

DRAFT #2

"GOOD AND VERY GOOD"

Moderation and Extremism in the Scheme of Creation

The meaning of טוב (good) in the early chapters of Genesis--where at the end of every segment of the Creation we read טוב וירא אלקים...כי טוב--is tantalizingly obscure. What does goodness, a term usually associated with moral acts or psychological satisfaction, have to do with the natural order? If, as some maintain (Maimonides, Guide 2:30, 3:13), טוב here denotes production of an item whose existence conforms to its purpose, or the successful execution of the divine will, then why, at the final day of the Six Days of Creation and the emergence of man (Gen. 1:31), does God declare that the Creation is טוב מאד, very good? Is it at all relevant to speak of greater and lesser success in the implementation of the divine decision to create?

The problem becomes more acute in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Paradise). Before the creation of Eve, we read that Adam's condition was not good: לא טוב היות האדם לבדו, it is not good that man should be alone (2:18). If טוב is a moral or psychological category, the verse is understandable; but then the טוב כי repeated in the creation narrative in chapter 1 presents apparently insurmountable difficulties. And if the טוב of the first chapter refers to the full execution of the divine will, then the phrase לא טוב היות האדם לבדו is problematical, although not insuperably so.

The question becomes more acute, however, when we turn to the story of the עץ הדעת טוב ורע (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). Man is warned not to eat of this tree, for "on the day that you eat thereof you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

File: ki-tov

After the creation of Eve, the serpent ensnares her and persuades her to violate the divine command. But the serpent persists, and informs Eve that "for God knows that on the day you eat thereof your eyes will be opened and you will be like the powerful ones who know good and evil" (Gen.3:5). (Our use of "the powerful ones" follows the Aramaic translator, Onkelos, as opposed to other commentators who translate the Hebrew as "God." That Onkelos is correct is evident from the use of the plural יודעי, whereas the beginning of the verse uses the singular, כי יודע.)

What kind of power does this knowledge confer, and why should it be denied to the Deity's human creatures? And if the knowledge of the distinction between טוב ורע, in the moral sense, is taboo to man, how can God, in the first instance, have commanded a creature who is incapable of telling right from wrong? And how just is it to punish an ethically or rationally incompetent being for failing to make such distinctions? This, indeed, is the famous question that Maimonides poses at the beginning of his Guide (1:2), one which he contemptuously dismisses and which he resolves by categorizing טוב ורע as esthetic rather than moral terms. This solution is less than perfect, however, if one attempts to read the first chapter of Genesis in this light. Clearly, for Maimonides esthetic judgments are conventional, or humanly subjective; are they, then, applicable to the natural order, especially before man emerged as part of Nature as an observer? The difficulty is by no means alleviated if we adopt the Maimonidean "success" definition referred to above, because this seems totally irrelevant to the עץ הדעת.

I propose a solution in which טוב is examined in light of the climactic טוב מאד, and which assumes that the word טוב in the first three chapters of Geneses--the creation and the story of Adam and Eve--bears little relation to the use of the term later in the Torah and, indeed, in ordinary Hebrew

usage. Whatever relation does exist is remote, and the result of a semantic evolution from the beginning of Genesis until it eventually takes on the meaning or meanings conventionally applied to it.

We here follow the Maimonidean "success" definition of טוב in the creation narrative. A slight variation, to bring it into conformity with contemporary parlance, will sharpen the focus: טוב implies efficient functioning. The Creator saw every step in His developing universe כי טוב, that it was functioning efficiently, carrying out the telos which He had assigned to it. Thus, light, land, oceans, vegetation, animal life, etc.,--each in its own time--is טוב, functions well. However--and this is critical--it functions well but not at maximum efficiency. Were each part of Nature to function at its maximum, exhausting its full potential, chaos would ensue as the various parts would mutually self-destruct in the competition for mastery; the developing universe would thus revert to primordial תהו ובהו. Instead, טוב denotes a functioning at less than full capacity, at a level which does not exploit its full potential. This is so because the world is a interdependent system rather than a conglomeration of independent parts, and a system requires the synergistic coordination of all its constituent parts. Only when each segment operates at a טוב level, with restrained functionality and limited efficiency, can the entire, completed system deserve the sobriquet טוב מאוד, very good. Only when the each constituent is טוב, and not more than that, can the cohesive whole become טוב מאוד.

