CHAOS FROM THE BEGINNING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

The earth was null (Tohu) and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep... (Bereishis 1:2)

The stone the builders despised, has become the cornerstone. (Tehillim 118:22)

When Dovid HaMelech wrote this posuk, he had himself in mind. He was amazed at how Hashgochah Pratis - Divine Providence - works, how G-d takes advantage of our assumptions to either reveal to or hide from us clues about history. Details WE take for granted can often be the most important to Heaven, and thus, even Shmuel HaNavi was fooled by Dovid's older six brothers, who seemed far more qualified for leadership roles than Dovid, when it came time to anoint the new king of Israel.

The posuk above is a great example of this axiom. It seems to be sandwiched between two amazing possukim, one that describes the beginning of all physical matter, and one that recounts the creation of the greatest invention of all time: light. As a result, it is often misunderstood and under-appreciated in terms of the vital information it has to teach us about life in This World.

It is this verse that made the attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States on September 11th of this year possible, and every act of evil since G-d first made creation. If you were shocked by the attack against humanity and what has occurred since then, then you do not know "Tohu" and the role it plays in life.

I say "shocked" as opposed to devastated, saddened, and demoralized, for even during war time one is hurt by destruction even if it is expected. However, shock implies something out of the blue, something that SEEMINGLY should never have happened, yet did. And, once it does, it forces us to re-examine our assumptions about life that led to our faulty perceptions that did not allow for such tragedies to occur in the first place. Had they, then maybe we could have avoided so many of life's fatal tragedies.

According to Kabbalah, the world was built upon Tohu, a fact that had not the Torah itself mentioned it, we ourselves would have no right to speak about. For, says the Midrash, it is like speaking about how the king's palace was built upon a garbage dump; even it is true, it is a disgrace for the king to recall it.

What exactly is Tohu? The Talmud itself discusses this:

A green line around the globe from which darkness emanates, as it says, "He made darkness His secret place surrounding Him" (Tehillim 18:11). (Chagigah 12a)

Whatever this means, its effect is described in Sefer Habahir: something that creates wonder for man (Siman 2). That is, it is very difficult to fathom just how chaotic the conditions of creation can become.

According to Kabbalistic tradition, Tohu was the pre-creation state of existence from Rosh Chodesh Av through the ninth of Av (the most severe part of the "Three Weeks" observed at this time every year). In other words, if one were to count backwards from the 25th of Elul, when G-d first began to make physical creation, into what would have been the year before creation until what would have been the first day of the Jewish month of Av, he would arrive at the pre-creation time that Tohu began. It continued for the next nine days, "days" being a borrowed term since time before creation was different than time after creation began.

The state of existence prior to Tohu was very different. It was not a time of darkness and death, but one of light and life. However, for the sake of man who would later require free-will to earn his portion in the World-to-Come, the light that was the "soul" of that stage of existence was withdrawn, effectively resulting in the death of that which existed at that time. In Kabbalah, this act is referred to a "Shviras Hekeilim" - the Breaking of the Vessels," also called the "Death of the Vessels."

As the Soul-Light ascended, the vessels that previously contained it spiritually descended to the future location of the world we now live within. However, according to Kabbalah, they did not do so peacefully, but rather, "piecefully," having shattered into an infinite amount of (spiritual) pieces. The result was the "World of Tohu" - a lifeless spiritual vacuum in the most extreme sense.

However, the fact that anything remained at all means that, on some level, G-d was still there amongst it. Had the light of G-d not remained even in Olam Hatohu, then even the "broken pieces" could not have survived even a moment. However, the fact that the pieces broke at all means that, whatever level of G-d's light remained, it was very, very minimal. Had a human being been there at the time to witness it, he would have assumed that G-d was nowhere to be found at all, G-d forbid.

Tohu was and is the ultimate "hester panim" - hiding of G-d's face.

