

Bereshit 5768 - It's All Good

One of my slightly guilty pleasures is to curl up on my couch, snuggle under a blanket, and settle in for what I refer to as “my weekly cry.” My weekly cry is not a deliberate act of catharsis that cleanses me of the stresses of my past seven days, although that is often the result. No, my weekly cry is a television show, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. I’m a pretty sentimental person, easily moved by others’ emotions, so it doesn’t take much for me to turn into a blubbing mess. I’ve been known to cry at television commercials. (I thank my mother for this particular trait.) Despite my proclivity for tears, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* really is something to behold.

Each week, a family is selected to have their home entirely rebuilt by the show’s team of designers and hundreds of volunteers. The families chosen for this incredible gift are in dire straits. Often suffering physical illnesses or injuries, having weathered tragedies of all sorts, they are living in quarters that are not adequate to meet their needs. Desperate to change their situation, but lacking the resources to do so independently, they call on the show in the hopes that it will change their lives.

The show’s gimmick, if you will, is that this process of transformation takes only a week. After meeting with the family to learn better what their needs and wishes for their new home are, the crew sends them off on vacation and gets to work. And there is no shortage of work to do. First, the home, which was likely a source of chaos and distress while standing, is demolished. The rubble is carted away, and the building begins. The foundation is laid, the house is framed, plumbing and electricity are installed, drywall and roofing go up, then landscaping and interior design. A project that would easily take four months is completed in a week, and the family returns for a dramatic and emotional “reveal,” seeing their new home for the first time and taking the first steps toward starting their new lives.

From hopelessness, desperation and chaos to order, beauty and promise in just a week—sound familiar?

As we read the beginning of the book of Bereishit this week, we saw chaos unfold into a new world. The earth, which was unformed and void, is illuminated with light. The waters are separated, giving us our sky and seas. Out of the water emerges land, a foundation for plant life. Heavenly bodies,

whose presence helps us to determine time, are next. Finally, animal life is created, culminating in humankind. Reading through this chapter, we get a sense that each step in the process of creation is the right step, that each new ingredient is the perfect addition to the growing world.

At each step along the way, with a couple of notable exceptions, as Tamar pointed out to us, God sees that God's work is, in the words of the Torah, "Good." We might call this a divine understatement. One *midrash* on this passage notices the unusual choice of words and imagines God as בונה עולמות ומחריבן (*boneh olamot u'maharivan*), creating and then destroying countless worlds, after finding one flaw or another in them. This world is called good because God finally got it right. Our own Etz Hayim Humash, following many of the traditional commentaries, explains that the word good "affirms the flawlessness of God's creation. Reality is imbued with God's goodness." The new world isn't just any world; it's Eden, paradise.

Our notion of the world at the beginning of time as exemplifying perfection plays out for us in a number of ways. Perhaps most poignantly, we hopefully declare in the *El Maleh*, the memorial prayer, בגן עדן תהא מנוחתו (*b'gan eden t'hei m'nuhato*), may our loved one's eternal resting place be in *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden. We imagine their spending eternity not in any old place, not even in a nice place, but in Paradise. While we, living in this world, are in no rush to leave and experience this Paradise, we can appreciate the comfort that this idea might bring at the end of life.

Just a few moments ago, when we returned the *sefer torah* to the ark, we called upon the idea of a return to Eden in a slightly different way. At the climactic moment of the ark closing, we sang, השיבינו ה' אליך ונשובה, חדש ימינו כקדם (*hashiveinu Adonai eilekha v'nashuvah hadeish yameinu k'kedem*), Help us return to You, Adonai, and we shall return. Renew our lives, כקדם (*k'kedem*), as in days of old. The midrashic commentary on this verse from the book of Eicha, Lamentations, explains that this refers not just to any days of old, but to the quintessential days of old, the ימים קדמונים (*yamim kadmonim*), the earliest days at the beginning of the world, a time when things were flawless and idyllic. Looking at this verse in its context, at the end of the book of Eicha, we can understand the author's desire to return to a better time. Following the chaos and upheaval brought on by the destruction of the Temple, hoping for a return to a time before war, before devastation, is only natural.