The Sages understood this principle when they explained the derivation of the divine Name אני הוא שאמרתי לעולמי as שד"ך (Hag. 12a), One who set limits to the (parts of) the world, creating land and water, for instance, but preventing the one from encroaching upon the other. (The Kabbalah too embodies this insight in asserting that the Sefirot of חסד and גבורה are in conflict and only in the limitation they

impose upon each other do they dialectically merge into (תפארת.)

If we now explore the term טוב in the Adam narratives (chapters 2 and 3), we emerge with new and engaging insights. לא טוב היות האדם לבדו denotes a critical lack of "efficiency" in Adam's life; he fails to fulfill his human destiny as a solitary creature. As long as he does not relate to a fellow human, he is less than complete and hence לא טוב. (And here the functional definition of טוב begins to lead to the standard moral definition.)

We now turn to the עץ הדעת טוב ורע. A perfect universe consists of imperfect parts in coordination. An efficiently functioning world requires that each part operate properly but at less than full capacity; that it work well, but not over-work. If any one part expresses its potential to the extreme, the equilibrium of the system as a whole is wrecked. Each constituent part, therefore, must be characterized by restraint. All this is implied in the creation story, where each part is טוב so that the whole might be טוב מאוד. Such is the divine plan for the universe.

Man, however, the only creature endowed with freedom of the will, thus "imaging" his Creator, was formed with the power but without the right to upset the whole of creation by exploiting any one part at its full potential. That denial of the right to exercise the power to destroy the whole by overextending any of the parts is symbolized by the prohibition to eat of the fruit of the עץ הדעת טוב ורע. He was, of course, granted the right of moral choice, a right which presupposes the gift of intellectual discrimination. Were he not able to tell right from wrong, the commandment itself--not to eat from this particular tree--would not make sense. It was not knowledge that was denied to Adam and Eve, but power--power that they could, however, seize illegitimately in an act of rebellion. Should they so sin by

seizing this power and eat of the עץ הדעת טוב ורע, they would become like אלהים, "the powerful ones" of the earth, and be enabled to exploit their natural environment and their developing human world as well, throwing the entire system out of kilter and thereby threatening their very own survival--מות תמות, "you will surely die" (2:18).

The primal sin of man is therefore one of lack of restraint or, better yet, one of extremism whereby the moderation that ensues from the imperfect but efficient functioning of the parts is abandoned as he uses his power to "know" טוב ורע and to push the טוב to an extreme, thus converting טוב to רע in the moral sense. The "know" in "the Tree of Knowledge" is here meant as "know how"; it is not the knowledge of ratio but of techne. This interchangeability of good and evil is reflected in Aristotle's theory of the Golden Mean, where good and evil are conceived as not ontologically different from each other. Rather, vice and virtue lie on the same plane with vice(s) occupying opposite ends of the spectrum and virtue locating itself in the center; moderation is thus identified as virtue, and evil as the extremes. Vice is virtue taken to an extreme.

Such seizure of power and throwing off of the shackles of restraint by pushing each part to exploit all its potential, has large and fateful consequences. One is an addictive submission to the technological imperative (which plays itself out in the generation following; see, e.g., Gen. 4:8, the fratricide by Cain, interpreted by the Rabbis as a refusal by the brothers to remain satisfied with an equitable division of the earth's riches; and 4:17, ויהי קין בונה עיר, in the present tense, i.e., Cain "is building a city" rather than "he built a city"--Cain, the overreaching son of overreachers, cannot help but build compulsively). The resultant danger to man's natural environment is inevitable as טוב is extended beyond its limitation as the merely efficient to the extreme of perfectionism. Man's power thus

constitutes a mortal threat to the ecology of the earth.

Another and allied consequence is, as mentioned, death itself, which is not a supernaturally imposed penalty but a "natural" result of the systemic flaw that obtains when the whole is neglected in favor of a part of the parts, when טוב is pushed beyond its set limits to become רע such that the world as a whole no longer can be termed טוב מאוד.