Shabbos Day:

And G-d said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. (Bereishis 1:3)

Again, according to Kabbalah, this light occurred in advance of physical creation for the sake of

making it. This light would have begun to shine on the pre-creation tenth day of Av, at the beginning of what is called "The Tikun," - The Rectification. Its goal was to reverse the state of Tohu and "resurrect" the broken pieces into creation as we know it. It lasted for forty-five days, ending where the six days of creation begin.

Another question that Kabbalah asks is, even if we CAN discuss Tohu because the Torah itself does, why bother? What is the point of recalling an unfavorable state of creation when it has long ended; it is like reminding a sinner of his past life once he has already done teshuvah and changed his ways!

Kabbalah answers: because the chaos did NOT end long ago.

In other words, though this remarkable Light shone and breathed new life into the broken pieces and fabricated creation, it did not do a complete job. In fact, only as much was required to create existence was rectified, the rest remaining "untouched" by the Light to leave room for man to participate in the perfection of creation, just as in the case of Bris Milah. This was to be the result of Adam HaRishon's own actions, specifically the abstaining of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil until Shabbos.

However, not only did Adam NOT rectify the remaining broken pieces and rid the world of Tohu once-and-for-all, but he even reversed much of what the Light, under the auspices of the Creator Himself, had previously rectified. The result was increased Tohu, that is, increased hester panim - a greater hiding of G-d within creation.

There are different ways of understanding this. However, the most accurate version is the one that G-d created many levels of angels to act out His will. In the beginning before Adam sinned, G-d did much of the work Himself personally, which is why the Torah constantly says, "And G-d said . . ." - a direct reference to G-d and His direct involvement.

The result of the sin was that G-d "withdrew" from public, so-to-speak, creating angels whose entire existence is just for the sake of carrying out specific commands of G-d. It is still G-d doing EVERYTHING, but behind the spiritual veil of a massive army of angels. We have a word for this reality in English: Nature.

It's those tricky angels that create the impression of randomness.

This is really the deeper understanding of the following Talmudic statement:

And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day (ha-shishi). (Bereishis 1:31)... The letter "heh" (preceding the word "shishi") is extra... to say that [G-d] made a condition with them [creation]: "If the Jewish people accept the Five Books of the Torah, [then you are to] remain; if not, then I will return you back to null and void." (Shabbos 88a)

In other words, the letter "heh" which represents the number five is an allusion to the Five Books of the Torah; the "sixth day" is also an allusion to the sixth day of Sivan, 2,448 years later at Mt. Sinai

when the Torah was destined be given. Thus, hester panim and the randomness it seems to project is a function of the Jewish people's acceptance and living by Torah. The more we accept Torah, the less angels involved in daily life, the more the hand of G-d is revealed, and the more evil goes "up like smoke" instead of buildings and people.

In a way, it works a lot like magic today. Magic today is not real, that is, it does not work above the rules of nature, but within them. Instead, it takes advantage of people's assumptions and physical limitations to create false impressions that are, to the viewer, quite real. It is the fine art of distraction where the magician does all kinds of fancy footwork to keep the entertainee mentally engaged while he does the truly REAL and mundane thing elsewhere.

Do not misunderstand. The devastating and horrific destruction of September 11, 2001 was real. It was real, but it was not random. It involved thousands of seemingly innocent individuals, and the problems that it has and will leave in its wake will be truly felt. However, what we are perceiving about it and the conclusions that most people are drawing from it are bound to be inaccurate if they do not take into account the concept of Tohu, what it is, and its role in creation and our lives.

First of all, G-d is completely just, 100 percent just. He can do no evil, and no evil can exist within Him, which is where our world and EVERYTHING is located. Yet, we have witnessed what appears to us as the ultimate evils, and many have turned away from G-d as a result, sadly. How can G-d be SO just and SO much injustice can occur?

