

**Parshat Bereishit:
Being Good**
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Class of 2017

The other night I went to see “Wicked”. It is a prequel to the story of Wizard of Oz. A play showing the audience how Galinda the good witch and Elfaba the “wicked witch of the west” were really friends, and that perhaps the wicked witch of the west, wasn’t so wicked after all.

Throughout the play, the audience is brought to question what it means to be “good”. Galinda is happy and bubbly. At times she is a people pleaser but only for personal gain, while at other times it is clear that she just wants others to see good in life. Elfaba on the other hand is quite cold, which could be because society shunned her as her skin was green. But at the same time, she fights for the rights of those who don’t have a voice. She willingly gives up power and fame, because she realizes that Oz was corrupt. She accepted the name of being wicked and in some ways played into that, so that Galinda could have what she wanted and so she would not have to do anything that she truly felt was morally wrong.

In Bereishit we hear a lot about things being “good”. After almost every day of creation we are told, “it was good”. We read about the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God exclaims before the creation of Eve “it is not good for man to be alone”. The word *tov*, good, is used over and over, but in each context it can teach us different lessons.

How often do we look at what we have accomplished and say, “wow, I did a good job”? After each and every act of creation, God looks at the new creation and proclaims: וַיְהִי טוֹב – “It was good” (1:4,10,13,18,21,25). God makes this pronouncement six times. This statement is articulated regarding the light, seas, land and vegetation, luminaries, birds and fish, and animals. For the first seven times, it doesn’t seem to be based in relation to something else. It wasn’t that it was “bad” before, rather God looked at His creation, and recognized the good that was made.

There are times that we do not know the completion of what we have created, and so it might be more difficult, or maybe impossible to make a claim of good. It is when humankind was created that we do not hear about if it was good or not. According to the Ramban,

Freewill is accorded every person. If they desire to take the good path and be righteous, they are free to do so; and if they desire to take the evil one and be wicked they are free to do so... the Creator does not preordain a person to be good or bad.

Even though God did not say it was good after the creation of man, there still and overarching statement of “good” at the end, saying that “all that He has made was very good.”

We hear about the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil. We see that there is an opposite of good. We see that there might not be intrinsic goodness in everything; there is potential for another option.

It is here that the story of Galinda and Elfaba fit in. When are we being good and when are we being

wicked? If I fight against tradition for the rights of others, am I being good? Are there times that I need to do right for myself and won't be considered selfish? In Deuteronomy 6:8, we read "do what is good and right in the eyes of God". We all know that there are times that what is good and what is right, might not mean the same thing, but it is our job to try our best to do both at the same time.

We see towards the end of the creation story, God says "it is not good for man to be alone." What does this statement of "not good" mean? The Gemara in Yevamot (62b- 63a) gives two different ideas. One is that "not good", means that a person has no joy or happiness in life if they are alone (ie. not married). The other idea brought is that it is just difficult physically to be alone. There is a lot to do in the world, and there is no way to actually accomplish EVERYTHING without some help, be that from a partner, friends or family. It is Seforno, a 15th Century Italian Biblical commentator, who teaches that if we only had time or energy to devote to ourselves, we would not be able to live up to "being in His likeness and image." That somehow, even though God is alone in the "upper world", in order for us in the "lower world" to maintain that holiness, we need to be with others. Not only do we need other people to help us, but we need to be helping others so that they too can achieve goodness.

In the Wizard of Oz, the Wicked Witch of the West seems to be wicked, and at the end there is a bit of happiness that she is killed. In Wicked, Elfabra, seems to actually be someone who is trying to do good in the world, but is somewhat misunderstood.

We should try and see good in the world, see the worth of our creations. I think that most people want to do good. But what if going against the expectation is really what is good? Are we still able to be seen as good, or are we always going to be seen as a rebel, or worse, wicked?



Rabbi Eryn London, is a chaplain resident at New York Presbyterian - Weill Cornell Medical Center. She earned her B.A from Goucher College, where she majored in theatre, minoring in psychology and Judaic studies. Eryn subsequently earned an M.A. at Goldsmiths, University of London. She specialized in applied drama: theatre in educational, community, and social contexts. Eryn made aliyah in February of 2010 and studied at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and at the Susi Bradfield Women's Institute of Halachic Leadership at Midreshet Lindenbaum. She is one of the co-founders of "Gam Yachad", a multi-denominational Beit Midrash for Israeli rabbinical students. Eryn has served as scholar in residence and rabbinic intern at the ACT Jewish Community in Canberra, Australia, Adath Shalom B'nai Israel in Chicago, Illinois, and at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, New Jersey. In addition, Eryn has lectured in various communities in Israel, Canada, Colombia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.