The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Introduction to Parashat Hashavua

Yeshivat Har Etzion

Dedicated in memory of Charles (Chuck), Roberta and Batsheva Bernstein z"l.

Parashat Bereishit

Creation: How Good is "Very Good?"

By Rav Yaakov Beasley

We begin our study of the Torah at the beginning, when God creates heaven and earth.[1] From the "*tohu va-vohu"* (a primordial chaos) of boundless waters (v. 2), we read on as God slowly but surely imposes order on the world. In the text, the word "and" creates a subtle, constant, almost pulsating rhythm that lays the groundwork for each stage of creation:

> In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was… and darkness was over… and God's breath hovered… And God said… and there was… (Vv. 1-3)

As the chapter progresses, additional words assert themselves over this rhythm: "create," "call," "separate," "bless," "make." On day one, we find "And God said… And God saw… and God divided… And God called" (vv. 3-5). Day two continues this theme: "And God said… And God made… and He divided… And God called" (vv. 6-8). Thus, the entire chapter moves orderly forward, artfully combining repetition and innovation.

Notably, almost every act of creation is described as an act of separation or division, e.g., light is light because it is not darkness. Similarly, without clear boundaries between land and sea, life as we know it could not exist. The text's language encourages this understanding; the word divide (from the root *b-d-l*) appears fives times (vv. 4, 6, 7, 14, 18), the words "after its kind" appear another ten times (vv. 11, 12 twice, 21 twice, 24 twice, 25 three times). In short, the Torah provides us with a world of order, where speech has both creative capabilities and the ability to articulate distinctions. Hovering above it all, God's presence is so manifest throughout the narrative that the name *"Elokim"* (God) appears thirty-five times.

As this passage is also a religious text, its hierarchical presentation suggests theological priorities, as delineated by Dr. Leo Strauss (cited in Leon Kass's *The Beginning of Wisdom*, p. 33). From chaos come light and

darkness in a continuous cycle; water and land are given definite places on earth, from which they cannot move; heavenly bodies can move, but are not granted life; birds and fish have motion within their respective habitants, while animals roam the land. Finally, living things are contrasted with mankind, alone created in God's image. Immediately before this act, God's speech becomes self-referential and non-creative for the first time. Afterwards, God not only blesses mankind (as He did the fish and birds previously, in v. 22), but speaks directly to them, granting them dominion over the entire earth and bestowing upon them a unique ontological standing. Last formed, man is the ultimate creation; with his appearance, the creative process is complete. Chapter 1 concludes with a loud crescendo: "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (v. 31).

If we read it carefully, however, remaining sensitive to the repetitive patterns the Torah has established in the creation narrative, we find that the climactic ending may be less conclusive than we at first realize. Throughout this chapter, the text emphasizes not only God's role in creation, but the (almost) uniform quality of that creation. With formulaic regularity, the text tells us that God speaks, God creates, and God evaluates (sees) – and what God has created is good (vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Only two exceptions stand out; neither the firmament on day two nor mankind on day six is declared to be good (instead, both instances conclude with the formulation "and it was so"). Rashi explains the missing declaration on day two as follows (v. 7, s.v. Mei'al la-rakia):

> Why does it not say "and it was good" on the second day (as on the other days of creation)? Because the work of the water is not completed until the third day … and a thing which is incomplete is not in its state of fullness and goodness. On the third day, when [it] is completed, and He begins other work, the Torah repeats "and it was good" twice: once for the completion of the second day's work and once of the completion of that day's work.[2]

Other sources make similar suggestions for the omission of "it was good" on day two. The Talmud mentions two unpleasant elements introduced on this day: "the fire of Gehinnom" (Pesachim 54a) and strife [lit. division], because on that day, the waters were split (Shabbat 156a). Rabbeinu Bachya suggests that the omission proves that only when creation addresses humanity's needs, does creation deserve the appellation of "good;" and as it stood on day two, an earth entirely covered with water clearly provides no benefit to mankind.[3] Similarly, the Rambam (*Moreh Ha-nevukhim* 2:30) suggests that the firmament was too remote and too incomprehensible to the average intellect to be defined as "good."

Opposing this is the conclusion of the Chizkuni, who, after listing several of the options listed above, quotes Rabbi Elazar that "the Torah returned and included it in the sixth day, as it is written, 'and behold, it was very good.'"[4] According to the Chizkuni's suggestion, despite the apparent omission of the phrase "and it was good" concerning the firmament (and by logical extension, regarding mankind on day six[5]), we can rest assured that indeed, all is good, based on the chapter's conclusion that "God saw everything that He had made, and, behold it was very good." What role does the additional modifier "very" provide? Rav Ya'akov Tzevi Mecklenburg's formulation, in *Ha-ktav Ve-hakabbala,* is worthy of notice:

> The word “very” comes to signify an intensification of the object (in quality or quantity), or an intensification of an action, as in “and Kayin was very aggrieved” (Bereishit 4:5). I am amazed that the commentators did not question the usage of the word “behold,” as it is always used in a text to indicate a new awareness that did not exist previously… which is inapplicable to the knowledge of God. Similarly, the word “very” is only relevant when there exists another object to compare it to, for we can not say that one object is greater (or an action is more intense) unless there exists another object (or action) of lesser quality. But in describing the totality of existence as created, is there another realty to which it may be compared?