The damage, however, is not limited to ecological ruin or man's own physical extinction. It is a social and moral peril as well. And here we come to the fascinating subject of man's discovery of his sexual persona and the sudden development of a sense of shame--all a consequence of his seizing the power to be immoderate, to exploit the potential of the parts and thus irreparably damage the whole, to indulge his penchant for extremism, whether technological or personal or ideological, even if sincerely meant as an effort to exploit that which he holds to be the good and the virtuous.

Let us now return to the עץ הדעת טוב ורע. The Sages conjecture about the identification of the tree; some say it was a fig tree, others a grape vine, yet others that it was an etrog or citron, and so on. But as we read the biblical text, it appears, rather surprisingly, that not only does the Torah not give any hint as to the nature of the tree, but seems to go out of its way to emphasize its "normalcy," its lack of significant difference from any other tree. Thus, note the description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8, 9:

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And the Lord God made to grow, out of the ground, כל עץ נחמד למראה וטוב למאכל -- every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Later, in 3:6, the description of the tree in the story of Eve's submission to the serpent's seductive blandishments to eat specifically of the עץ הדעת is strikingly similar to the previous description of all the trees in the garden:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (כי טוב העץ למאכל) and that it was a delight to the eyes (וכי תאוה הוא לעינים) and that the tree was desired to make one wise (ונחמד העץ להשכיל), she took the fruit thereof and did eat...

The particular choice of phrases indicates that the tree was by no means different from any other tree; it possessed no magical or supernatural qualities, and hence it is irrelevant whether it was an apple or a tomato, a fig or a grape or whatever. The only distinction it carried was that it was prohibited by divine fiat, and this very prohibition is what rankled the first humans. Like every other tree in this primordial arborium, the עץ הדעת was good to the palate and pleasant to the eye. What made it stand out was the commandment to refrain from eating of it lest man thereby gain the forbidden "knowledge of good and evil." Eve interpreted that as some sort of secret knowledge, perhaps an elementary kind of gnosis, which would make her wise and powerful--להשכיל. In fact, however, there was nothing objectively distinctive about the forbidden fruit. It was only the very prohibition itself which made it stand out, and this commandment to refrain from propelling the drive for even טוב beyond its legitimate limits, even for the purpose of attaining wisdom or beneficent power, is what made the fruit of this tree so fateful in the unfolding drama of the human race. Were this commandment respected, the טוב in man's environment and in his inner life would indeed remain "good" forever in its very limitedness for the sake of the greater good or perfection of the whole scheme, טוב מאד. Its very incompleteness is what would have ensured that it be טוב, and thus the Garden of Eden would have remained the eternal abode of humankind. But when that commandment was violated by pursuing the טוב beyond its set limits, horrendous

consequences followed.

First, the טוב, driven beyond its borders, turns into רע, evil because, as was mentioned, good and evil are not conceived of as two antagonistic ontological substances but as mutually transformable into each other. As long as the full potential of טוב is left undisturbed for the sake of the טוב מאור, evil finds no place in the scheme. Only when טוב is carried to an extreme in passionate excess, does the potential of evil emerge into reality. Under such circumstances, the perfection of the whole, declared by the Deity to be טוב מאור, disintegrates. This dis-integration means that the equilibrium of existence is ruined and free rein is now given to all the constituent parts of the whole to seek their own fulness, to propel the partial good until it is transformed into moral evil as the "system" reels from one blow after another.

Hence, death now enters the life of the universe, not so much as a punishment imposed from above as a logical consequence of the chaos introduced by the overexpression of the good and the emergence of evil as the perfection of a טוב מאור universe unravels (see Midrash Psalms 92). Aware of the tragic consequence of his foolishness--for the primal sin, according to this interpretation, is more one of stupidity than cupidity--man seeks to undo the damage he had wrought and instead of retracing his steps and correcting the original defect, strives to ward off the consequences by attacking the symptoms: man seeks directly to regain his lost immortality. Hence, a new insight into the passage in Genesis 3:22-24:

And the Lord God said, "Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Tree of Life and eat and live forever"...Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He drove out the man, and He placed at the east of the

Garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword
which turned every way, to guard the way to the
Tree of Life.

The divine words, dripping with sarcasm, declare that in a perfect world made imperfect by man, man was not to be permitted to grab the prize of deathlessness while the rest of existence lay in ruins. To permit this would be unjust.

