CHALLAL: ON MANY LEVELS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. (Bereishis 1:1)

I mentioned in a previous essay that the better one knows the process of Creation the more one can appreciate the gift of life and live inspired by it. As the mishnah says, it is knowledge that defines the concept of abuse, helping a person to make better use of this world and his or her life within it:

The world was created with ten statements. What does this come to teach us? Certainly it could have been created with a single statement. It is in order to make the wicked accountable for destroying a world that was created with ten statements and to reward the righteous for sustaining a world that was created with ten statements. (Pirkei Avos 5:1)

However, like with respect to all of Torah there are four levels of understanding on which this can be explained. The Torah provides Pshat, or the most obvious approach to the Creation story. The Midrash uncovers clues within the wording to explain the verses on the level of Remez, or Hint, and refers to earlier traditions to reveal the exegetical level of understanding, or Drush.

Then there is the level of Sod, or Kabbalah. Though much of the Zohar, one of the main sources of Kabbalistic thought, speaks on the weekly Torah readings on a level that many can understand (if they can read Aramaic), the parts of the Zohar that deal with Creation itself are so complicated that they stand almost completely apart from the rest of Torah learning. Even the language is different, speaking of many concepts that are not referenced anywhere in the revealed Torah, at least not in an obvious way. It is this level of Torah learning that is the basis of this week's essay, though what follows is the briefest of summaries of volumes of Kabbalistic material.

The first thing to know is that before God "decided" to make Creation, all that existed was Ohr Ain Sof, literally "light without end." Kabbalah is particular to make it clear that this was a completely spiritual light that was "everywhere" equally. At this stage of existence the concept of measurement did not yet exist in any recognizable form, having yet to be created.

Then came the "moment" when God decided He wanted Creation to exist, and in particular, a free will being that could "earn" his portion in Eternal Life. This necessitated the creation of evil, without which free choice cannot exist. This is because it is not really considered to be a choice to choose between perfect good and perfect good. Even choosing good over better is a choice between good and evil, since we're always supposed to choose the greatest good we can.

It was a great plan but a problematic one as well. As human beings it is possible for a different world to exist beyond our own, and the fact that other people are evil is not a contradiction of our own good. But how is it possible for evil to exist in the world if that world exists within a reality—within God—that is already completely and utterly good without the slightest trace of evil?

The answer is not so much an answer as it is a description of a supernatural reality that is the basis of the miracle of life as we know it. The question is: How do you do the impossible and limit the Infinite? The answer is: You simply do the impossible and limit the Infinite. Thus, "impossible" is only based upon what we perceive to be possible, and not from God's vantage point.

The Kabbalistic term for this limiting of the Ohr Ain Sof is tzimtzum, which means constriction. God chose a "point" within His infinite light, the Arizal explained, and constricted it. At that moment there existed, for the first time ever, a place within the Infinite Light where the Infinite Light was not so infinite anymore. This was long before anything described in the Creation Story ever took place.

Next, the Arizal revealed, God expanded the area of constriction outward in circular form from its original point. This ongoing process of constriction continued outward until a certain size spiritual sphere, a hollow called the "Challal," existed. This was within a "space" in which there was almost no Ohr Ain Sof compared to the infinite amount of Ohr Ain Sof on the outside of the Challal, infinitely and equally in all directions. Two very different realities existed at that time kept apart from each other merely by the will of God.

With the creation of the Challal came the existence of one of the most important concepts that makes our lives and all of Creation meaningful, one that we very much take for granted: measurement. Tzimtzum resulted in a finite reality within a hugely larger infinite one, and finiteness means the existence of up and down, and right and left. It means a person can do a mitzvah and spiritually grow closer to God, or do a sin and move further away from Him. It means that a person can add to the fulfillment of a previously incomplete Creation, or detract from it.

This may sound like no big deal, but in Kabbalah, it is the biggest of deals. It's a little like saying that man invented a way to fly—without the help of any machinery. To create a machine that can allow a person to fly through the air is remarkable, but not counterintuitive. It's a just a question of understanding and taking advantage of the inherent properties of physical materials and of flight itself.

But man on his own was not made to fly. His limbs do not support the idea of flight and he is not aerodynamically designed to do so. Were we to see someone flap his arms and take off we would be most astounded and start to question all of our assumptions about what a person can and cannot do. If we understood how counterintuitive measurement is to existence we'd be in awe of it as well.

The creation of the Challal was just a preparatory stage for the rest of Creation, kind of like digging a large hole in the ground for a future skyscraper. Making the hole was a function of removing what was already there. Building the skyscraper is a matter of bringing new materials to the site and

assembling them according to plan.

The "material," in this case, was not physical. Rather, and quite ironically, it was the same "material" that existed before the first constriction and resulting Challal: Ohr Ain Sof. The difference, however, was that the Ohr Ain Sof was allowed back into the Challal in a measure amount, a Divinely-controlled finite amount of infinite light referred to as the Kav Ohr Ain Sof—Line of Light Without End—an oxymoron if ever there was one.

