

Parshat Bereishit

Is the Image of Greatness Merely Good?

Rabbi Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch

Class of 2022

When one opens the Torah, it can be seen in the special calligraphy or sofrut in the Ashkenazi tradition, the letter pey has a hidden letter bet inside of it, in the white space surrounded by black ink. The word pey in Hebrew means mouth, as the world was made into being through words, spoken communication. Accordingly, the very first word is bereishit, with the first letter in the Torah being bet.

The Talmud Yerushalmi¹, based on Deuteronomy 33:2² describes that when the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, it was engraved in black fire on white fire. There are a few different explanations of what this means, mostly with the black fire being what one can see and the white fire being what one cannot see. One understanding is that the black fire is the written Torah and white fire is the oral Torah. Another more mystical possibility is that perhaps the black fire is the physical and the white fire refers to things that are hidden or not so readily apparent.

The Torah begins with the story of creation, that in the beginning there was nothing, everything was brand new, without a template. The all powerful God simply spoke, declared what would be and it was. And after each step, God proclaimed that it was “good.” Since there was nothing before, and something now exists, it seems to be objective, and I wonder what it could possibly mean that there is a goodness quality ascribed to these actions and results? Each creation is miraculous and unique, as it has never existed before, and each creation is harmoniously connected with the ones before it. The ultimate creation happens on day six, the last of creation, humankind.

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ
כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הַרֹמֵשׁ
הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵם
אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:
(בראשית א:כז)

God created man in His image, first stating the intention, using the word *betzalmenu*, then after it is done, *betzalmo*.

¹ Jerusalem Talmud Shekalim 6:1:50

²Sefaria, Deuteronomy 33:2

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה מִסִּינַי בָּא וְזָרַח מִשְׁעִיר לְמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מִהָר פָּאֲרָן וְאֵתָה מִרְבַּבַּת קָדֵשׁ מִיַּמִּינָו (אשדת) [אש דת] למו:
He said: The LORD came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, And approached from Ribebboth-kodesh,^aCf. *Meribath-kadesh*, 32.51. Lightning flashing at them from His right.^b

And, like the pattern before, a little later in verse 31, God concludes day six, looks around at his work and proclaims that it was good, but this time it is not merely good, it is very good. According to Ramban, this wording of וְהָיָה טוֹב מְאֹד, behold it was very good, signifies their permanent existence. This insert of *meod*, could also mean mostly, meaning that humankind is mostly good, leaving room for evil. Humankind is imperfect (as we will learn with the story of the Garden of Eden just shortly after) even though created in God’s image.

The creation of humankind is so complex, it has two stories, a few verses later on in Genesis 1:26-27

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

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 וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ
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 אֱלֹקִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

(בראשית א:כו-כז)

In this version of the creation of humankind, we continue to have the word *b'tzelem*, that now in two individuals, this creation of humankind was actively made in God’s image. God made man *בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ*, in our image and after our likeness, according to Rashi refers to the power to comprehend and to discern. So as we saw before, even though humanity is created in God’s image, there is a balance here against greatness to imperfection, individuality, comprehension and discernment.

Can we learn from trying to define good as being not only satisfied, but pleased and proud of our accomplishments? We can be like God in understanding that there is room for imperfection within greatness. Our world needs the existence of the black fire and the white fire, what is obvious and what is hidden beneath the surface.



Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch is a student at Yeshivat Maharat in the class of 2022. She has completed various internships including placements with a national voter registration campaign, Hillel International, chaplain intern at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and served as Multifaith Intern with New Sanctuary Coalition through Truah's Rabbinical Student Fellowship. She has completed the cross seminary organizing course with JOIN for Justice and The Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y. Phoebe Ana studied at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Middlebury College Language Schools, and has studied Torah at Drisha, Hadar and Pardes, where she was involved in organizing a weekly partnership minyan. She has experience teaching English as a Second Language to adult learners and Hebrew and Judaic studies at various religious schools in New York City. She grew up in South Florida and earned a B.A. in Religion and Anthropology from American University (Washington, DC). Phoebe Ana is interested in exploring how to create a supportive and nourishing environment for all and is committed to further pursuing a society that reflects our values. She lives in Washington Heights, New York and serves as Partnerships Lead at Tzedek Box.