YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

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**Creation and the Intention Behind It[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Was the world created perfect?**

A simple reading of the Creation story leaves the reader with the general impression that the world is created good and complete. This impression is formed, inter alia, by the recurring phrase, "And God saw that it was good,” and the fact that the conclusion of the account seems to indicate that God finished His work. The entire universe, including man, is "very good.”

However, a look around the reality in which we live causes us to question this conclusion. When we look at the world, at human existence, at our close environment, we do not see a totality of good. The real world appears to be far from the impression of perfection arising from the Creation story.

We might offer an explanation for the imperfections and problems of the world that is based on a certain perception of the purpose of man: our world is not perfect, and it includes good and bad, in order that man will have free choice, so that man can be rewarded for choosing the good and for observing God's commandments. The good and evil that coexist in the world allow man this free choice throughout one’s life, following which one receives a just reward in the World to Come.

However, this answer is unsatisfactory. One of the problems with it is that it ignores a central theme running through Torah: the course of history. As Manitou emphasizes, history is not a biography. It is more than the successive events comprising the life of an individual. It encompasses thousands of years. The very existence of history, of historical processes, means that there are changes in the world. If the world's initial conditions were to be perfectly aligned with the purpose for which it was created — to provide man with free choice — then those conditions would prevail for all eternity, for there would be no reason for any change. Even if an individual experience ups and downs over 120 years of existence, the world as a whole should theoretically remain static. But as we see, this is not the case. The world as a whole undergoes a process of change and development.

Manitou underlines the historical process through a reading of *midrashim* of *Chazal* based on the verses of the Creation story. These create a picture that is different from the perfect idyll described above.

**The world needs work**

A careful reading of the Creation story reveals details that might be ignored in a more cursory review. The opening verse of the Torah seems to describe the earliest, most primordial creation of the world, and immediately thereafter, in the second verse, we discover that the world is in a state of "*tohu va-vohu*" – in short, chaos. This is not what we would expect to find in an idyllic description of Creation. In addition, when Man is created, God commands him to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth. This demand is addressed to man and is dependent on him, but there seems to be no guarantee that he will be capable of fulfilling it. At this point is becomes clear that the world is not perfect; its perfection relies on Man, and now the question is whether he will devote himself and manage to bring it to perfection or not.

*Chazal* (*Bereishit Rabba* 1:4, *Vayikra Rabba* 36:4) interpret the word "*be-reishit*" (commonly translated as “in the beginning”), the first word of the Torah, as a statement of purpose: "for the sake of *reishit*.” There is a beginning, for the sake of which the world was created. At first glance, it seems that the purpose of the world is not stated. God does not explain why He introduces each successive creation, nor the purpose of the world as a whole. *Chazal* reveal within the world "*be-reishit*" that there is Divine thought that precedes Creation, and that is the purpose that all of Creation is meant to realize.

Let us consider two more *midrashim*. One focuses on God's impression of His work at the end of the Creation story:

Rabbi Nachman bar Shemuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rav Shemuel bar Nachman: "Behold, it was very good” — this alludes to the good inclination; “And behold, it was very good” — this alludes to the evil inclination. (*Bereishit* *Rabba* 9:7)

The verse seems to be describing the perfection and wholeness of Creation, but *Chazal* detect in it a hint of its great deficiency.

Another *midrash* from the end of the Creation story, complementing the first *midrash* that focus on the word "*be-reishit*,” addresses the phrase “*asher bara Elokim la-asot*,” “which God created to do.”

A philosopher asked Rabbi Hoshaya… He replied: I cannot dismiss you with no answer; rather, all that was created during the six days of Creation requires doing (*asiya*)… Even human beings require repair (*tikkun*). (*Bereishit Rabba* 11:6)

“Even human beings require repair” — This is as it is written, “which God created to do.” For the text does not say: created and did, but rather [“which God created to do”], meaning that everything needs repair. (*Peirush Meyuchas le-Rashi,* ad loc.)

According to this *midrash*, the word *“la-asot”* indicates that the world needs work, repair and completion. It was not created whole and complete. In other words, *Chazal* are telling us that everything that was created during the six days of Creation is in fact deficient. This runs completely counter to the initial impression of the biblical account of Creation, but it does explain everything subsequent: following Creation, there begins the process of work and repair that improves the world and brings it to completion:

“Everything requires *tikkun*” — in other words, completion, in the world of *asiya*, in historical reality. This is the task that man takes upon himself with the conclusion of the six days of Creation. In the [Divine] intention behind Creation, everything already exists in a state of perfection. But in the world of our reality, this is not so: action is required in order to achieve the desired level. The process of *tikkun* is not a mystical process, but rather a historical one, leading to a perfect conformity between the reality of this world and the intention of the Creator. When this world becomes the World to Come, then there is no longer any discrepancy. The world is perfected.

