

TORAH MIETZION

New Readings in Tanach

BERESHIT

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Parashat Bereshit

“And God Saw that It Was Good”

by Rav Chanoch Waxman

I.

Parashat Bereshit begins with a bang. “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In a striking passage, the Torah teaches the crucial philosophical and theological truth that it was God who created the world. From a certain perspective, one might say that the rest of the Torah, or at least the remainder of the creation story presented in chapter one, constitutes mere detailing and development of this fundamental theme.

However, this is not the only fundamental truth chapter one aims to teach. Throughout the chapter the Torah emphasizes not just God’s creative act, but also the quality of the created objects. After the introductory verses (1:1–2), God orders the existence of light (1:3). The immediate accomplishment of this directive is closely followed by God’s observation that His work is good: “And God saw that the light was good...” (1:4). From this point on, the staccato phrase, “And God saw that it was good,” appears repeatedly throughout the chapter (1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Taken together, these six appearances of the term “good” more or less follow a pattern and define a general creation formula. God speaks and creates. Following on the heels of God’s creation of a particular object or entity, God notes that His work is good.

In addition, the chapter closes with the phrase, “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (1:31). The placement of the term “good” at the end of the chapter, the modification of the stock phrase to include the modifier “very” (טוב מאוד) and the expansion of God’s vision to include “everything that He had made” all serve to emphasize the point made above. God’s world and the things He has made are good.

Finally, the term “good” modifies God’s work seven times throughout the chapter, highlighting this as a key term and generating a parallel between the seven “goods” and the seven days of the creation process. No more need be said. Chapter one of Sefer Bereshit teaches not just of God the creator, but also of the good things He has made, the “good world.”

II.

The making of mankind constitutes the crescendo of the creation narrative of chapter one. God creates man last, at the conclusion of six days of labor, an entire world of warm-up. This seems to signal that man represents God’s crowning achievement in creating the “good world.” Let us take a look at the text.

And God said, Let Us make mankind in Our image and likeness and they will have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and over all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them ... (1:26–28)

Strikingly, the term “good” is completely absent from *parashat adam*, the creation of mankind. The key word of Chapter One is missing! Furthermore, the creation of man deviates from the standard creation formula. While in the standard formula, creation is always followed by vision, i.e. God’s observation of goodness, here God makes no observation as to the goodness of His handiwork. It is not the case that God created man and then “saw that it was good.” We are left with the apparent conclusion that while all else in God’s world is good, man is apparently not “good.”

This seems a bit hard to accept (see *Bereshit Raba* 9:14 and Abarbanel on our topic). A short detour to the end of *Parashat Bereshit* should help explain this intuition. There, the Torah depicts God as regretting the creation of man: “And God repented that He had made man...” (6:5). This regret results from the evil (*ra*) of man’s thoughts, heart and actions: “And God saw (וירא) that the wickedness (רעת) of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil (רע) continually” (6:5). The text implicitly contrasts the “*ra*” (רע) of man in Chapter Six with the “*tov*” (טוב) of the world of Chapter One through the obvious “bad-good” linguistic dichotomy.

This contrast is further highlighted by the texts’ utilizing the phrase, “And God saw” (וירא), part of the stock good-world formula of Chapter One. When God observes man, he sees “bad.” This seems to constitute a result of the events of *Parashat Bereshit*: rebellion, murder, etc. Of course mankind deserves the accolade “bad” by the time we reach Chapter Six. However, in Chapter One, we stand at the very inception of man’s existence, before mankind’s sad history of disobedience and sin. Is it truly the case that man is already “not good” from the very start? Can it really be that from his very beginnings he constitutes the proverbial “bad apple” in an otherwise good world?

III.

Often in Torah study, a new question can help answer an old question. In this spirit, let us plunge a little deeper into the role of the term “good” in Chapter One. Earlier, I argued that the term should be viewed as part of a creation formula in which God first creates a particular thing and then immediately observes that it is good. Furthermore, I claimed that the seven appearances of the term in the chapter parallel the seven days of the entire creation process. Finally, I maintained that the last appearance of the term, the “very good” of 1:31, constitutes a deliberate variation on the stock phrase meant to summarize and modify the entire creation of Chapter One.