To decipher the meaning of the word “very,” let us look at some of the approaches suggested by the classical commentators:

RASHBAM:	God reviewed all His creations to see if there was anything that required repair, and behold, everything was beautiful and in perfect form (“very” being understood as the ability to maintain its form without degeneration).
SEFORNO:	The end purpose of existence *in toto* was far greater than the end purpose of each individual part.[6]
RAMBAM:	Not only did the existence of every part conform to its purpose, but it accomplished the unified goal of the whole; all things “conformed to His intention and purpose and continue to do so without ceasing, corresponding to what was intended” (*Moreh Ha-nevukhim* 3:13).
TZEROR HA-MOR:	Creation became complete, because mankind, its ultimate purpose, was placed at the pinnacle.

Whether they understand the word “very” as implying permanence, purpose, or the greater value of totality, all these commentators understand that the word “very” signifies an increase in the goodness of creation. This makes the Ramban's approach (ad. Loc.) potentially revolutionary:

> The meaning of the word *me’od* is “mostly”. On this sixth day, He adds this word because He is describing creation in general, which contains evil in some part of it. Therefore, He said “it was very good,” meaning its *me’od* (the part which contains evil) is also good.

According to this understanding, the Torah’s qualification of the word “good” is not to signify an increase in goodness, but a diminution. In common daily speech, if a person responds to “How are you?” with “Good,” we generally understand that all is well. However, if the person qualifies his response with “Mostly good,” we understand the allusion: that there are areas of his life that are not good. At the end of the creation, we find that God is surveying His handiwork, and things are less than they appeared at first. What has changed? Are we forced to conclude that the addition of mankind has diminished God’s handiwork? If so, then how do we understand the Torah’s effusive praises meted out to man several verses earlier? No other being requires consultation before its creation; the Hebrew word “*bara”* (signifying the creation of something new), appears with a vengeance (three times) in the verse creating man; and only mankind is directly addressed by God (a close reading shows that the fish’s blessing is about, not to

them). Continuing the Ramban's interpretation, we sense that he comprehends the difficulty that interpreting "*tov me'od"* as "very good" poses:

> It is this thought which is the basis of the Rabbi's statement in Bereishit Rabba (9:5): "'And behold, it was very good' – this refers to death." Similarly, the Rabbis posit "This means the evil inclination in man" (ibid. 9) and "This means the careful dispensation of punishment" (ibid. 13)… Some rabbis explain that on account of the superiority of man, He heaped special praise upon His creation (ibid. 14).

Ignoring the Ramban's final line, we are confronted with a vastly new understanding of the reality at the end of day six. Creation now contains elements, located within its crown jewel, that foreshadow potential disturbance and strife. Of what use is a creature that is not good?

Perhaps we can understand this by returning to the statement of Rashi we quoted earlier regarding the firmament, that the phrase "and it was good" was omitted on day two because the process was incomplete; we may suggest that humanity is also created deficient. Continuing Leo Strauss's line of thought, mankind, located at the end of the creation process, is capable of the greatest range of motion of all beings. However, his freedom is not solely in physical locomotion, but through the moral range available for its choosing. Man alone is capable of veering away from its designated purpose. Paradoxically, it is precisely due to this freedom — that man is made "*be-tzelem Elokim,*" "in the image of God" — that the human being is incomplete and therefore cannot be called good.

Creation therefore ends, despite the orderly structured procession in its earlier stages (both textually and in reality), with an indeterminate and ambiguous ending. The story of nature's fixed hierarchy has ended; the question of how mankind will utilize its freedom and capabilities begins.

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[1] All Scriptural citations are from the first chapter of Bereishit unless otherwise noted.

[2] Two of the major supercommentaries on Rashi, the Divrei David and the Maharal, note that Rashi is analyzing the phrase "above the firmament" (v. 7), emphasizing that the division of the waters is essentially a creative act, in accordance with what we have noted above, and is therefore worthy of being evaluated as "good."

[3] He quotes the Talmudic maxim, "the righteous are greater than the ministering angels" (Sanhedrin 93a) as a prooftext; in rabbinic thought, angels were created on day two.

[4] This idea is brought in the name of Rabbi Yosei in Bereishit Rabba 4:8.

[5] According to the Chizkuni himself, the conclusion "it was very good" refers to mankind.

[6] Many other commentators develop this concept of the whole possessing greater value than the sum of its parts; see the Malbim and Meshekh Chokhma, ad. loc.