

Chaye Sarah

Perceptions
Issue #869

“Let the girl to whom I say, ‘Please tip your pitcher for me to drink’ . . .” (Bereishis 24:14)

THE TALMUD SAYS that 40 days before a child is born, it is decided in Heaven who they are to marry. It’s even proclaimed (Sotah 2a), though no one down here can really hear it. But that doesn’t matter, because it will become known once the two people finally meet each other and decide they are for one another.

This means that it was already announced before Yitzchak was born that he would one day marry Rivkah, and that 40 days before Rivkah was born, it was proclaimed that she would later marry Yitzchak. As Rashi mentions about her birth at the end of last week’s parsha, she was born as Yitzchak’s soul mate.

Avraham, being a prophet, as God told Avimelech in last week's parsha, probably knew. Or, at least he suspected this, another reason to send Eliezer eastward in search of Yitzchak's wife.

But when Avraham instructs Eliezer, he makes it sound as if it was not yet determined who Yitzchak would marry, as if Eliezer would have to find out for himself. Thus, Eliezer also seemed to act on this when when he contrived his whole scheme to flush out Yitzchak's "zivug." While it is true that the Talmud would not be written down for thousands of years, it is more than likely that they were already aware of such concepts. So why did they act contrary to what the Talmud would later say?

They didn't. They just understood that even though God decides all outcomes of events (Brochos 34b), He likes to allow us to act as if we can play a role in them. This way God can reward us for our contribution in whatever happens, and we can feel as if our decisions made a difference. Or, if a person made it possible for something bad to happen, they can be held responsible for it.

This is because, what counts in life is not what we accomplish, because we can "fail" for reasons that go beyond our own personal attributes or lacks. We're part of some hugely bigger picture than our own personal lives seem to indicate, and this takes precedence over our idea of what is "fair." Sometimes the moment needs us to fail, because a larger history requires it.

But that's okay. What counts the most in life is our "ratzon," or will. It's what we decide to care about that gets Heaven's attention. It's about what makes us feel good or what makes us feel sad that reveals our true self, and what we'd like to do to make a situation better. This is true

regardless of whether or not we have the means to make good on our will.

That's the initial merit a person needs to be plugged into God's plan for good, or the demerit to be plugged into a plan for bad. Then, if history allows it, a person might find themselves one day actually in a position to make such a difference, for good OR for bad, depending upon who they have become.

Aharon HaKohen's grandson, Pinchas, stands out as one of the perfect examples of this for good. Until he acted zealously on behalf of God, he was a virtual nobody, not even a kohen. But his lack of position and fame did not stop him from looking at himself as a partner of God, and when the right moment came, God plugged him in and he got both, kehunah and fame.

Zimri, whom Pinchas killed on behalf of God, did the same thing, but for bad. The Talmud speaks about whom he really was and what kind of spiritual life he lived. Therefore, when the time came for him to be plugged in, he became the person through whom Pinchas would sanctify the Name of God.

History is pre-determined, as the Midrash says. Certainly God has known everything that would happen since Creation, and set it up so that it would. What about free will? That's for people to decide who they want to be, and what they want to accomplish, so God can plug them appropriately.

One way or another, Yitzchak was destined to marry Rivkah, even before they were born. They were soul mates, and they deserved each other. Eliezer was just fortunate enough to be the one through whom God worked to make it happen, earning reward for doing so as if it depended upon him.

Connecting the Dots, Issue #6

A Separate Mater, Chapter 1: Good & Evil

GOOD AND EVIL—everyone knows about the two of THEM. Every society has their own version of these two main “characters” of history. There have been many debates about whether they REALLY exist, or are just a figment of some ancient imaginations. But one thing is for sure: people live as if they are definitely REAL.

The funny thing is that not a lot of people really KNOW what good and evil are. If anything, they define good as that which works to THEIR advantage, and evil as that which interferes with what THEY want. That’s why there have been, and remain to be, so many versions of good and evil.

