NORMAN LAMM AUGUST 1967

YAVNEH SIDRA SERIES: BERESHIT

"CREATIVITY AS AN ETHICAL IDEAL"

Why did God create the world?

I do not ask this question in an ultimate metaphysical sense. For despite the various agadic, philosophic, and Kabbalistic answers proposed in our tradition -- for the sake of man, or Israel, or Torah, or "to create a dwelling place for Him in the lower worlds" -- the most convincing of all remains that of Maimonides in his Guide, namely, that the purpose of the creation and existence of the Universe is to fulfill the Will of the Creator. This, of course, is another way of saying that we have no access to an intelligible answer, that it is both vain and arrogant to attempt to capture the great Creator in the limited vessels of a teleology conceived by the creatures. My question, rather, relates to the character of God: which of His *middot* did He exercise in order to bring the cosmos into existence? The problem is not an innocuous and fruitless theological speculation for, as Maimonides taught (*Hil Deot* 1:6, based on the Mekhilta), the purpose of describing God by attributes is to inform man how *he* must live. *Imititio dei* (or, in the language of the Torah, *ve'halakhta bi'derakhav*) cannot be achieved unless we know something about Him. When we ask, therefore, what is the source of the divine creation, we are in effect inquiring as to the source and hence meaning of human creativity.

In the Yiddish manner, let us answer this question with yet another question. Throughout the account of the creation, after each major step such as the creation of light and waters and grass, the Torah tells us that va-yar Elohim ki tov, "and God saw that it was good." Now, taken literally, these passages strike one as grossly anthropomorphic: as if the Creator of the universe is a kind of cosmic artist who, after every significant addition to his composition, steps back to admire his painting or sculpture and cannot refrain from an expression of self-gratulation. But from the days of Onkelos and on, the Jewish tradition has assiduously attempted to reinterpret every possible anthropomorphism in the Bible. What, then, does it mean when the Torah tells us that "God saw that it was good?"

A striking answer is provided by R. Jacob Zevi Meklenburg (in his Ha-ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah), whether or not one is willing to accept the syntactical accuracy of his exegesis, the word va-yar, usually translated as "he saw," is, in the Hebrew, in the causative (hif'il), which can therefore be translated as "he made seen" or: he brought into existence. Thus, God said (i.e., He willed), let there be light, and va-yar Elohim, He brought this light into being, He made it visible. So, upon willing the existence of the land and the waters, of the luminaries and the grass and the animals, He made them visible, He called them into existence. But why did He do so? The answer is: Ki tov, because He is good! Not "that it was good," but "because he -- God -- is good." Whether the world as such is good remains, at best, a debatable thesis. It is the goodness of God, not of the world, that the Torah has come to teach us. Divine creativity is a function of divine goodness, for goodness is givingness.

The Kabbalah taught this secret too. One of the Sephirot (the ten stages of divine self-revelation) is Chessed -- love or goodness -- and this is identified with hitpashtut, the overflow or effluence, the emanation of existence from God. "He creates" means He gives of Himself, and this He does ki tov, because He is good, because He possesses Chessed. Plato too (in his Timaeus) maintains that God brought the world into being because he was not envious, not begrudging existence to those other than himself. (For the history of the development of this idea in Western philosophy, see Arthur O. Lovejoy's The Great Chain of Being.)

The most valuable of expression of human creativity must likewise be that of goodness-givingness. To be good is to do good. Hence, to give of oneself is to be good, and to be good is to be creative, and to be creative is to be God-like. "In the beginning God created" ultimately means, "In the first place, man must do good by giving of himself."

R. Shneour Zalman of Ladi, the great founder of HaBaD Hasidism and author of the Tanya, taught that the ideal mitzvah, the perfect commandment, is tzedakah (the giving of charity), for it is the act in which man most closely imitates God. Just as God's most significant act, creation, is an act of goodness by virtue of His giving (existence), so the apex of man's Godlikeness is his goodness expressed in giving -- whether charity or time or money or love or compassion. A good man, like the good God, is a giving being.

This insight into the meaning of tov (good) provides us with a new understanding of the Biblical view of marriage. Adam finds himself in Paradise, yet lo tov heyot ha-adam levado, "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). The companionship of man and woman is good; loneliness and solitude are not. But this divine judgment on the undesireability of celibacy is not merely a question of the welfare of the male of the species: that it is better for him psychologically and existentially to be married. It is also an ethical judgment, in terms of our definition of tov: when man is alone he cannot be "good," he has no one upon whom to shower his innate love and affection, no one to whom to give and with whom to share his gifts. With no wife to love, and no family to provide for, and no home to protect, and no other human being to whom to extend his pity and his assistance, how shall man be good? Goodness, as the act of giving, requires another human being in order to actualize itself. Thus was Eve created, in order that two human beings should now have each other in whom to inspire the divine-human attribute of *tov*. Marriage, then, is the institutionalization of human goodness, the maximalization of the potential for the deepest and most intimate giving. As such, the act of marital goodness is truly creative, in *imitatio dei* of the creation of the universe. (See further on this theme in *Mikhtav Me'Eliyahu* by the contemporary Musarite, the late and sainted R. Eliyahu Desler.)

The Halakhah too incorporates this insight. When acquiring a new object, we are required to pronounce a blessing. Which *berakhah* should be recited? The Halakhah (according to the Babylonian Talmud, see *Be'ur ha-Gera* and *Mishnah Berurah* to *Sh.A. Orach Chayyim,* 223:5) distinguishes between two types of acquisition: if the object is one from which I alone will derive benefit, such as an article of clothing, then I must recite the *she'hecheyanu,* wherein I thank God for permitting me to live and survive to this happy time. But if the object is one which affords benefit not only to me, but to others as well, such as a house or automobile, which is made to share with others, then the proper blessing is *ha-tov ve'ha-metiv,* blessing God who is good and who does good. Here again we find the outgoing, creative nature of goodness. *Ha-metiv* should be translated not as "who does good," for that alone would not account for the difference in the blessings.

A preferable translation would be, "who makes (others) good," in the sense that He teaches us to imitate His goodness (ha-tov) by giving to others. 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 share my gifts and actualize my indigenous desire to give may I recite ha-tov ve'ha-metiv; for then He has made me good, even as He is.

The highest form of creativity is neither intellectual nor artistic; it is ethical. Man is both acquisitive and benificent; he possesses elements of both the demonic and the divine; he can become both satanic and saintly. It is the function of Torah to teach man to exercise the latter in imitation of his Creator. Ein tov ela Torah -- "Only Torah is truly 'good'" (Berakhot 5a).