It is the ultimate optical and mental illusion, like Tohu itself, which is why, like evil itself, it cannot exist forever.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

And G-d blessed the seventh day... (Bereishis 2:3)

HE BLESSED AND SANCTIFIED: He blessed it with the mann, since the rest of the days of the week only one omer per person fell, but on the sixth day a double portion fell. (Rashi)

This is a very interesting Rashi since it is not the pshat that ANY of us would have thought of. Had Shabbos lacked in forms of blessing and differences from the rest of the week, then maybe we would have thought of the blessing of the mann to occur in another 2,448 years. However, there are some very major differences between the seventh day and the rest of the days of the week, and the mann is only one of them.

Thus, if Rashi went out of his way, so-to-speak, to focus on the brochah of the mann to sum up the brochah of Shabbos, there must be something intrinsically "Shabbosdik" about the mann that fell for the Jews for forty years in the desert after leaving Egypt, and by extension, the two loaves of Challah

that we enjoy at each Shabbos meal.

The mann, though food, was not primarily meant as food. This the Torah itself states:

He afflicted you, and caused you to go hungry, and gave you mann to eat which you did not recognize, nor did your ancestors experience it -- so that He could teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but by whatever G-d says should exist does man live. (Devarim 8:3)

The point of the mann first and foremost, therefore, was not to fill the stomachs of the physically starving Jewish people, but to fill the minds and hearts of the spiritually starving Jewish people. It was to act as a vehicle to elevate the Jewish people of that time above nature in order to train them to go to G-d directly for their physical and spiritual sustenance. That, of course, is the essential point of Shabbos as well.

Thus, the Talmud says:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Had the Jewish people only kept the first Shabbos, then no people or language could have had any power over them, as it says, "It came to pass on the seventh day that the people went out to collect . . ." (Shemos 16:27), and after that it says, "And Amalek came . . ." (Shemos 17:8). (Shabbos 118b)

From the Talmud, it may seem incidental that the verse chosen to reveal the breaking of Shabbos was the one about the people going looking for mann on Shabbos. However, not any more, for now we understand that going to look for mann on Shabbos was not only a violation of Shabbos, but it was at the same time a violation of the mann itself.

This is similar to what we learn in Parashas Vayakhel, where we are taught that the construction of the Mishkan was to cease Shabbos. The deeper reason for this is that it didn't make sense to continue construction on what would LATER be a "House of G-d" when Shabbos itself was already that NOW.

The same is true of the mann. As the Talmud teaches, you worked for mann not by going to work each day as we do now, but by going to work on yourself each day, by perfecting your middos - your character traits (Yoma 75a). This is what created the cause-and-effect that resulted in parnassah (livelihood) each day. The mann was a physical effect of a spiritual cause.

Thus the Talmud also says:

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: Why did the manna not fall once a year (as opposed to once a day)? He replied, I shall give you a parable: It can be compared to a mortal king who had a son for whom he provided food once a year; [as a result] he saw his son once a year. Thereupon he provided for his maintenance daily, so that he called on him everyday. The same is [the case] with Israel. One who had four or five children would worry and say, "Perhaps no mann will come down tomorrow, and all will die of hunger." Thus they turned their faces to heaven [in prayer].

(Yoma 76a)

And, as the Talmud says:

All who eat the three meals of Shabbos will be saved from three things: punishment during the travails of Moshiach, the judgment of Gehinnom, and the war of Gog and Magog. (Shabbos 118a)

Because, on Shabbos we make a point of having the two loaves at each of the three meals to remember the miracle of the mann in the desert which represents the same idea: rising above the physical reality and DIRECT reliance of G-d.

As Rashi points out (Shemos 17:8), the attack from Amalek was the result of the Jewish people being lowered from the "shoulders" of G-d to ground-level where we are vulnerable to the attack of a dog, that is, Amalek. ALL attacks of Amalek, from wherever they may come at whatever time they may come, are the result of the Jewish people descending from the supernatural reality of Shabbos and the mann, to the natural reality of Amalek.

That is why the numerical value of "Amalek" is equal to the Hebrew "sufek," which means doubt, and "Haman," the prototypical Amaleki is really "Ha-mann" - the mann - an allusion to how he came to exist in the first place.

