



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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# Between Heaven and Earth

Sometimes, what the Torah *doesn't* say is as important as what it says. Such is the case with two omissions in the Torah's description of Creation.

The Torah marks the completion of each phase of Creation with the phrase, “וַיֵּרָא, אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב, and God saw that it was good.” On two occasions, however, this phrase is conspicuously absent. It is omitted on Day Two of Creation when Hashem separates Heaven and Earth and, once again, when the Torah discusses the creation of man.

Scholars across the ages have offered various explanations for these omissions...

Noting that וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב actually *appears twice* on Day Three of Creation, Rashi explains that HaShem begins the task of separating independent domains from each other on Day Two, when He divides Heaven and Earth. The overall task of separating such domains, however, is only completed on the third day, with the further division of the land from the sea. Thus, וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב is held until Day Three, and recorded only when the overall task is complete.

The approach of many scholars to the second omission of וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב, in connection with the creation of man, is particularly meaningful as we move away from the Yamim Noraim. The verdict on man, these authorities maintain, is “still out.” Man—uniquely endowed with free will—is not declared “good” upon his formation. He must *earn that title* through his own actions.

Many years ago, however, it occurred to me that another approach is also possible. Perhaps the two omissions in the Creation narrative are, in fact, deeply connected.

I would like to suggest that Hashem's separation of Heaven and Earth is not labeled “good” in the Torah, simply because *that separation is not good*. God wants Heaven and Earth to be connected. He desires that each of these two realms affect one another. Why, then, does HaShem separate these domains?

*To challenge man.* As a partner with God in creation, *man is tasked with the reunification of heaven and earth.* We are meant to re-connect that which God separated on the second day. Our task is to be מְקַדֵּשׁ שֵׁם שְׁמַיִם, to bring God into the world by living in accordance with His will. Every mitzva that we do, every act of chesed and justice that we perform, lessens the gap between Heaven and Earth. And, as that gap closes, we all draw closer to

the point when God will say about man's creation: "it is good."

## We are not meant to escape our internal conflict by rejecting either aspect of our being

This explanation is consistent with Judaism's general approach to the nature of man. Other faith traditions preach that sanctity in this world can only be found through retreat from physical pleasures. Rejecting such retreat, our tradition sees man's uniqueness as stemming from our formation "מן העליונים ומן התחתונים, from the upper and the lower spheres." We are created "dust of the earth," into which God divinely breaths "a living soul."

Man is a creature in conflict. We are part of the animal kingdom with its natural urges and drives. At the same time, we reach towards the heavens through spirituality, art, poetry, music and more. We are not meant to escape our internal conflict by rejecting either aspect of our being. Instead, we are meant to embrace the inevitable struggle. Our physical being and our spiritual potential are both gifts from God. Our task is to unite the two through the sanctification of life in this physical world. Our challenge is to unite Heaven and Earth, every day, in our lives.

As we begin our year together, never has this challenge been so clearly defined. While we cannot hope to answer why HaShem has thrust the world into a global pandemic, we can identify what He wants



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from us. As with all trials in life, He wants us to meet our shared challenges together, in a way that sanctifies His name.

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## Our time can be much better spent focusing on ourselves and finding ways to foster own development

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This effort, however, can be extremely difficult. With no end to the situation in sight, we find ourselves feeling increasingly isolated, increasingly anxious, increasingly frustrated. Disagreements are intensified; fuses grow shorter; we tend to lash out more quickly. Friendships are tested; families are under stress; it's only natural to find someone else to blame...

And yet, one by one, we can turn things around. If Covid teaches us anything at all, it teaches us how connected we really are. We cannot control the actions of others, but we certainly can control our own.

On a personal level, disputes can be defused from the outset if we learn to “agree to

disagree.” As strongly as we feel about an issue, others feel strongly otherwise. We can argue our positions passionately, yet still be strong enough to end the discussion respectfully, before things start becoming personal. Relationships are too precious to risk by reacting unthinkingly, at a time when we are all under stress.

Communally, we have every right to object when others fail to follow the rules that protect us all. We also have the right to speak out against such behavior, in settings and forums where our words can make a concrete difference. Beyond those settings, however, spending our personal time discussing the behavior of others—over whom we, personally, have no control—serves little purpose. Such discussions only increase the rancor in the air around us. Our time can be much better spent focusing on ourselves and finding ways to foster own development.

*B'ezrat HaShem*, the pandemic will end—and we will, once again, be faced with the challenge of living with each other. The less animosity we feel and project today, the easier our shared path in the future. Ultimately, our way out of the darkness will only be found together.

More than ever, now is the time to unite Heaven and Earth; to act in a way that will make God proud. And if we are successful, perhaps HaShem will be moved to mercy as He delivers upon us the verdict *וְרָא אֱלֹקִים כִּי טוֹב*. ■

*Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU press volumes “Unlocking the Torah Text,” and “Unlocking the Haggada.*

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