Thus, there is an intention underlying Creation, a purpose that Creation is meant to realize. This purpose is not realized at the stage of Creation; Creation is merely the starting point for a lengthy process that is meant to bring the Divine intention of Creation to realization.

**The intention behind creation and our reality**

**Ideal and realization: the next world and this world**

Let us elaborate further on this idea. In contrast to philosophical and religious systems which cannot accept the two seemingly contradictory principles (that God created the world and that the world is deficient) and which therefore deny or evade either one or the other, or both, the Torah teaches that both are simultaneously true: God deliberately created a world that is deficient. How can this be?

In order to understand, we have to draw a distinction between the intention behind Creation, and Creation itself (reality). The world was created for a purpose, which we may refer to as “the intention behind Creation”. The intention behind Creation speaks to the perfected state that the world is intended to attain, as God intended it to be. However, God made our reality deficient and, at least at the outset, far removed from that worthy state. The world is meant to elevate itself from that initial deficient state, to the endpoint where it will be complete and perfect.

*Chazal* address this distinction between our reality and the intention behind Creation by use of the terms “this world” and “the World to Come”. This world is reality as it is at each stage of its progress, while the World to Come is the world as it should be and as it will be when it attains its completion and perfection. In the works of the Kabbalists, the distinction is made through the concepts of “the world of *beria*” and “the world of *asiya*”. The contrast between these two concepts is the contrast between what is and what should be.

God deliberately creates the world deficient (“*tohu va-vohu* and darkness…”) so that through a process of improvement and elevation, it can attain perfection and completion.

**Perfection of the world, along the axis of history**

How does the perfection of the world come about? The axis along which the process unfolds is history. This is clear from another *midrash*, which addresses the second verse of the Torah:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse as alluding to [the various periods of Jewish] exile:

“And the earth was *tohu* (waste)” — this refers to the Babylonian exile, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 4:23) "I beheld the earth, and lo, it was waste…' [for Yirmeyahu prophesized concerning the Babylonian exile].

“And *vohu* (void)” — this refers to the Median exile, as it is written (*Esther* 6:4) “And they hurried (*vayavhilu*) to bring Haman” [for the story of Esther is set in the Kingdom of Persia and Media].

“And darkness” — this alludes to the Greek exile, when they darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees, telling them, “Inscribe on the horn of an ox that you have no part in the God of Israel.”

“Upon the face of the deep” — this refers to exile under the Evil Empire that is unfathomable, like the deep. Just as the deep cannot be measured, so likewise the wicked.

“And the spirit of God hovered” — this refers to the spirit of the messianic king. How is this so? For it is written (*Yeshayahu* 11:12), “And the spirit of God shall rest upon him” [in reference to the Messiah]. (*Bereishit Rabba* 2:4)

According to Reish Lakish, the verse enumerates four fundamental deficiencies built into the foundations of Creation. These deficiencies form the basis for the negative forces that develop out of them, each destined to appear at a different time on the stage of history, until all these deficiencies can be repaired and completed. This is the historical continuum — from the Babylonian period to the Persian Empire, from there to Greece, and so on. This process is meant to end in Messianic Era, when God will be One and His Name One.

According to Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, the history of the Jewish people — the heart of humanity, as Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi defines us[[2]](#footnote-2) — seems like a series of exiles and persecutions, a succession of abnormal situations. Is there any end to this gloomy history? Reish Lakish draws his optimism from the existence of “And the spirit of God hovered upon the face of the water” from the very start, when everything looks like complete chaos and waste. There is a direction, after all; there is a purpose to the history of this world, and this purpose is included in the very beginning. There is a purpose to our toil in this world, and by virtue of our toil, the World to Come is formed out of this world.

The concept of the light of the Messiah, which guides the world and human history towards the desired end, towards success, is a central concept in *Chazal*'s teachings, because a developmental process, which is dynamic by nature, can be random and accidental. It may lead to a dead end, or back to the starting point: a return to disorder, to *tohu va-vohu,* in the event of total failure.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the world has a unifying power. Everything proceeds from this absolute Unity, and this unifying power leads to the manifestation of unity — the unity of opposites — at the end of the historic process. Between these two points there unfolds the history of our world — this world.

