

Parashat Bereishit 5782, 2021

*“Let Us Make Man”*

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**This *d’var Torah* is dedicated to the memory of *mori u’rebbe HaRav Dr. Moshe Dovid Tendler zatzal. T’hay nafsho tzururah b’tzor hachayim.***

Several of our *parasha*’s most thought-provoking *pasukim* focus upon Hashem’s plan to create humankind:

And G-d said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” And G-d created man in His image; in the image of G-d He created him; male and female He created them. And the L-rd G-d formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul. (*Sefer Bereishit* 1:26-27, 2:7, this and the following Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The phrase, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” has been the subject of intense scrutiny since time immemorial. To whom, after all, did the Holy One blessed be He refer when He employed the terms, “us” and “our?” In his commentary on our verse, Rashi (1040-1105) provides us with a celebrated midrashically-suffused interpretation: **Let us make man:** From here we learn the humility of the Holy One, blessed be He. Since man was created in the likeness of the angels, and they would envy him, He consulted them... **Let us make man:** Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation...”

Rashi notes that the angels were jealous and “they did not assist Him in His creation.” *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 8:5 elaborates upon their opposing reactions, and reveals that some angels were completely hostile to Hashem’s grand plan:

Rabbi Simon said: “At the very moment the Holy One blessed be He sought to create the first man, the Ministering Angels gathered together into various groups and caucuses. Some of them declared: ‘Let him be created!’ While others proclaimed: ‘Do not create him!’ This is written in the verse: ‘*Chesed* and *emet* have met and *tzedek* and *shalom* have kissed [that is, have encountered one another].” (*Sefer Tehillim* 85:11, translations my own)

At this juncture, the *midrash* presents the competing claims of *chesed*, *emet*, *tzedek* and *shalom* that were championed by the Ministering Angels:

*Chesed* said: "Let him be created! After all, humankind is capable of acting with lovingkindness." *Emet* protested: "Do not create him! Humankind is nothing other than a pack of lies!" *Tzedek* said: "Let him be created! After all, humankind will undertake righteous acts." *Shalom* said: "Do not create him! Humankind represents endless fighting [and violence]. What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He grabbed *emet* and tossed it to the ground! This is what the verse states: "And He threw *emet* to the ground." (*Sefer Daniel* 8:12)

In sum, *chesed* and *tzedek* strongly supported the creation of humankind, while *emet* and *shalom* were radically opposed. While this midrash certainly conceals more than it reveals, it teaches us that humankind is the ultimate study in contrasts. On one level we have the potential to emulate the *malachai hasharat*: "Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty." (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:6) Nonetheless, immediately prior to this paean of praise, the very same *David HaMelech* declared: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You have established, what is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?" (4-5)

Many Kabbalistic and Chassidic works focus upon humankind's dual nature and analyze the battle raging within us between the *nefesh behamit* (animalistic-oriented soul) and the *nefesh Elokit* (the divine soul). Perhaps this perpetual psychological and spiritual conflict motivated our Sages to question whether man should have been created:

Our Rabbis taught: Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued for two and a half years. [This group said,] "It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created." [In contrast,] the other group stated: "It was better for man to have been created than to have not been created." [Finally, a consensus was reached,] and they concluded: "It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created..." (*Talmud Bavli, Eruvin* 13b, translation and brackets my own)

The Maharsha (1555-1631) provides a trenchant analysis of this passage. He notes that man is an essential part of Hashem's Universe, for if he did not exist there would be no one to perform the

Torah's commandments. Yet, practically speaking, this idea contains a conceptual double-edged sword: The *mitzvot lo ta'aseh* (negative commandments) are, in the main, fulfilled by simply refraining from performing certain specified actions. Therefore, were we never to have come into being, these *mitzvot* would have been fulfilled by default, as there would be no one to violate their integrity. With humankind's creation, however, this calculus changed, and a negative risk-reward valence resulted from the distinct probability of violating the *mitzvot lo ta'aseh*. The plus side of the equation of our existence, however, is to be found in the potential fulfillment of the *mitzvot aseh* (positive commandments). As the Maharsha states:

... for if he had not been created, it is incontrovertibly the case that the positive commandments would never be fulfilled. Now that man has been created, it is possible that he will act meritoriously and perform them...

These words of the Maharsha are highly reminiscent of a well-known mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* that stresses the potential greatness we can achieve in this world: “[Rabbi Ya’akov] was known for the following adage:] ‘A single moment of repentance (*teshuvah*) and good deeds (*ma’asim tovim*) in this world is greater than all of the World to Come.’” (IV:17) With Hashem’s help, and our fervent desire, may we strive to fulfill His holy *mitzvot* and engage in innumerable moments of *ma’asim tovim* — for this, after all, is why we were created. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:  
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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)