

A BEGINNING WITH NO END

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

The earth was null and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of G-d hovered above the water. [Bereishis 1:3]

It is taken for granted that chaos ensued at the beginning of existence. Though G-d could have made a completed world without passing it through a chaotic stage, Divine wisdom dictated otherwise, and therefore "null, void," and "darkness" reigned in the early moments of the first day. Though it may be out of the question to ask why G-d decided to initially create a world in chaos, it is certainly not out of the question to ask what it teaches us. On the contrary, the fact the Torah records it means it is there to teach us something crucial.

Indeed, the second verse of the Torah provides an important clue to answer pressing questions, such as why, after five thousand years of history mankind has yet to achieve the coveted state of "universal brotherhood" and "peace for all mankind." One would think that after witnessing the brutality of war and after experiencing unimaginable barbarism, mankind would abandon physical force and destruction as a means of resolving differences. But war is as prevalent today as it has ever been.

Why?

Why not? Why shouldn't the world constantly fall into despair and head towards destruction? What basis is there to assume that the natural state of creation is order and peace? Because life appears to be that way? Take a closer look at physical existence and you will see that the "natural" order of creation is anything but peaceful:

To understand how chaos-and the questions chaos raises-affects your daily life, consider the seemingly simple matter of your heart. Traditional science treats it as if it were a pump beating like clockwork, whose complicated cycles can be broken down into a number of simple waves of standard shapes. Real hearts are far more puzzling. Your heartbeat is triggered by signals from your brain, but the actual rhythmic contractions are the result of a democratic vote by millions of muscle fibers, all agreeing to contract in synchrony. Such a system is obviously far from clockwork. The rhythm of your heartbeat continually varies by

tiny measurable amounts. It's not a variability imposed from the outside; even when your body is at rest, your heartbeat fluctuates. It is caused by chaotic internal dynamics ... (DISCOVER; "Does Chaos Rule the Universe?" page 57, November 1992).

Is this not what the second verse of the Torah teaches us, that the so-called natural state of creation is not order, but chaos? Is this not the reason why modern-day physics has discovered a universe in a state of entropy, a world in which mankind more easily drifts towards war and destruction than towards peace and brotherhood?

The midrash defines the chaos of the second verse in terms of specific exiles the Jewish people would have to endure. Null, says the midrash, refers to the Babylonian exile (423 - 371 B.C.E.); void refers to the Median exile (371 - 356 B.C.E.); darkness to the Greek exile (318 - 138 B.C.E.), and the face of the deep, to the last exile of Rome (approx. 63 B.C.E. until present day). (The spirit of G-d alludes to the Messianic period at the end of days.)

In one verse we are given a description of the natural state of existence and a historical overview of how that condition will affect the world, and more specifically, the Jewish people. In either case, it is not a pretty picture, and history bears witness to the veracity of the verse's prophetic vision. The exiles have come to pass, war is rampant, destruction and corruption constantly rear their ugly heads, and somehow, the Jew always seems to bear the brunt of world chaos.

The only question is why must it be that way? The answer to that question is the subject of the third verse,

G-d said, "Let there be Light!" And there was Light.

The light created in the third verse was the response to the chaos and darkness created in the second verse. Light, therefore symbolizes the antidote to darkness and chaos, which, according to the Torah; is a light that can only result from a positive, moral, conscious act of will. G-d created a world in chaos so that He could then bring order to it through the medium of a supernal light. Likewise, life itself can be like an intellectually dark "room" within which each individual must navigate to the best of his or her ability. Though we live in a world well lit by the light of the sun at day, and the light of the moon at night, often, we still grope in intellectual darkness. Even on subtle levels, chaos reigns in our lives.

However, that is where our role begins. For, just as G-d did on the first day of creation, we have to use our powerful free will to reduce the chaos of intellectual blindness. We have to take the world in chaos, and create order, and maintain that order. To fail to do so, the Torah warns, is to let creation and society drift back to its more natural state: chaos.

Shabbos Day:

The heaven and earth were completed and all their hosts. On the seventh day G-d completed His work which He did. And G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because He rested on it from all His work which G-d created to make. (Bereishis 2:1)

There are no words to describe the importance of Shabbos to existence, not just to the Jewish people, but to the entire world. Shabbos is the embodiment of all that creation is meant to be, and, according to tradition, it is a spiritual portal to another existence altogether: the World-to-Come. The fact that G-d rested on the seventh day is what made it different from the previous six, such that it became Shabbos. During the first six days of creating, G-d gave form to the potential which was created on the first day. G-d stopped doing precisely that on the seventh day. De facto, the seventh day became Shabbos.

However, as simple as this idea sounds, it creates a complex philosophical dilemma: If nothing is labor for G-d, then from what did He rest? Does the term "rest" not imply more than cessation of creative activity? Does it not imply the "easing-up" of effort? For this reason, the concept of melacha (creative activity) must be redefined in terms of G-d.

Even in daily life the term "work" can be ambiguous. For example, it is possible that what is deemed work for some can be leisure for others (and vice-versa). For this reason, the term "work" does not seem to relate to the type of activity being performed as much as it does to the way the doer relates to the action.

For example, someone who enjoys physical exertion might find it leisurely to mow the lawn, whereas his neighbor who abhors such physical activity finds it a struggle. On the other hand, the neighbor loves reading, which, for the man happily mowing the lawn, is taxing.

Defining work from this example, one might call work any activity that goes against one's nature and causes a resistance, physically, mentally or both. This definition will help us to better understand how the concept of "resting" can be applied to G-d and more importantly, the true opportunity of Shabbos.

But first, another analogy, this time of a painter and his painting.

