in the Torah which exhort us to proper service of G-d assume far greater and more profound significance. When the Torah states, "Beware lest your hearts be tempted and you shall turn away... And the L-rd will close the heavens and there will not be rain..." (Deuteronomy 11:16-17), it is not some kind of supernatural threat -- some miraculous act of retribution meted out by an exacting G-d. It is simply the "natural" result of our behavior. If we make the world a more corrupt and less stable place, more disasters -- both "natural" and man-made -- will result. We might even call it the effects of spiritual global warming (this week's corny title ;-). For as we stated, there are spiritual laws of nature every bit as much as there are physical. And foremost among them is that sins can and will come home to roost.

But perhaps the most tragic aspect of this is the indiscriminate nature of such forces. Once evil is unleashed, where does it strike? Jewish thinkers point out firstly that the most likely target will be the perpetrator of the evil himself (see for example Nefesh HaChaim Gate I Ch. 6). The wicked city of Sodom is most likely to be overturned. But unfortunately, the world is usually just not that neat. If you create a situation of global warming and erratic weather patterns, innocents will suffer as well -- as unfortunately we've been seeing a lot of lately. (You just wonder if the US government will recognize how much **more** costly it is **not** to alter its energy practices than to do so.) In this vein the Midrash writes, "Once the 'destroyer' is given permission to destroy, it does not distinguish between righteous and wicked" (Mechilta 11, quoted in Rashi to Exodus 12:22). The wicked are the true instigators of such destructive forces, but once unleashed, there's no telling what will result.

(We've discussed elsewhere how G-d allows innocents to suffer in such a situation -- though it's nearly impossible to give a truly satisfactory answer. See [3:19](#) for some unsatisfactory ones.)

So to conclude, we live in a complex and interrelated world of unseen spiritual forces -- far more so than we are able to comprehend. It is not ours to understand this in great detail (although the parallels to the earth's natural ecosystems are telling). But the primary, crucial lesson must not be lost upon us. We all share this spaceship earth together. We all have a mission which can only be

achieved in unity. If we fail, the damage and destruction will be our own responsibility -- and our own undoing. If we succeed, we become no less than partners of G-d in bringing the world to perfection.

(Some of the ideas discussed above are based upon the Ruach Chaim commentary to Pirkei Avos, and more generally upon Nefesh HaChaim, Gate I. Both works were authored by R. Chaim Volozhiner, of late 18th to early 19th Century Lithuania.)

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