

"GOOD G-D"

The Torah's record of the creation of the world by G-d, no matter how you may interpret it, is one of the major fundamentals of Jewish thought. Without the concept of creation, nothing else in Judaism makes much sense.

It is therefore pertinent to raise one of the most persistent and universal questions that has bothered many a laymen as well as some of the most serious thinkers of all times: why did G-d create the world? G-d is, after all, perfect. He does not need the world. He is complete without it. Why, then, did He bring it into existence?

Furthermore, especially troublesome is the verse va-yar Elohim ki tov, and "G-d saw that it was good." What does the Bible mean when it says ki tov, "it was good?" And what do we mean by the words va-yar Elohim, "and G-d saw?" Certainly it could not mean that G-d stepped back, like an artist who has just finished an oil painting, to admire his handiwork from the proper perspective. What then does it mean?

Allow me to commend to your attention one of the most novel answers I have yet seen. It is suggested by Rabbi Jacob Zvi Meklenburg in his "Ha-ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah." The word va-yar, he says, does not mean "and he saw," but rather "he brought into existence." For va-yar in ordinary Hebrew parlance may mean not only "he saw" but "he showed." Just as the idea "to show" means to reveal something which is hidden, so creation by G-d means to bring into sight that which was previously hidden from mortal eyes. Creation by G-d means to bring an object from potential into real existence. Va-har Elohim, "and G-d brought into existence (the world)" - and why? - because ki tov, because He is good! Not that G-d saw that the world is good, but He brought the world into existence because He, G-d, is tov, good! Whether the world is good remains at best a debatable thesis. It is the goodness of G-d, not the goodness of the world, that the Torah means to emphasize. So that the verse va-yar Elohim ki tov comes

to answer the question: why did G-d create the world? And the answer is, He created because He is tov, good.

Here is a marvelous idea which finds expression centuries later in vastly different forms of thought. Thus, the Kabbalah^h speaks of God's chesed or love or goodness, as primarily hitpashtut, emanation, outpouring of creativity. And the Greek philosopher Plato (in his Timaeus) similarly maintains that God brought the world into being because He was not envious, He did not begrudge existence to those other than Himself. Because He is tov, He granted the gift of existence to the universe.

But important as this idea of a good God is philosophically, its effects and ramifications practically are far-reaching indeed. They affect each and every one of us most intimately - whether or not we are interested or understand the metaphysical problems. One need not be a philosopher at all to appreciate the consequences of this idea and this definition of goodness.

We Americans, and especially we American Jews, often speak of having a "good heart." Indeed, there are statements in the Talmud which are sufficient warrant for speaking admiringly of this quality. Yet if we are to accept what we have said concerning the words ki tov, then goodness can never be defined as a vague, benevolent sentimentalism. No one can be said to have a "good heart," unless the heart transmits goodness to his hands and his feet and his mouth. There is no difference between a good heart and a bad heart, unless the consequences are made felt to others. To spread blessing and happiness and confidence to those about you - that is the essence of being tov. To withhold these gifts from others - that is being no-good, or bad. To give goodness is the ultimate test of being good. Better yet, to be good means to do good! Like God, man is tov only when he creates, when he gives, when he reaches outward benevolently.

(No wonder the great Hassidic teacher, the author of the Tanya, maintained that Tzedakah is the most ideal mitzvah, for it is the mitzvah where man most closely imitates God. Just as God's most significant ~~act~~ act, that of the creation of the world, is an expression of His goodness - that is, His willingness to give to others, ^{so} with man, the apex of his good^{ness} consists of giving - whether charity, kindness, favors, friendship, even a smile. A good man, like the good G-d, will be a giving man.)

Perhaps with this definition of goodness, we may achieve a new insight into the famous words of the Torah in this morning's Sidra, le tov heyot ha-adam le'vado, "it is not good for man to be alone." These words were uttered by God when He beheld Adam's loneliness, his absence of a spouse. Ordinarily we interpret those words to mean, that it is not good for a man that he should be alone, without a wife. It is bad for his mind, for his heart, for his psychological tranquillity. It is better to be married, to live in society, than to be lonely. Yet the definition we have heard of tov, of goodness, would lead us to a new understanding of this verse: le tov heyot ha-adam le'vado - it is not possible for a man who is alone to be tov, good. God beheld Adam in his solitude. He is a perfect man, said God. An excellent creature. But as long as he does not have a wife and children, how can he express goodness? He may have precious sentiments, he may cherish noble thoughts, he may even be moved to shed a tear of sympathy. But as long as he does not have a wife whom he can support and upon whom to shower his love and affection, as long as he has no family for whom to provide and upon whom to bestow his kindness and his goodness and his considerateness, or, barring these, a dear friend for whom to sacrifice and serve and work and labor - then it is impossible for him to be tov. And if man cannot be good, in this sense of giving, of what use is all his life and existence? Therefore did God create Eve for Adam - so that, in giving of his own self and time and kindness to another human being, he might fulfill his own potential tov, his goodness. What a reminder to modern husbands and wives that it is more important to give ^{an} them to take, to love ~~and~~ than to be loved!