Think about THAT one the next time you lift your "Lechem Mishnah" (Double Portion) of Challah at each meal of Shabbos.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Changes That Last Forever:
Installment #3

CHAPTER THREE: Image Of An Intellectual

There is another definition necessary to arrive at the objective reality. It is the definition of the word Elokim:

The term Elokim can be used to describe every intelligent force that is separated from matter, and which is perfect and can function in actuality. As such, it is therefore eternal, and thus this term is used regarding G-d, the Blessed One, and His angels; it is also applied to judges because of their ability of reason . . . (Sforno, Bereishis 1:26)

This definition of Elokim is reflected in the term as used in reference to G-d Himself. Each name ascribed to G-d refers to a different aspect of His "nature," at least as it is revealed to mankind (the essence of G-d is beyond human comprehension, so G-d describes Himself in terms of characteristics, which are embodied in specific names). According to tradition, the name Elokim

describes the aspect of G-d that is judgment-oriented.

Judgment is the work of an "intelligent force," made possible by the "ability of reason." In order to make a decision, one that is above instinctual response, a person must be able to investigate the essence of ideas, compare them to one another, evaluate them and then prioritize them in a logical sequence, all in keeping with a perceived purpose.

As the above definition pointed out, because this intellectual process depends upon the ability to reason, it is the nature of an Elokim.

It was Elokim, the aspect of G-d that alludes to the power of discernment, which transformed dark into light, and chaos into order. If we are b'tzelem Elokim, then such power of discernment must be our potential as well, and our key for turning chaos into order.

This is what the third verse pertaining to the creation of light indicates, in which G-d not only created light, but also distinguished it (havdalah) from the dark. The discernment between dark and light, chaos and order, profane and holy, the Talmud teaches, is the result of an intellectual process. In fact, the Talmud (Brochos 33b) asks why havdalah, the Saturday evening service performed to conclude the Shabbos, is set into the blessing that deals with the gift of knowledge. The Talmud answers because havdalah is the result of an intellectual process.

Thus, from the first verses of the Torah, it is clear that the goal of an Elokim is to intellectually distinguish between light and dark. This is the process of becoming clearer about the objective reality. This would explain why the Hebrew word for "sin" is chet, which means to "turn aside," as in "miss the mark." Whereas sin implies a deliberate evil deed, an act of losing oneself, chet implies an action that results from a mistaken point of view.

For example, eating well is a commandment, except on Yom Kippur, at which time it is a terrible sin to do so. However, a person who does not intellectually believe in Torah will not refrain from eating on Yom Kippur, believing that there is no reason to do so.

On the other hand, eating non-kosher food is forbidden, unless it is to save a life, and marrying one's widowed sister-in-law is immoral, unless one's brother died and left her childless. In fact, every action has a permissible application, at the right moment, in the right circumstance. According to the Arizal, had Adam waited until after the first Shabbos, then even eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil would also have become permissible

But, how is one to know when the moment is right or wrong, and when the circumstance warrants a specific act or doesn't, and just how to perform the act or how not to? Such discernment requires people to utilize their intelligence and discern their objective reality.

The earlier Talmudic statement can now be rendered as follows:

No person misses the mark, wastes an opportunity, responds incorrectly to circumstance, unless he

or she loses intellectual perspective of the objective reality.

Because avoiding sin, or better yet, mistake, is a function of the intellect and therefore within our ability to reason, we are held accountable for the actions that result from our incorrect reasoning. The Torah makes us culpable, even for accidental mistakes.

In conclusion, real and permanent change comes from investigating the root of mistaken action, from up-rooting the incorrect notions that lead to a misperception of reality. True teshuvah or repentance, is the process of discernment, of investigating the ideas that guide our lives, to reject the dark they may contain, and to absorb the light hidden within them.

In doing so, one brings his or her own vision of reality closer to the objective reality, avoids sin, and rises to the level of Elokim.

Have a great Shabbos,
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