Two conclusions, or perhaps expectations, emerge naturally from this line of thinking. First, every object created should be followed by the observation of its goodness. Second, the six appearances of the stock phrase, “And God saw that it was good,” parallel the six days of active

creation and should be apportioned one to each day. A quick glance at Chapter One should be enough to demonstrate that this structure more or less holds up (see Days One, Four, Five and Six). However, the creation of man (1:27) is not the only problem. Let us take a careful look at the making of the "firmament" (רָקִיעַ) on Day Two.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. (1:6–8)

God makes the firmament and yet does not note its goodness. Does this mean that the sky, like man, is not good? Is Day Two not a good day? Quite clearly, something in our thinking must be modified.

Reading the Day Three story and a bit of thought about the making of the firmament should provide the necessary clarification. The story of Day Three (1:9–12) divides into two subsections. In the first, God causes the waters under the firmament, now called heaven, to gather and move aside, thereby creating the dry land and the seas. God then sees that "it was good" (1:9–10). In the second subsection, God decrees the existence of grasses and trees. As usual, upon realization of His decree, God observes that "it was good" (1:11–12). It appears that the missing "good" of the firmament and Day Two has made its way to Day Three.

This is no accident, as an organic connection exists between the creation of the firmament on Day Two and the creation of the dry land and seas on Day Three. In Chapter One, the structure of the world around us consists of dry land, seas, sky and waters above the sky – all formed out of the watery chaos (1:2). Day Two (1:6–8) and the first subsection of Day Three (1:9–10) describe the process by which this occurs. First, God limits the waters by creating the firmament, placing some water above the sky and some beneath. Second, in the next stage of the limitation, God causes the waters to gather together, thereby revealing the dry land. The creation of the firmament, dry land and seas in fact constitutes one unit that may be termed "the limitation of the waters."

This should help explain why the term “good” fails to appear on Day Two in reference to the firmament. In fact, it does appear in reference to the firmament – but only in verse ten, at the end of the process of “the limitation of the waters,” a process in which the creation of the firmament constitutes merely a preliminary stage. Only after the waters have found their **final place**, only after the creation of the sea-land-sky system is **complete**, does the word “good” appear. Only that which is complete and “in place” can be termed good in God’s eyes.

As signaled above, I believe that the problem of the firmament and Day Two provides crucial insight into the meaning of the term “good” in Chapter One. Only that which has found its proper place, which is complete and which plays its role as part of a well-ordered world, can be termed “good.” However, to resolve the problem of the creation of man, we must take another step and figure out in what sense mankind at the moment of its creation has not yet found its “proper place.”

IV.

The difficult phrase and concept “*tzelem Elokim*,” image of God, constitutes part of the core of *parashat adam*, the creation narrative of mankind. The term or a variation on its root appears once in the planning stage: “Let Us make mankind in Our image (1:26) “... (צַלְמֵנוּ), and twice in the action stage: “So God created mankind in His own image (בְּצַלְמוֹ), in the image of God (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים) He created them...” (1:27). But what does it mean?

The options suggested by Jewish exegetes span the gamut from the actual form of God (Rashi 1:27), to divine soul (Ramban), to rational intellect (Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 1:1). In my opinion, an additional interpretation of the concept of *tzelem Elokim* can be formulated in light of the actions of Elokim in Chapter One.

While God does indeed create the world out of nothing at the outset of the chapter, creation out of nothing is not His primary occupation in Chapter One. Rather, most of God’s activity in the chapter is dedicated to the process of fashioning the primordial chaos into a well-ordered and inhabited world (see Ramban 1:1). A quick reference to the text should help confirm this claim. At the start of the narrative, the world is “without form and void” (1:2); it is shapeless and empty of

recognizable entities – but it is not completely empty. There are “depths,” “water” and “darkness” (1:2) – an altogether frightening and dreary picture, but all is not lost. The very same verse also refers to “the wind of God” (רוח אֱלֹהִים), a symbol of God’s presence. Elokim subsequently creates light, the antithesis of the dark of 1:2. On Day Two, God creates the firmament, the beginning of the process of “the limitation of the waters,” thereby eventually yielding the sky-land-seas structure, the antidote to the shapeless encompassing wateriness of 1:2. By the middle of Day Three, God moves on to the problem of “void” and in the remainder of the six days of active work fills the land with grasses, trees, animals and people; the heavens with birds, sun, moon and stars; and the seas with fish. Elokim of Chapter One is not so much God the creator but perhaps more accurately God the constructor, the shaper, the molder, the conqueror of chaos, who through various means arranges a well-ordered and inhabited world.

