



PARASHAT NITZAVIM



הטוב הנצחי The Eternal Good

■ Beloved is Man

Moshe Rabbeinu, in Parashat Nitzavim, presents Israel with a straightforward choice: Life, or death? Good, or bad?

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב... ובחרת בחיים...

*See, I have given before you today the life and goodness,
and death and that which is bad... Choose life!* (D'varim 30,15-19)

To understand the depth of the “goodness” that is offered here, and especially its eternity, let us consult the words of our Sages. In Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers 3,14), Rabbi Akiva teaches us:

Beloved is man, for he was created in G-d's image. Extra love was shown to him that he was created in G-d's image, as is written, *For in the image of G-d He created man.* (B'reshit 9,6)

This teaching leaves us puzzled. The fact that man was created in G-d's image is certainly testimony of G-d's love for us - but why does the Mishna then immediately repeat the same idea with a slight addition, saying it is a sign of His “extra love” shown to man? What does this add to our understanding?



This question applies to the next clause in the Mishna as well:

Beloved is Israel, who are called G-d's children. Extra love was shown to them in that they were called G-d's children, as is written, *You are children to Hashem your G-d.* (D'varim 14,1)

Here, too, we are missing information about this “extra love.”

It could be that we can find an answer in the peculiar phrase, “extra love was *shown* them/him.” The very fact that G-d disclosed to man that he alone was chosen to bear the “image of G-d,” and disclosed to Israel that they are His children, is itself the “extra love.”

A similar idea is found in the Talmud: “One who gives a gift to his friend should inform him of it” (Shabbat 10b). Informing the recipient is an expression of benevolence that uplifts the gift to a higher level of love and closeness. This is the approach taken by Maimonides in his commentary to the Mishna.

But this approach has some difficulties, in terms of both language and context. For one thing, the Mishna could have made this point by simply stating, “Extra love was shown them in that they were informed...” In addition, this explanation does not fit in with the third and concluding passage of the Mishna, which reads as follows:

Beloved is Israel in that a precious tool was given them. Extra love was shown to them in that they were given a precious tool that was used to create the world...

Here we see clearly that there are two levels: the “precious utensil” is the sign of G-d's love, and the “extra love” is manifest in the utensil's high quality: it was “used to create the world.” This shows that the phrase “was shown to them” actually does not indicate that the very act of “informing” is the extra love.

We are therefore left with this question: What does the Mishna mean when it tells us – three times – that extra love was “shown to man/Israel”? To plumb the depths of the world of Rabbi Akiva and his philosophy, we turn to find the key to this enigma in the Mishna's third passage.

■ **Beloved is Israel**

Rabbi Akiva, the author of this Mishna, is known as Israel's great defender. His love and admiration for Israel was so great that when he once said



something implying a measure of criticism about the generation that left Egypt, R. Yochanan immediately responded, “Rabbi Akiva has abandoned his piousness [i.e., his approach of always judging Israel favorably].” (Sanhedrin 110b)

The groundwork for G-d’s extra special love for the Nation of Israel is presented in this Mishnah by Rabbi Akiva in three tiers, one in each passage. The first tier refers to mankind in general, the second refers to Israel, and the third and highest level discusses Torah.

First of all, every human is special in that he was created in G-d’s image, as manifest by his intellect and free choice. This is the first floor of the structure.

Atop the first level is the second floor: the special Divine love shown to Israel for being the “children of G-d.” This means that in addition to being humans created in G-d’s image, we are also linked in spirit to our Father in Heaven. We are charged with the mission of representing G-d’s Name in the world. To this end, we received the Land of Israel, the only place where G-d will reveal Himself to us via Prophecy and the Holy Temple.

This mission obligates us to climb to the third story of the structure, as described in the last passage of our Mishna:

Israel is beloved ... in having been given a precious tool used to create the world, as is written, *I have given you a good doctrine – my Torah; do not abandon it.* (Proverbs 4,2)

We see that the precious tool is the Torah – the utensil by which Israel will fulfill its task and destiny in the world as bearers of the banner of G-d’s path. And it was this, the Torah, with which G-d chose to create the world.

■ **So Precious a Utensil**

This raises a great difficulty: How can G-d have given man such a powerful utensil as one with which the world was created? The difficulty is two-fold:

1. Ability: Is mortal man really capable of using such a powerful tool?
2. Permission: How can permission be granted him to use such a tool without certain knowledge that he won’t use it for the wrong purposes?

The answers to these questions are found in the first two passages of the Mishna.



1. Man was created in the image of G-d, meaning that he is able to use the tool used by the Creator of the world.
2. And because the People of Israel are called “children of G-d” and will certainly walk in His ways, G-d *allowed* them to use the tool He Himself used to create the world.

According to this, the Mishna’s first passage must be understood as follows: “A special love was made known to man who was *created in G-d’s image*” – a special love that will be made clear further on.