They’re in good company, though, or perhaps in “bad” company. The first man and woman ALSO didn’t know what good and evil were. So, they embarked on a “journey” to find out first hand, conveniently enough, by eating from the ONE tree in the ENTIRE Garden of Eden that promised to teach ALL about good and evil: the Aitz HaDa’as Tov v’Ra—the TREE of Knowledge of GOOD and EVIL.¹

Six millennia later, people still struggle with the idea.

¹ Bereishis 3:1.

Mankind has grown incredibly larger, but not his understanding of good and evil. On the contrary, so often one person's idea of "good" is exactly another person's idea of "evil." Not only this, but today, some things once considered "evil" by just about everyone have become accepted as "good" by many.

If it came down to just a couple of different opinions, then maybe we could just divide the world and give people the choice to live on one side or the other. But it DOESN'T. It comes down to MANY different opinions, and MANY different versions of those opinions. It would be easier to have just ONE version of right and wrong, for EVERYONE.

EASIER, but not EASY. Even GOD hasn't been able to sell it, and He MADE this world. He's tried several times, but each time people have gone ahead and edited it to their liking. Even the Jewish people who heard Him firsthand and accepted it in written and oral form, have struggled with it through the ages, with many splintering off to do the "Judaism Thing" THEIR way.

Some people have been bold enough to say that they got their version of good and evil from God Himself. But, when asked who else heard God talk to them, they had no one. That's not good for credibility when you are trying to sell a way of life that involves self-sacrifice, that goes against people's most basic natural instincts.

Others have been more honest and admitted that God did NOT give them their direction regarding morality, and that they really had no authority to push their own. They're just following a path in life that speaks to them, and if it talks to others as well, then let them come and join.

Then there are those who don't believe in God and

therefore, the idea of good and bad. There is the world, and man within it. There are some rules of Nature, and of man as well, that we can't change, some we can bend, and others we can even break. Life is about living within that framework while trying to "enjoy" life.

The problem with these approaches is if God actually DOES exist, and there is something called ETERNAL REWARD. No one may worry about it that much NOW because God seems to let a lot of people get away with just about anything. But, how will they feel LATER when they realize their error?

"It's worth the risk."

At least that is what they tell themselves, or at least WANT to believe. And they figure they can afford to, because day-after-day they wake up to the same life, with no noticeable signs that God is watching them, cares about what they do, or keeps track of it all for future accounting to the umpteenth degree.

Torah Judaism is the ONLY philosophy in the world that not only claims to be God-given, but that it was God-given to THREE MILLION people. It's an extremely BOLD claim to make if not true. It's an extremely INSANE claim to make if not true AND you want to sell an ENTIRE nation of INTELLIGENT people 613 mitzvos, many of which go against basic instinct and are not easy to do exactly right.

But that is a discussion unto itself, and not one that works with everyone, certainly not without seriously considering the history behind it and the implications it creates. It would be more expedient though to cut to the chase and speak out the Torah's explanation of good and evil.

It is, at the very least, fascinating and insightful. It's

certainly more than just do what the Torah says to, and don't do what it says not to. Evil has to do with something Kabbalah calls the "Klipos," and good, by definition, is whatever opposes, deposes, and disposes them.

What are the Klipos?

The word itself means "peels." They are called this, even though they are COMPLETELY spiritual, because they "encase" a person, like a peel might a food. They do this to spiritually desensitize a person, so if a person is not spiritually sensitive, they are, by definition, at the mercy of the Klipos, even if they are basically a nice person. To the extent that a person is spiritually desensitized, that is the extent to which they are affected by the Klipos.

Why must this be the case? Because, as it has been pointed out, man is basically a spiritual being having a physical experience. He has a soul, and it is his main part.² He inclines towards spirituality, unless the Klipos incline him in the opposite direction. They can cause him to misread reality, so that he will choose a material, basically Godless life over a spiritual one. Judging by almost 6,000 years of history, the Klipos have been on the winning side.

But what ARE the Klipos exactly, and how do they work?