Probably one of the most general, pervasive reasons for marital ^{discord} ~~discord~~ is that ^{there is no one else --} many a man and woman even after marriage, acts as if levado -- and the aloneness and separateness can only be dissolved by being truly tov. What a reminder ^{that} to every man or woman, married or unmarried, ~~too~~ as long as another human being lives, he has the precious opportunity to be tov, that by relating to others in terms of the service we can perform and the happiness we can bring them, we become truly good people and good Jews.

Indeed the Halakah ^h emphasizes this ~~very~~ fact in a very practical way. Everyone knows that when we buy a new object, such as clothing, we recite a berakhah, a blessing. What kind of blessing do we recite? The halakhic decision is quite interesting (according to the Babylonian Talmud, see Beur Ha-Gera and Mishnah Berurah on Sh.A., O.Ch.223:5): if one purchases or acquires an object from which he alone will benefit, such as a suit or a hat, then he recites the blessing of she'hecheyanu - he thanks God for allowing him to live and survive to this happy time. But if the object he buys is something which can be enjoyed by others as well as himself, such as the house for his entire family, or an automobile in which he will be able to drive others as well as himself, then he must recite a superior and greater blessing, that of ha-tov ve'ha-metiv - blessing God "Who is good and does good to others." Here again we find this remarkable definition of goodness! If I do something for myself I may be happy; only if what I do brings happiness to others as well, may I characterize my happiness as something good and noble. Only when something fortunate happens to me that I can share with others can I thank G-d who is Himself tov, for He gave me something, and ha-metiv, for He made it possible for me, in turn, to be tov by giving to others. Goodness does not describe the static heart or the stagnating sentiment; it speaks only of self-sacrifice, of a surging sense of service and munificence that spills over the sides of the soul so that others may derive satisfaction, happiness and pleasure from me. If I take care only of myself, I am entitled to no more than she'hecheyanu; "who has let us live" - I merely live, and live for myself. Only when I consider others as well as myself can I say ha-tov ve'ha-metiv; then I am truly good -- even as G-d is good.

Our Rabbis (Berakhot 5a) expressed an admirable idea when they declared, ein tov ela Torah, "Torah is truly goodness." Torah is identical with the good. By this I believe that our Rabbis meant, that those people err grievously who conceive of Torah as something to hoard, a device invented to advance their own credit rating in Heaven. There is nothing really tov or "good" about Torah if one thinks of it selfishly, as a development of one's own mind and soul^s and family, while he blithely ignores the welfare of the community. That is why we ought to be unimpressed by the self-righteousness of those individuals who are proficiently pious, fearlessly "frum," and demonstratively devout solely in their own four cubits, but refuse to impart their learning, their experience, their loyalties and their talents to the wider community; who decline any responsibility towards the synagogue and our important communal organizations by proclaiming shalom alekha nafshi - I worry only about my own soul. This kind of attitude may ~~not~~ make them live happier; but they do no good for the world. At most they are entitled to a she'hecheyanu; never do they reach to the level of ha-tov ve'ha-metiv.

How appropriate is the definition offered by the Rabbi of Kotzk of the Yiddish expression "a tzaddik in peltz," a righteous person in a fur coat. This is the sarcastic title characterizing one who is only pseudo-pious. The Kotzker Rebbe says that there are two kinds of tzaddikim, or pious persons. These are equivalent to the two ways of keeping warm. One type of person, when he wishes to keep warm, builds a fire. The other kind puts on a fur coat, a peltz. The one who builds a fire is him^sself warm, and he succeeds in warming others as well. But the man who merely covers himself with his peltz, he reserves warmth for himself, but denies it to others. So, there is a tzaddik whose piety can benefit many people. But it is an inferior type of tzaddik who selfishly hoards his religiosity; he is tzaddik in a peltz! So it is with those who are satisfied that they and their children study Torah and observe Jewish law, but refuse to participate in those communal agencies which try to ensure the emanation and dissemination of Torah throughout all the Jewish community. They are tzaddikim in little fur coats, forever ignoring the frigid atmosphere in which their neighbors must thrive. They are not really tov, good. Ein tov ela Torah - true Torah, true

Jewishness, true Judaism, requires a creative goodness, outgoing goodness, a superabundance of goodness that is a service for others as well. ^{It} is true of people as it was of the old railroad tickets, upon which was printed the ^{legend} ~~words~~, "no good if detached."

When, a few minutes ago, we blessed the new month, we asked G-d for chayyim, for life filled with all kinds of wonderful gifts: health, wealth, Torah, good deeds, honor. But cardinal among them is: chayyim shel to^vah - a life of goodness. This is not just a summary of the other requests. More than that, it is a prayer that we learn to be tov, and share these very blessings with those about us.

Va-yar Elohim ki tov. God brought the world into existence because He is good. Man like God must understand that goodness is not a state of being, but a state of doing; not a way of feeling, but a way of giving; not a matter of being a beneficiary, but that of being a benefactor.

May God, who is ha-tov ve'ha-metiv, grant that each of us be blessed with the wherewithall, the health and the happiness, as we enter the new month, and the New Year which begins with the cycle of the Torah, to be able to be good in this expressive, creative, genuinely Jewish manner: ve'yimal'u mishalot libenu, may all the desires of our hearts be fulfilled, not only for ourselves, but le'tovah, enabling us to be good by sharing our blessings with those as yet unblessed -- Amen Selah.