What follows is very complex and complicated, and far beyond the scope of a five-page essay. As mentioned above the mishnah speaks of a Creation made with 10 Divine statements. If anything, they were 10 Divine understatements. That's like saying, somewhat, that if you want to build a 100-floor skyscraper just put together some metal and glass, and a bunch of other materials.

A simplistic way of describing what happened next and henceforth is the creation of an onion in reverse. An actual onion starts with an inner layer and then layer upon layer of onion is added to the outside as it grows in size. The finished product looks like a series of balls, one smaller than the next.

That's what the Challal looks like after all the levels of inner layers were created and put into place. After the Ohr Ain Sof came into the Challal as a thin line of light, it then spread out horizontally to create the first layer of light within the Challal, close to the edge of it but not touching the original Ohr Ain Sof that surrounds it. It remained separate from the encompassing Infinite Light by the will of God.

Having completed that first layer of light, the Line of Ohr Ain Sof penetrated a little deeper into to the Challal before making a second layer of light. Once this second layer was fully created the Line of Ohr Ain Sof descended a bit more in order to make a third layer of Divine light, a sphere within a sphere within a sphere within the Challal. This process continued until all the layers of Divine light that God wanted to create came into existence, far more than we'll ever know. For, just as a layer of onion is actually comprised of inner layers, likewise each layer of Divine light is comprised of a multitude of inner layers. Many we may never know about, at least in this stage of history.

If you could cut the Challal in half, you would see a series of concentric circles from the top of the Challal to the center of the Challal, each one smaller than the previous one. On one side, which we'll call the top of the Challal, you'd see an opening that extends down into the Challal towards its center that resembles, for lack of a better example, an elevator shaft. This is the Kav Ohr Ain Sof, and it stops just short of breaking through the other side of the Challal.

All of this was brought into existence for the sake of man, whose actual universe exists at the very bottom of all the circles. Dimensionally, it would not even be visible when looking at the cross-section of the Challal, being completely dwarfed by all that preceded its creation. As vast as our physical universe appears to us, it is not even the size of a pinhead in comparison to all the levels of spiritual existence that gave rise to it, ex nihilo.

It's a little like a father building a multi-billion dollar company, and then constructing a 125-floor skyscraper to be its head office. At the top of the skyscraper is a state-of-the-art and opulent penthouse office. Traveling up a super fast elevator to the top floor, the elevator opens up directly into an office space fit for royalty. After stepping into the place in absolute awe, you are shocked to find a two year child playing with his toys on top of a large expensive oak desk.

Looking at the father with an inquisitive look, one that reveals your confusion from the disproportionate reality, the father, looking at the child happily says, "I built all of this for him."

Really?

As the father takes you on a tour of his empire, explaining to you detail after detail, you keep asking yourself, "What's the point?" You cannot fathom how someone would go to so much trouble for a child who has little or no appreciation of what has been done for him, and who may or may never have such an appreciation. In fact, he could grow up and reject all of it, his father included.

Hours later, after the tour has been completed and you sit down with the father and his two-year old son, for whom he insists everything you have been shown and told about on the tour was created, you find your mind spinning and your heart palpitating. "Forgive me for being so frank," you tell your elderly host, "but I am having a difficult time accepting," you tell him as you motion with you hand to his entire empire, "that all of this is for, well, that little baby playing on your lap . . . who would be just as happy with a cheap little toy at the moment!"

The father smiles in appreciation of the question. He says, thoughtfully, "You are not the first to ask such a question. In fact, I have asked it of myself from time-to-time, and each time I come up with the same simple answer." He thinks for a moment, and then explains, "Life is about making choices, and the more moral the choice is, the better it is. Some choices impact very little whereas others can impact the entire world. Some choices that we make build while others destroy." Certain that you are following him, he continues, "Today my son does not make any real choices, at least none that really impact all that much.

But one day he will be old enough to make such choices, decisions that can affect the world in a major way or a small way, in a positive manner or a negative one. If I leave him but one thousand dollars he could make, at most, a $1,000 decision, so-to-speak. If I leave him $10,000 then he will only be able to make a $10,000 decision, again, so-to- speak."

Then, picking up his son as if to talk to him, the father says, "I value free will so much that I want my son, when the time is right, to be able to make billion dollar decisions, decisions that will build entire worlds and greatly impact Creation in a major positive way. This," the man says as he looks around his large office, having in mind his entire empire beyond its walls, "was created to give my son and future heir the opportunity of such decisions."

You smile an understanding smile, and a grateful one as well. "I never looked at life that way," you

tell your wise host. "I may not have a billion dollars, and not even a million dollars," you continue, "but I do have the power of free choice. What's more," you add, "my Heavenly Father has built a vast 'empire' just to give me the opportunity to use my power of choice to have a major and positive impact. In that respect," you humbly conclude, "it is not unlike what you have done for your son. I am that baby!"

If you think subjects such as Quantum Physics are complex and difficult, they are "101" compared to Kabbalah and its explanation of Creation up until the one we will read about in this week's parshah. What we do know from Kabbalah is only what God has shared with us, an infinitesimal amount of knowledge compared to all that really went into Creation. The Aitz Chaim by the Arizal is awesome enough, but what about the part he didn't share with us, and the one that God didn't share with him?

Humbling, to say the very least.

Text

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