Hence, another consequence of sin: exile. The Garden of Eden, paradigm of the perfect world, that of טוב מאור, can no longer remain the abode of a creature responsible for the wrecking of that wholeness. The Garden must now fade into a dream of the human species, a microcosm that existed in the misty origins of the species, symbolizing the טוב מאור which once was and which, thanks to man's impetuous pursuit of the perfection of the part at the expense of the טוב מאור of the whole, is no more. His exile, like his death, is but the to-be-expected playing out of the immanent pattern of the universe rather than an act of vengeance by an irate Deity.

We may now understand why the human reaction to this disruption of cosmic harmony was the discovery of nakedness and shame. When the world was טוב מאור and all its parts were טוב, i.e., limited, the relations between man and woman were likewise describable as טוב. Their relationship was such that they achieved loving companionship for both male and female, doing away with the gnawing loneliness of Adam who had everything--an entire Paradise--yet nothing: "for it is not good that man should be alone." The disintegration of the world immediately affected the male-female harmony. With the primal sin of overriding the limits of the טוב, the טוב quality of the relations between the sexes was likewise subject to overreaching, immoderation, extremism. And so, free of restraint, sexuality now became sex, and unchecked carnality entered the life of humans and, with it, certain inevitable consequences: sexual exploitation, tension and rivalry, libidinal passion directed outward promiscuously

(hence the intriguing legends of the sexual adventures of both Adam and Eve as recorded in the Agadah and Midrash.) The erotic dimension of man was now turned from a binding and bonding force to one that had the potential for rapaciousness. Once, before the tragic violation of the divine command, nakedness meant nothing at all to them--"And they were both naked... and were not ashamed" (2:25); but now, with the freedom to overstep into excess, such naivete would leave humans helpless. Hence, "And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves girdles" (3:7). Clothing, the covering of one's organs of reproduction, became a necessary defense against untrammelled lust by others, and shame developed as a mechanism of self-restraint holding in check the lack of inhibition that had been introduced into the world and into the human psyche.

An examination of the punishments meted out to the culprits in the biblical narrative reveals that, as with death and exile, they were only pronounced by God, but flowed "naturally" from the violation of the pattern imprinted into the world and man by God in His creation of a perfectly balanced, טוב מאד world.

It was the serpent who seduced Eve into the violation of the divine command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. We may take this as an expression of the sexual form of the full exploitation of טוב. Indeed, legends abound amongst all peoples who accept Scripture concerning the tendency to mate across species. (Thus, in the Talmud, Shabbat 146a, we read of the serpent copulating with Eve.) Friendship amongst the various higher species, including man, a quality that is unquestionably טוב, degenerated into perversion as טוב was pushed to its "logical conclusion" namely, uncontrolled sexual itinerancy. Hence, the punishment announced in 3:14 follows. The serpent, symbol of the non-human species, is pushed to its logical conclusion: It was not merely going to

continue as before, in a non-upright position (although one midrashic opinion, in Gen. R. 19, holds that the serpent originally walked upright, "straight as a reed"), but it would lose its limbs and be extremely prone, crawling on its very belly. It convinced Eve that the forbidden fruit was good to the palate--a טוב within its limits--and so it was condemned to eat nothing but dust for the rest of its life. The friendship between the serpent and man had been exploited beyond the licit, and so it would dialectically result in its opposite--even as טוב was propelled into its dialectical opposite.

The lust felt by Eve for the fruit of the tree and which corrupted the human sexual urge would now result not in pleasure but in pain--the pain of childbirth and the anguish in raising a family. The concord that had prevailed between man and woman--that too would be transformed into rivalry and the quest for domination, whether by brute force or by guile.

Adam's punishment too is expressive of the exploitation of the טוב: he who had been placed in the Garden of Eden and commanded to "work it and keep it" (2:15) without pain and anxiety, implying a life equally free of strenuous labor and boredom, would now find that mission of work taken to an extreme: "...Cursed is the ground because of thee; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee... With the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread..." (3:17-19). And indeed, man's relation with his natural environment, once so idyllic and harmonious, has now been ravaged. Hence, "...till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return" (3:19).