Painting is a conscious act of creating. The artist is usually inspired by an experience or even a thought, which, he personally finds worthy of expression on canvas. From the very first brush stroke, the artist pursues that expression until he is satisfied he has captured on canvas what he sees in his mind's eye.

For this reason, a painting is the product of everything which has affected the artist's perception. For that is what shapes his perception of reality. In other words, because the painting is an expression of

all the painter' believes in and though he may sign the painting, his true signature is the painting itself.

This idea should also apply, then, to the Artist of artists, G-d Himself. Creation is G-d's "painting," the expression of His perception of reality, and how we should interact with it. If so, then the natural state of affairs ought to allow us to see G-d in every aspect of creation.

So why can't we see G-d clearly? Unlike most other artists, G-d chose to "paint" a world that did not clearly reveal who He is, or what He thinks. G-d hid the light of that understanding, the light that revealed G-d within His creation and all that He intended for mankind.

One of the principle "veils" G-d used (and continues to use) to hide His presence is nature. The world is allowed to give the impression that it runs itself, free of Divine assistance, creating the illusion that it is a "painterless painting." Never has this illusion been better perceived than in our generation in which science has mapped the mechanics of existence on a sub-atomic level.

But what is natural for nature is not natural for G-d: G-d, who is omnipresent and omniscient, is difficult to hide. Nevertheless, G-d is also able to do anything, and if He chooses to hide Himself, the Torah tells us, He can, and will:

■ *"... On that day, I will completely hide My face." (Devarim 31:18)*

Thus, because hiding for G-d is against His nature (from our perspective), it can be called work for Him. However, the Torah teaches us that work ceased with the seventh day of creation, which means that G-d stopped hiding Himself behind nature's veil. It was this revelation of the Divine reality that imbued the seventh day with extra G-dliness and made it holy.

Because of the immediate, automatic revelation of G-d's presence, Shabbos becomes an eternal day. It allows for a partial reattachment to the Source of life (G-d), which was severed when Adam defied the prohibition to abstain from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus through Shabbos, an aspect of immortality can be restored to mankind. Yes, can be restored. The sensation of Shabbos is a potential, not an automatic reality. Only for one who understands and appreciates the potential of Shabbos does the realization of Shabbos become possible, as the Talmud states:

■ *Only he who prepares prior to Shabbos eats on Shabbos. (Avodah Zara 3a)*

In other words, it is possible for two people to have completely different experiences on the seventh day of the week. While one basks in the tranquillity and eternity of Shabbos, the other may barely sense any difference from the previous six days. Shabbos is a reality that can only be sensed by those who have intellectually sensitized themselves to its existence. Apparently, the veil of ignorance to Shabbos can remain even into the seventh day.

Seudah Shlishi:

He [G-d] said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the from the tree that I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman you gave to be with me, she gave to me from the tree, and I ate.' (Bereishis 3:11)

There's no end to the discussion about the first mistake. Every detail can and should be analyzed and reanalyzed to yield profound understanding about life in this world. It should be clear by now that we are referring to what it means to behave like a Tzelem-Elokim. For this reason, Adam's response to G-d's question demands investigation. After Adam revealed himself from his hiding place and explained why he had hidden, G-d asked him accusingly:

"Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree which I commanded you not to eat?" (Bereishis 3:11)

The proper answer would have been, "Yes, I did eat, and I regret having done so." This would have been the tshuva G-d was trying to arouse in Adam. Such an answer would have evoked Divine mercy, but, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Adam missed his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and instead answered:

'The woman You gave to be with me, she gave to me, and I ate.'

As Rashi points out, it wasn't just the tshuva that was missing from Adam's response; Adam's mistake was two-fold:

*'The woman You gave to be with me, she gave to me, and I ate.'
Here he denied the good. (Rashi)*

There is no way to overestimate the centrality of a hakores hatov-appreciating the good someone gives to you-in the bringing to fulfillment the purpose for creation. Now we can see firsthand how it had been Adam's lack of hakores hatov that cost him the garden, and placed us into 5758 years (and counting) of exile to fix it up. Thank you is not longer just a nice way to make someone know you appreciate his help; it is tikun olam-rectification of the world.

Melave Malkah:

The Talmud (Avodah Zara 2b) paints a picture of what will happen on that final day of judgment. It says that the non-Jews will complain that all that distinguished them from the Jewish people was that they were not given mitzvos. G-d says that this is not true, and to prove the point He gives them an "easy" mitzvah: sukkah.

As the story goes, they happily go off and build their sukkos, after which time they go into their sukkos to prove their point to G-d. However, G-d then brings the hot sun of Tammuz to bear down on them, which forces them to leave their sukkos. Unable to stand the heat, they angrily leave their sukkos, and, on the way out, they kick the sukkah.

The Talmud asks, "What kind of a test was that? Even a Jew could have and would have left the sukkah on the way out!" True says the gemara, but, a Jew doesn't kick the sukkah on the way out.

That's the difference? That's the whole difference between "us" and "them"?

The answer is yes, for, as the Talmud states elsewhere, getting angry (which is why they kicked the sukkah), is a form of idol worship, for it denies Divine Providence, as if to say, if G-d was running the show here, this would never have happened and was therefore not justified. A Jew doesn't kick the sukkah on the way out, because it specifically symbolizes Divine Providence in everyday life.

The Jew instead asks, "Why did this happen to me? What must I fix up to become more worthy to G-d, and fitting for a happier relationship with Him." This is what G-d was trying to indicate to the non-Jews, namely that serving G-d comes down to more than doing mitzvos, it is doing them for the sake of coming closer to G-d through the execution of the them.

Have a great Shabbos and Chag Samayach,
Pinchas Winston

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