The second passage then states: “A special love was made known to Israel, who are *called Children of G-d*” - and once again, this special love will soon be made clear.

Finally we read the third passage of the Mishna, and everything becomes clear: “Israel is very beloved in that it was given a precious tool that was used for Creation.” That is to say, in the merit of the two qualities previously stated – having been created in G-d’s image, and being called His children – we finally receive, as stated in the third passage, the special love itself: the giving of this precious utensil, the Torah.

■ A Good Doctrine

We saw above that the verse from which Rabbi Akiva derived his third teaching – that G-d gave Israel a tool with which He created the world – is one that refers to the Torah as His “*good doctrine*” (Mishlei 4,2). Hashem tells Israel: “The Torah is precious merchandise, so do not abandon it.” But one thing is missing: How do we know that it was used in the creation of the world?

The answer is found in one special word in the verse: *good*. This is the key word, and should be understood in its ultimate context: It is *the* good utensil, that is, the utensil used for the Creation of the world. How so?

The word *good* is used in the Torah repeatedly during the story of Creation, as in:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב ...

And G-d saw that the light was good... (B’reshit 1,4)

It is used not only in verse 4 to describe the creation of light, but also in verse 10 when the oceans and land were created, and again in verse 12 for the trees, and so on. On the sixth day, the Torah even says that Hashem saw



“all He had created and it was very good” (verse 31). Only on one of the days, the second, is the word **good** not mentioned, as we will see.

Why does the Torah tell us that Hashem looked at His handiwork and judged it to be good? Can it be that He wished to show off His accomplishments? If so, to whom?

Our point of departure is that Hashem Himself is the Absolute Good, as is written:

טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו.

*G-d is good to all,
and His mercies are [given] upon all His works.* (Psalms 145,9)

And since He is good, He wants to give of His goodness, as is written:

טוב אתה ומטיב למדני חקיה.

*You are good and You do good;
teach me Your statutes.* (119,68)

The standard by which Hashem planned and executed all of Creation is that of “eternal good,” as we read:

ויאמר אני אעביר כל טובי על פניה וקראתי בשם ה' לפניך...

*G-d said: “I will pass all My goodness before you;
I will proclaim G-d’s Name before you...”* (Sh’mot 33,19)

According to the Rambam in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the phrase **all My goodness** refers to Creation. We now make two more assertions as to how Creation was effected. One, G-d wanted His handiwork to last forever, as is written, חק נתן ולא יעבור, **“He issued a decree, it will not change”** (Psalms 148,6). And two, all that meets the standard of “good” is eternal. Accordingly, Hashem made a daily review of what He created on each day, to make sure it met the standards of “eternal good,” and only then would He go on to the next day.

Of all the days, only the second day - on which the waters were divided and separated - did not meet the necessary standards of “eternal good,”¹ and **good** was therefore not mentioned until the next day.

This also explains why Hashem said about Adam, **“It is not good for man to be alone”** (B’reshit 2,18). This means that without a woman by his side or a

1. as explained in our article *The Lost Good* to Parashat B’reshit



family to which he can give, man has no eternal existence or continuity. But once he marries, King Shlomo says about him, “*One who finds a wife, finds goodness*” (Proverbs 18,22) – meaning, he has found the channel by which to give goodness to others, thus granting him the existence and continuity he lacked when he was alone.

The Torah is a “*good doctrine*” because it paves the way for the world’s “eternal existence” – in that its laws teach how people may bestow goodness on each other. As Moshe Rabbeinu taught Israel:

וַיִּצְוֵנוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לְיִרְאָה אֶת ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ
לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ כְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

*Hashem thereupon commanded us all these laws,
that we should fear Hashem our G-d, for our good forever,
to give us life this day.* (D'varim 6,24)

From here, Rabbi Akiva derived one of the basic tenets of his philosophy: “All that G-d does is for the best” (B'rachot 60b, bottom). That is to say, everything G-d created in His world is *for the purpose of doing good*. Each of the Six Days of Creation is measured by this standard, and anything that met it was created.

■ In Order that You Benefit

Let us consider another example showing that a lack of goodness and of granting goodness is actually a fundamental deficiency in the world's existence.

The Ten Commandments are recorded in two places in the Torah: Parashat Yitro in Sh'mot, and Parashat Va'etchanan in D'varim. They are basically the same, but one of the main differences between them is found in the Fifth Commandment, that of honoring one's parents. In both places the Torah tells us that we must honor our parents “*so that your days might be prolonged upon the Land G-d gave you*” - but in D'varim, there is an additional incentive that does not appear in Sh'mot: “*so that it will be good for you.*” (5,16)

The Gemara (Bava Kama 55a) explains the reason for this difference. It tells us that the first Tablets of the Law, the ones we read about in Sh'mot, were destined to be broken by Moshe when he saw the people's sin with the Golden Calf. This means that the First Tablets were unable to bring goodness to Israel and prevent them from worshiping an idol, and this is why they have no existence or continuity. The word *good*, standing for



bestowing goodness and eternal existence, was therefore omitted from them.