The internal structure and interrelationship of the six days of creation support this interpretation. The days and their creation contents may be charted as follows:

# Day	Creation contents	# Day	Creation contents
One	<i>Light</i>	Four	<i>Sun, Moon, and Stars</i>
Two	<i>Sky</i>	Five	<i>Birds and Fish</i>
Three	<i>Land, Grass and Trees</i>	Six	<i>Animals and People</i>

We may well think of column two, the items created on Days One through Three, as resources. If so, the items listed in column four, created on Days Four through Six, constitute the utilizers of these resources. The heavenly bodies “utilize” light, the birds utilize and fill the sky and the animals and people utilize the land, grass and trees. While some details remain to be ironed out (see questions for further study), the basic idea should be clear. Elokim, the conqueror of chaos, structures a well-ordered, balanced and full world.

This brings us full circle to the concept of *tzelem Elokim*, the making of mankind in God’s image in Chapter One. Let us return to *parashat adam*.

Let Us make mankind in Our image and likeness and they will have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and over all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (1:26–28)

Elokim plans and executes the making of a creature in His own image – a creature with the capacity for conquering chaos, for structuring a well-ordered, balanced, full and good world. God charges this being with filling the world and ruling over it. In fact, He charges this being to realize the meaning and potential of its own *tzelem Elokim*, its own built in divine-like potential – to fashion and maintain a good world.

All of this should help us finally tackle the problem of the lack of “And God saw that it was good” in *parashat adam*, a problem we reformulated as the question of mankind’s “place” and “completeness.” The analysis until this point should make us realize that mankind of Chapter One has no particular “place.” Rather, its place in the scheme of things is in the fulfilling of its mission, a mission that involves moving over the world, filling it, ruling it, and when necessary reinforcing, ensuring and remaking the good world wrought by God. Man remains incomplete and out of “place” as long as he has not yet fulfilled his mission.

If so, we realize that mankind is not bad from the very start, nor even “not good.” Rather, as *tzelem Elokim* whose good lies external to him, in the challenge of his mission in the world, man is **not yet good**. Only the crucible of history and the fulfillment of his mission will deliver the verdict.

V.

Before closing, I would like to explore another aspect of mankind as *tzelem Elokim*, graced with potential, confronted with challenge, and as yet “good.” Much has been said in Jewish thought and exegesis equating man and the world. For example, both the famed Mishnaic statement valuing the

life of a single individual as equal to the world (Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:3), and the kabbalistic doctrine of man as a microcosm (*olam katan*) make this fundamental equation. In point of fact, this equation has its roots in the language of the Bible. Let us return to the language of Chapter One.

In the beginning God created (ברא) the Heaven and the Earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep; and a wind from God moved over the surface of the waters. (1:1–2)

Previously, I have implicitly argued that these two verses should be viewed as a kind of preface to the primary description of world-making, or more properly world-structuring, of Chapter One. To elaborate, verse two should be read as a description of the state of the world in its embryonic stage, at the beginning the process, before the ordering of the six days of creation. Verse one constitutes a kind of preface to the preface. The terms "Heaven" and "Earth" are not references to the specific objects of sky and ground – after all, they are made on Days Two and Three respectively. Rather, they constitute a biblical colloquialism for "everything," a way to say "the world" (see 2:1; 14:19; Ex. 31:17; Deut. 3:24). As such, the verses teach 1. God's creation of the world, and 2. the initial state of the created world, chaotic void, darkness and depths. (See Rashi on 1:1, Ramban on 1:1, *Bereshit Raba* 1:19.)