We recite this verse each time we read from the Torah. Our situation, thankfully, is not the overwhelming one faced by those who lived immediately after the destruction of the Temple. Yet the message still resonates. We often express our sense that the world used to be something that it no longer is. And we wish that we could be there again. This desire to return to a better time, or, more accurately, to inject our time with those longed-for lost qualities, is one that goes well beyond our religious experience. When we talk politics, we may wish for candidates like those who once were. We may long for our favorite sports team to show a glimmer of who they used to be many years (or maybe even just a month) ago. We tend to relate to this kind of thinking as a sort of nostalgia, a longing for the “good old days.” When we do this, we do a bit of disservice to our own time—we are essentially saying that these days aren’t as good as we’d like them to be. Those storied “good old days” are our Eden, our fabled perfect time. If we could only get back there, then things wouldn’t be quite so bad.

I don’t mean to say that our times are free from problems—quite the contrary. We live in a world where genocide is a reality, where poverty is incessant, and where war is a constant. Our hopes for another chance at Paradise can certainly motivate us to work toward eradicating these scourges of our world. We do, in fact, hold the idea of *tikkun olam*, of repairing the world, to be a central tenet. However, getting back to the perfection of those first days is impossible. Even if we were, miraculously, able to rectify all of the problems we face, we could not erase the centuries upon centuries of imperfection.

Think back, for example, to the beneficiaries of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*’s generosity. The team of designers and builders seems to create an Eden, a perfect new beginning for the families they choose. The new home may be beautiful, safe, and perfectly equipped to meet their needs, but it does not eradicate the reality of the challenges each family faced before the rebuild. Nor does it cure the disease, repair the injury, or offer them a perfect new beginning.

That the new house doesn’t solve all of the family’s problems, and that we couldn’t possibly perfect our world does not mean that the idea of Eden, of Paradise, is a sham. In fact, if we look a little more closely at the Torah’s picture of the world at the time of Creation, we will see that it’s not as far from our world as we might have thought. At the end of the first

chapter of Bereishit, after God completes the creation of the world, the Torah explains that God looked over all that had been made and saw והנה טוב מאד (*v'hinei tov m'od*), that it was very good. Rather than seeing this distinction as another instance of understatement, the *midrash* on Genesis, *Bereishit Rabbah*, goes in another direction. Very good means that it includes both our good inclination, and our bad inclination; that the new world can hold both good times and suffering; that it includes both *gan eden*, paradise, and *gehinom*, hell; that the world relies both on the angel of life and the angel of death. Neither good nor very good means perfect; rather the very good new world is complete, containing both the good and the bad, both wonders and serious flaws.

For the past two months, we've been engaged in a process of examining our own flaws, of seeking atonement, and of striving to rid ourselves of our sins. Just a few days ago, we closed out that season as we celebrated *Hoshana Rabbah*. Cleansed of our past misdeeds, we seek to attain God's favor by remaining in this perfected state. Following immediately on the heels of *Hoshana Rabbah*, as we re-read the Torah's account of the beginning of the universe, we can't help but be awed by the majesty and long for just a glimpse of that world. But when we look at Eden through the eyes of *Bereishit Rabbah*, it's a little easier to withstand the reality of this world, and of ourselves. Not even the world at its very beginning, that idyllic time for which we yearn, was perfect—it was simply good. And good is enough. Good means positive and often beautiful. Good holds potential. Knowing that even Paradise was not perfect does not free us from working to move our world and ourselves to a more ideal place. But it can help us to be satisfied, even happy, with the good that we hold.

As we embark upon a new cycle of reading and studying Torah, and as we near the end of this first month of the year, I'll take another opportunity to wish us all a *shana tovah*—a good year, and a Shabbat Shalom.