It's a LONG Kabbalistic story. There are a lot of very technical details that one should learn to better understand what they're dealing with, who they're battling against pretty much every waking moment.³ Only a few however really go that far, so this is a VERY brief overview of some of the ideas.

² Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Introduction 1.

³ Kiddushin 30b.

It's really God's fault. He made Creation, ALL of it, so He made the Klipos too. The only thing is that He made them for OUR good, to facilitate the usage of FREE WILL. If not for free will, we would not be able to separate things, and by doing so, earn ETERNAL reward in the World-to-Come. It's the entire reason why He made everything in the first place.

The story of the Klipos begins with the concept of Tzimtzum—Constriction. It's an idea we take for granted, but shouldn't. It may be everywhere and in all things, but it is also the reason for everything, even though by all rights, it shouldn't even exist.

It's actually quite the miracle, the biggest of all, because without it, God's Infinite Light would remain that way, and nothing could ever exist OTHER than His light. Tzimtzum makes God's light less infinite, even though it still remains infinite. See the big miracle?

Thanks to Tzimtzum, the physical AND spiritual universes exist. Thanks to Tzimtzum, there are levels of spiritual existence within which one can ascend and earn reward for doing so. Thanks to Tzimtzum, there can be evil in Creation, and with it, free will as well. Thanks to Tzimtzum, man can not only exist, but he can also make a difference to the direction of history and the perfection of Creation. Thank God for TZIMTZUM.

But, like many things in Creation, there's a downside to Tzimtzum. Dimming the lights might make it easier on your eyes, but it also makes it easier to bump into things. Tzimtzum reduces the spiritual intensity of God's Infinite Light so we can exist and even have a relationship with Him, but it has also blinded billions of people to His existence and allowed for people to commit terrible evils throughout history.

There is a major discussion amongst the Kabbalists as to just what Tzimtzum actually is, or more importantly, how it works, all very fascinating. The concern here however is the net result of Tzimtzum, and how it affects everyday life. Because, nothing can be more embarrassing or hurtful, or wasteful, or DANGEROUS, than to find out that your ally was really your mortal enemy.

Here's how the Klipos impact life. The goal of life is to recognize God and build a relationship with Him. The Klipos take advantage of intellectual blindness and make it seem as if God isn't here. A person is supposed to try to be spiritually great, and the Klipos make it seem wasteful. A person is supposed to be charitable, but the Klipos justify stinginess, or at least try and get a person to give for the wrong reasons, like for honor, etc.

To sum up, the Klipos cause a person to be extremely instinctual, therefore going after the desires of the body, and if possible, doing it with abandon. That part will depend upon how much some concept of "good" and "self-restraint" have been ingrained in a person's way of thinking, especially from childhood. That's what determines, for a non-God-seeing person, how many boundaries they will be prepared to break.

Good, therefore, is the opposite. It is doing that which is CONSISTENT with the PURPOSE of Creation, ESPECIALLY when it flies in the face of instinctual desire. Not everything the Klipos drive a person to do is the epitome of evil. But, if it drives them to do it at a time or in a way that undermines God's reason for Creation, even on a small level, it is, categorically, "evil."

But, what if a person doesn't know God exists? Or, what if they believe He exists, but do not know His purpose for Creation? What if they have come to believe that

there is nothing wrong with instinctual desires? What if they have no concept of anything remotely similar to the Klipos? How can they fight a war they do not even know is raging around them?

They can't, and society is the proof of that. And what's worse is that, unlike the snake that spoke to Chava from the OUTSIDE, the Klipos, a.k.a. the yetzer hara—the evil inclination—speak to us from the INSIDE. The dialogue, and really the war, became an INTERNAL one, requiring a person to REALLY know their enemy to fight it. Otherwise, they only hear their OWN voice, even though the yetzer hara is speaking.

If that didn't complicate matters enough, there is the additional problem of good being mixed together with the Klipos, as a single combination, creating the need for bir-rur on two levels: within the person, and within the world. Clearly it takes a real "talmid chacham"⁴ to navigate all of that.

⁴ Wise student.