Halachic Man’s Creativity

The daughter of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Dr. Tova Lichtenstein was asked to describe the essential teaching of her father in a word. She chose the following word: Creativity. (YUTorah, “Creativity and Tikun Olam: The Rav and Rav Aharon”)

A close study reveals the Rav’s enchantment with this notion and its centrality in his worldview.

Turning to the very first verse of the Torah we learn that God is a Creator (Bereshit 1:1). Only a few verses later we are told that man is made in the image of God (Ibid 1:26). Although there are many interpretations to this mysterious idea, the Rav emphasized that it relates to the creative ability with which man is endowed. We are sent to this earth to serve as an agent of God. We are also creators. (Derashot Harav, p 47).

A midrashic teaching which fascinated the Rav portrays God creating and recreating the world until He found this one (Gen. Rabbah 3:7). Taught the Rav: Of course, Ha-kadosh Baruch Hu did not need practice. Of course He could get it right the first time. He was teaching us, human beings, a powerful lesson. We also have the ability to create and recreate. Says Ha-kadosh Baruch Hu, in the teaching of the Rav: “Don’t despair. Don’t get frustrated. Follow in the footsteps of the Divine. I did it. You can do it too. You too can be successful in creating for yourself a world that will be a strong and lasting one.” (Majesty and Humility, Zeigler, pp. 11-12).

The Rav argued that the world we live in has been left incomplete and that the Almighty invites man to partner with him in making it whole. This is an essential component of our mandate to create. This idea can be traced again to the creation story: “And God made the two great luminaries” (Bereshit 1:16). The Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 6:3) indicates that at the dawn of creation the sun and the moon were of equal size, until the moon approached God and complained that two kings cannot wear one crown. In response, God shrunk the moon. God’s diminution of the moon, pegimas halevana, is symbolic of the fact that God left creation incomplete. The imperfection is reflected in the fact that man constantly struggles with nature and at times its catastrophes. Nature’s hostility to man is represented by pegimas halevana.

God wants man to rule and be victorious over nature: man himself must symbolically reverse pegimas halevana and thus become a partner with God in creation. (Chumash Mesoras HaRav 1:pp. 8-9 and Halachic Man p. 106)

In a similar vein, the Rav offered a brilliant explanation as to why Birkat Hamazon...
requires a longer text than the blessing we make following eating one of the seven species and other food items. The fact that we make a shorter blessing for other items strikes us as counter-intuitive. The Rav explains that when it comes to fruits and vegetables, human beings merely do the harvesting.

“It is God who does most of the work. Fruits and vegetables grow by the laws of nature, subject to the will of God. During the period of growth, people are passive, and when the fruit has grown, they merely have to gather it in. Bread, however, is very different. The wheat grows by itself, but it is up to human beings to do the work of plowing and planting, harvesting and grinding, sifting and kneading, and the entire procedure of baking. The fuller and more elaborate Birkat Hamazon is most appropriate because it signifies the noblest act of man, namely, partnering with God. “(The Royal Table, Norman Lamm p. 97)

“The world is to be viewed as an uncompleted creation whereby God deliberately made the world imperfect in order to leave room for human creativity. Man’s charge is to finish it and act as a co-creator with God.” (Ibid)

At the conclusion of the first week of creation, on Friday afternoon, as Shabbat was entering at sunset, the world was left unfinished. This was done intentionally. Man is to partner in creation.1

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1 The verse says: “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all His work which God created to make” (Bereshit 2:3). The clause “created to make” is obscure. Perhaps it...
One of God’s names, sha-dai, is an allusion to this aspect of God in his creation of the world. The Rav cited the Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 46, also see Chagigah 12a that makes this same point) which teaches that God, in the act of creation, issues the following order to the world: Dai! Enough! In the act of creation, God, so to speak, limits his creation.

The first time we find God’s name sha-dai is in the context of the Avraham story. The Rav offered a unique interpretation of the imperative issued to Avraham (Bereshit 17:1). “I am the Lord - Sha-dai - walk before me, and be wholehearted.” The intent of this verse is not merely to be “wholehearted,” rather “to make whole.” In other words, God charged Avraham with the mission of connotes a world created that is left unfinished and must be made whole by man.

In what ways does the notion of creativity characterize the life of a Jew?

First, in the area of Torah learning there is nothing as precious as a chiddush, revealing a new perspective, exposing new insight. This tradition of chiddush in learning and intellectual breakthrough is given particular prominence in the world of Brisk and can be traced back to Rav’s forebear, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin.

In his classic work on the topic of Torah learning, Nefesh HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin writes: “Chidushei Torah, true Torah innovations, that are newly developed by those who study Torah, there’s no limit to the value of the greatness of their awesome and remarkable merit...for each and every particular word that is innovated from a person’s mouth, the Holy One blessed be He kisses it and crowns it and from it is built a new, independent world...” (Nefesh Hachaim, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Shaar 4, Chapter 12).

Second, the Rav contends that creativity stands at the center of the mitzvah of Teshuva: “The Halacha introduced the concept of creation, in all its force and splendor in the commandment of repentance... Repentance, according to the halachic view, is an act of creation - self-creation. The severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous “I,” and the creation of a new “I,”

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possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longing, goals - this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.” (Halachic Man p. 110).

When the Rav discusses the creative ability in man he compares two Hebrew terms. In a talk he delivered as President of the Mizrachi Religious Zionist Movement, the Rav pointed to the similarity between the words ayef and yegiah. They both translate to mean tiredness or exhaustion. And yet they vastly differ from one another. An act that engenders ayefut, exhaustion, is one that lacks a creative component. Yegia on the hand is an engagement that requires enormous effort and yet it propels a person forward and is revitalizing.

Within this context the Rav illustrated how the creative gesture is part and parcel of the life of the Jew today in the endeavor of building and strengthening the State of Israel. Although the effort is often strenuous and exhausting and requires immense effort, due to its enormous fulfillment it brings with it renewed enthusiasm, knowing that we are partnering with the Almighty in this most noble and ennobling mission. (The Rav Speaks, p. 203-205)