Let us quote in this connection a beautiful idea expressed by the 14th-century commentator, Baal HaTurim. The number of letters in the Ten Commandments in D'varim is exactly 17 more than in Sh'mot. In gematria (Hebrew numerology), 17 is the value of the word טוב, *good*. The difference between the temporary Tablets and the eternal ones, therefore, is *good*.

It is also interesting to note that the letter *tet*, the first letter of the word *tov*, *good*, does not appear at all in the Ten Commandments in Sh'mot. In addition, the first time it appears in the Torah is in the word *tov* itself, in B'reshit 1,4.

■ Reaping the Benefits

Let us now look at another example in the following passage from the Talmud (B'rachot 8a):

R. Chiya said: One who benefits from his own handiwork is greater than one who fears Heaven. For regarding one who fears Heaven, we read, "Happy is one who fears G-d" (Psalms 112,1), while regarding one who benefits from his work, we read, "You shall eat the labor of your hands - you will be happy and it will be good with you." (Psalms 128,2)

The word *good* appears only regarding the one who benefits from his own work.

Based on what we have learned, R. Chiya's teaching can be explained as follows: One who requires favors from others is always dependent upon them and their good will. But one who eats of his own labor, benefits directly from what he accomplishes; it is a "salary," so to speak. He need not worry that his benefactor might arbitrarily change his mind and cut him off. He receives his food by rights, and not as a favor. This is why he will not only *be happy*, but also *it will be good with [him]* – eternally so.

R. Chiya says that one who benefits from his own work is greater than one who fears Heaven. The latter is someone who has always been a G-d-fearing, religious person and who has never struggled in this area. But one who "eats of his labors" is referring to one who discovered G-d on his own - the result of a spiritual struggle within him, a wrestle with his conscience as he faces up to difficult questions. His fear of Heaven is something well-entrenched and eternal. This is why, once again, we see that the word *good* is used here – *and it will be good with you* – as an indication of permanence.



■ Behold, It Was Very Good

Let us return now to the Sixth Day of Creation:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד...

*And G-d saw all that He had done,
and behold, it was very good...* (B'reshit 1,31)

On the Sixth Day, something new made its appearance in the world: the Evil Inclination, the human urge to do bad. This was the force that enticed Eve to commit the first sin in history.

Our Sages of the Medrash (B'reshit Rabba 9,7) explained the words of the phrase “*very good*” in the following curious manner:

‘Good’ means the Good Inclination, and ‘very good’ is the Evil Inclination.

In what way can something evil actually be *very good*? The explanation is that before the Evil Inclination came into the world, man did not struggle; everything came to him as a favor, by choice of the Divine Giver. His receiving of this kindness, however, was never guaranteed, nor was it permanent; it stood the chance of being stopped at any moment.

But later, once the Evil Inclination appeared and caused man to struggle to do good, whatever he received was by rights, not merely as a favor. Only now was he guaranteed a permanent and fully justified reward for his efforts, and only now would he merit existence and continuity.

The Evil Inclination is that which tests us; it provides the tool by which to measure our success in meeting life’s constant challenges. If we succeed in overcoming its hurdles, we are entitled to demand the Divinely-promised good. We are not dependent on the will of the Divine Giver, because He Himself made a covenant with Israel and promised reward, by virtue of justice and law, to those who deserve it.

Therefore, only on the Sixth Day does the term “*very good*” appear – telling us that only when man can truly deserve G-d’s reward, does Divine Goodness receive its solid footing of eternal existence.

Let us now return to the Mishna with which we started and summarize as follows:

Rabbi Akiva reveals to us that the Nation of Israel received a precious utensil with which the world was created. The verse that proves this is the



Torah: *“I have given you a good doctrine, the Torah”* – G-d’s Torah is “good.” In fact, it is the “eternal good,” the guarantor of the world’s existence, for without it and its laws, people would “swallow each other alive,” as our Sages teach (Pirkei Avot 3,2). Therefore, the Torah is the standard of eternal good by which the world was created.

We can also now understand the following teaching from the Zohar (Terumah, 161): “G-d looked in the Torah and [based on it,] created the world.” It means that Hashem looked at the objectives that the Torah set - namely, eternal goodness - and then created the entire universe accordingly. Again, anything that did not meet this standard was simply left out of Creation.

It is this Torah that we received as a gift – a perfect match for Israel’s character and inner qualities. Parashat Nitzavim tells us this straight out:

כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלַי הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

*For this thing [the Torah] is very close to you,
it is in your mouth and heart to do it.* (D’varim 30,14)

Hashem tests each and every person: Is he directing his ways and deeds in accordance with that which is eternally good? If so, he is a partner with Hashem in the Creation of the world, and fortunate is he and his lot.

