

BEGINNINGS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The rabbis have taught us that all beginnings are difficult. We see that the beginnings of humans as described in the Torah in its earliest chapters, affirms this truism. Sin, jealousy, murder, paganism, robbery, corruption and injustice are all hallmarks of the early generations of humans. Of course, there are righteous people as well and the world is not completely bereft of acts of goodness, compassion and kindness. But the general picture portrayed by the Torah is a bleak one.

Why should beginnings be so difficult? Why couldn't the world have gotten off to a better start? The rabbis over the centuries have pondered this problem and have reached one basic conclusion, though naturally each in their own different style and prose. Judaism views humans as being basically prone to evil behavior. The Torah itself states that the nature of humans is evil from its very youthful beginnings. As such, the only hope, in fact, the necessary imperative for civilization and its survival and progress is educating and training the young from their earliest years in the positive character traits of discipline, respect, cooperation, tolerance and non-violent behavior.

A positive attitude towards life and living must be instilled early and often. Otherwise, the inherent evil attitude born within us will always rule over human actions and policies. The beginnings are difficult because we are born as narcissistic, selfish, self-centered people. Our world horizon is narrow. A baby cries and demands immediate attention no matter how tired and exhausted its mother may be. One never expects consideration from an infant or a toddler. It is when that infant and toddler grows older and still behaves so selfishly that the problems of humanity and society begin in earnest.

The Torah predicates itself upon a human being's freedom of choice. Judaism does not believe or preach any items of predestination. Nevertheless, it is obvious that many things can influence that human being's freedom of choice. By realizing that humans begin essentially from a minus position regarding their character traits and behavior, the necessity for self-improvement becomes obvious.

All of the myriad tyrants, murderers, criminals and evil people of history and our current world began as cute cuddly little babies. Selfishness is tolerated from babies. But when one reaches physical maturity, such behavior is anti-social and evil. All of the values and commandments of the Torah came to help people grow and mature spiritually and psychologically. How one will apply the lessons of Torah to one's own life and behavior is also a matter of freedom of choice.

The inherent evil within us can twist all apparently good traits and use them for destructive and

selfish ends. The rabbis always advised humans to not only analyze and correct one's mistakes and bad behavior but one's "good" deeds as well. For as all of the prayers of Yom Kippur indicated to us, our beginnings were tainted and the evil inclination still lurks deeply within our character.

Our rabbis pondered the necessity for the evil inclination, for selfishness and self-gratification, to be present within us at all. The Talmud relates to us that at the time of the great Ezra, the Jewish leaders "trapped" the evil inclination and put out one of its eyes, however we will understand that metaphor. Therefore the rampant paganism that was present in First Temple times was greatly reduced amongst Jews in Second Temple times. The Talmud then asks why they did not put out the other eye as well. It answers that upon attempting to do so they realized that a hen would not continue to lay eggs and that the world as we know it could no longer function and exist.

The evil inclination can be turned to positive uses. It must be disciplined, checked and reined in, and not be allowed to dominate human life and behavior. Nevertheless, since it is so ingrained within us, the Torah sought to channel it and redirect its goals but never to completely destroy its presence within us. Judaism teaches that by recognizing our beginnings we recognize the limitations and dangers that lurk within us. Only by recognizing them and admitting their presence can we then take the counter measures necessary to deal with those shortcomings and weaknesses.

All beginnings are difficult. But ignoring those beginnings and not dealing with them correctly, judiciously and in a timely fashion makes life even more difficult for us and for others as well. The great holiday season just passed is a reminder to us as to our beginnings and the beginning of the world as we know it and our challenge to improve that world and ourselves.

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