From this point on, the term "*bara*" (ברא), normally translated as "created," all but disappears from Chapter One. While God speaks (ויאמר), and makes (ויעש), the word "*bara*" (ברא) is almost completely absent from the ensuing chapter. This is not surprising. It is a word utilized to describe the creation of "the world" and primordial chaos. The remainder of the chapter describes the countering, limitation and structuring of this initial state. Consequently, the term "*bara*" is banished from the text, its place taken by speaking and making.

All of this changes when we arrive at the making of mankind. By now, the verses should be familiar:

And God said, Let Us make (נעשה) mankind... So God created (ויברא) mankind in his own image, in the image of God

He created (ברא) him; male and female He created (ברא) them.
(1:26–27)

In place of the standard terminology of Chapter One – “speaking” and “making” – the Torah reverts to the term “*bara*” (ברא) to describe the making of mankind and utilizes this verb three times within one verse. Moreover, the planning stage (1:26) utilizes the standard language to plan the forming of man. However, as we move to execution (1:27), the standard language is deliberately supplanted by the non-standard terminology previously used to describe the creation of the whole world – the term “*bara*.” No wonder Jewish thought and exegesis have consistently equated man and the world.

All of this is meant to force upon us the following conclusion. If mankind stands in parallel to the world, if the creation process of mankind parallels and resembles that of the world, then just as the world is created in an initial state, so too mankind is created in an initial state. If the world begins its way possessed by the void, empty, dark and deep, so too mankind begins its way possessing void, emptiness, darkness and depths. If the positive element in the world at the beginning of its making is the wind, spirit or presence of Elokim (1:2), then so too the positive in mankind at its beginnings is its “*tzelem Elokim*.” Just as Elokim of Chapter One counters the darkness and chaos and forms a well-ordered and good world, so too must *tzelem Elokim* counter his own internal dark chaos and form a well-ordered and good world.

In fact, the text of *parashat adam* utilizes both the verb “*bara*” and the noun “*tzelem*” three times, implicitly balancing them off one against the other and placing them in tension. The entire parallel implicitly provides another challenge to mankind, another mission: the task of self-making. Hence we have stumbled upon another sense in which man is **not yet** complete, **not yet** good. Mankind has yet to imitate the labor of Elokim, not just in the external realm of the world, but also in the internal realm of man’s self.

While this all sounds quite nice and literary, a sharper formulation of the supposed darkness, depths and chaos of man’s initial state seems in order. Without overstressing the point, the terms of 1:2, “*tohu vavohu*” (best translated as some sort of combination of emptiness, formlessness,

and chaos), "*hoshekh*" (darkness), and finally "*tehom*" (depths), strike a dreary image in and of themselves. Furthermore, they comprise the state of the world **before** the initiation of God's action during the six days, the establishment of "good" in the world. Apparently, they are symbolic of a state prior to "good" or other than "good." They symbolize what we normally call "evil," or at least the potential for something other than good that lurks within the world. It is no accident that these terms become transformed into symbols of destruction, death and evil throughout Tanach (see I Sam. 12:21; Jer. 4:22–27; Is. 5:20; 9:1; 34:8–12; 49:9; Job 10:20–22).

Does mankind possess a dark side? Can man's very self pulsate with chaotic and often destructive desires? Does he contain within himself the potential for evil? These are, of course, rhetorical questions. Of course mankind possesses a dual nature, potential for both good and evil. Self-discipline and the creation of a good self constitute an almost unceasing challenge for mankind (see Ramban 1:26 and *Bereshit Raba* 9:9 for the classic rabbinic formulations of man's dual nature). Consequently, the possibility of man's goodness is intimately tied up with the darkness that resides within. Meeting the challenge comprises the very essence of man's goodness.

VI.

By the end of *Parashat Bereshit*, the Torah states that God saw "that the wickedness (רעַת) of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil (רע) continually" (6:5). The first generations of mankind failed in their task and were subsequently destroyed. But the story does not end there. The task remained, and yet remains in front of each successive generation of mankind, waiting to be successfully met.