This view is inconsistent with a whole, perfect, static world, made up of people each of whom performs *mitzvot* and receives reward. The world is dynamic; there is a succession of events that is meant to lead humanity to a realization of the intention behind Creation. According to Manitou, this is the fundamental view of history according to the Torah, and it is in accordance with this perspective that we must explain all the concepts relating to the axis of history. For example, this should inform our view of the Messianic Era: we are not meant to accept the concept of "the Messianic Era" as an axiomatic expression and to explain history accordingly, but rather, based on the principle of the unfolding of history, to try to understand the significance of the Messianic Era as the conclusion of this process.

**Ramifications of the view of the Divine intention behind Creation**

Manitou argues that once we internalize this perspective, other principles of Torah also become easier to understand. Aside from explaining history, we also have a better understanding of the concept of prophecy. We see throughout *Tanakh* that God looks at reality and announces, through His servants, the prophets, His judgment of what He sees. This judgment also finds expression in the verdict that is passed each year on Rosh Hashana. What is the significance of this judgment? What are its criteria? The judgment is made in accordance with the intention behind Creation, the destination that the world is meant to reach. The criteria for judgment are not about reality as it is now, but rather the direction in which the world moves towards its final purpose.

We have already noted the central place of the Messiah and the ultimate redemption. The simple meaning of these concepts is that there will be a perfect reality in the future, that the world has a goal that is meant to be realized. This principle finds practical, tangible expression in the character of the Jewish people: throughout the generations, the Jewish people are downtrodden and persecuted, but are nevertheless characterized by an unusual degree of optimism, an absolute and unshakable faith that in the end all will be good. This is faith in the road that the world is progressing along, in the realization of its goal.

The Jewish view of the intention behind Creation is different from that of other nations and religions. This point is significant to Manitou, whose writings maintain a dialogue with other philosophies and beliefs. He always tries to emphasize the uniqueness of Judaism and what makes Jewish belief different from all other systems. In this regard, the conventional view of the world is a static, cyclical one, based on Greek philosophy, which believes in a static, eternal world that had always existed and would always remain as it was — a world with no direction and no purpose.

In Islam, this view takes on a fatalistic garb: everything is *maktoub*, preordained by God. Man’s inward role is to be submissive and to accept God’s decree, and his outward role is to make others submissive, too. In the Far East, too, the idea is a flight from history: not action to repair the world, but rather liberation from the effort to repair and the accompanying disappointment and disillusionment, reconciling oneself with reality as it is.

Christianity awards a central place to the Messiah — not surprisingly, since Christianity built itself on the basis of Judaism. It denies the Jewish people their historical role, but retains the idea of a perfect future. Throughout much of the West, Christianity has given way to modernity, which likewise adopts the principle of this historical process and aspires to develop the world. In fact, this is the same original Jewish idea, after an intermediary period in which it was clothed with Christian garb, but with a critical difference: God is removed from the story, and man takes His place. Nevertheless, the idea of the world progressing in the direction of repair and perfection remains the same fundamentally Jewish concept.

Many streams of philosophy describe life as a theater of the absurd, arguing that there is no point in exerting effort in the moral realm, since any hope for change and improvement is false, for ultimately the inherent nature of the world will prevail. There is complete pessimism. Here the Torah comes along with a tremendous, innovative message: our reality does indeed seem to be characterized by absolute injustice, disorder, and a terrible, blind set of rules, in which the righteous seem to fare no better than the wicked. But this reality is not the final word; it is an intermediate stage, essential, but temporary. It is essential because this world is the place where a person, by virtue of his actions and his word, acquires what he has, given to him as a free gift by his Creator, as an act of absolute kindness. There is no other place where we can acquire what we have. Therefore this world is necessary, but is it temporary, because it is not the final state of Creation.

We still do not know why the world was created this way, rather than being created perfect. This relates to the broader question of the reason for Creation and the purpose of man. But what has been established so far is that Creation does have a purpose, and that is what the axis of history is all about. This view of history is reflected in Manitou’s exegesis of the narratives in the Torah, as we shall see.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Texts cited from Manitou are from *Sod Midrash Ha-toladot* III, 63-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* II, 36 and 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Maharal of Prague stresses this point in his *Netzach Yisrael*: nature can annul any unusual phenomenon. Thus, the presence of the Temple in this world is an unusual phenomenon, and it will eventually be destroyed. In physics as well, all matter eventually breaks down. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)