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Judaism's Social Vision

If you seek to understand Judaism's social vision, look at its anti-poverty legislation:

"If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him sufficient for his needs in that which he lacks. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: 'The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near,' so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your

land." (Deut 15:7-11)

Ostensibly the passage is about the cancellation of debts in the seventh year (*shemittah*, the year of "release"). The oral tradition, however, extended it to the laws of *tzedakah* - the word usually translated as "charity" but which also means "distributive justice, equity". The rabbis interpreted the phrase "sufficient for his needs" to mean the basic requirements of existence: food, clothing, shelter and so on. "That which he lacks" was understood as referring to a person who was previously wealthy but has now become impoverished. He too must be helped to recover his dignity:

It is related about Hillel the Elder that, for a certain poor man who was of good family, he bought a horse to ride on and a slave to run before him. When on one occasion he could not find a slave to run before the man, he himself ran before him. (Ketubot 67b)

The force of this passage lies in the fact that Hillel himself was notoriously poor, yet he gave of his money and time to help a rich man who had lost his money regain his self-respect. This double aspect is evident throughout the laws of *tzedakah*. On the one hand, they are directed to the brute fact of poverty. No one must be deprived of basic physical necessities. On the other, they address with astonishing sensitivity the psychology of poverty. It demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, shames. *Tzedakah*, ruled the rabbis, must be given in such a way as to minimize these feelings:

When Rabbi Yannai saw a certain man giving a coin to a poor person in front of everyone, he said: It would have been better not to have given it to him than to have given it and put him to shame. (Hagigah 5b)

In a famous passage, Maimonides describes the eight levels of charity:

There are eight degrees of charity, one higher than the other.

The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of one who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment - in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid. With reference to such aid it is said, 'You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you' (Lev. 25:35), which means: strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented.

A step below this is the one who gives alms to the needy in such a way that the giver does not know to whom he gives and the recipient does not know from whom he takes. This exemplifies doing a good deed for its own sake. One example was the Hall of Secrecy in the Temple, where the righteous would place their gift clandestinely and where poor people from noble families could come and secretly help themselves to aid. Close to this is dropping money in a charity box...

One step lower is where the giver knows to whom he gives, but the poor person does not know from whom he receives. Thus the great sages would go and secretly put money into poor people's doorways...

A step lower is the case where the poor person knows from whom he is taking, but the giver does not know to whom he is giving. Thus the great sages would tie coins in their scarves, which

they would fling over their shoulders, so that the poor could help themselves without suffering shame.

Lower than this, is where someone gives the poor person a gift before he asks.

Lower still is one who gives only after the poor person asks.

Lower than this is one who gives less than is fitting, but does so with a friendly countenance.

The lowest level is one who gives ungraciously. (Mattenot Ani'im 10:7-14)

This exquisitely calibrated ethic is shot through with psychological insight. What matters is not only how *much* you give, but also *how* you do so. Anonymity in the giving of aid is essential to dignity. The poor must not be embarrassed. The rich must not be allowed to feel superior. We give, not to take pride in our generosity, still less to emphasise the dependency of others, but because we belong to a covenant of human solidarity, and because that is what God wants us to do, honouring the trust through which he has temporarily lent us wealth in the first place.

Especially noteworthy is Maimonides' insistence that giving somebody a job, or the means to start a business, is the highest charity of all. What is humiliating about poverty is dependence itself: the feeling of being beholden to others. One of the sharpest expressions of this is to be found in the Grace after Meals, when we say, "We beseech You, God our Lord, let us not be in need of the gifts of men or of their loans, but only of Your helping hand ... so that we may not be put to shame nor humiliated for ever and ever." The greatest act of *tzedakah* is one that allows the individual to become self-sufficient. The highest form of charity is one that enables the

individual to dispense with charity. From the point of view of the giver, this is one of the least financially demanding forms of giving. It may not cost him anything at all. But from the point of view of the recipient, it is the most dignifying, because it removes the shame of receiving. Humanitarian relief is essential in the short-term, but in the long-run, job creation and economic policies that promote full employment are more important.

One detail of Jewish law is particularly noteworthy: even a person dependent on *tzedakah* must himself or herself give *tzedakah*. On the face of it, the rule is absurd. Why give X enough money so that he can give to Y? Giving to Y directly is more logical and efficient. What the rabbis understood, however, is that *giving is an essential part of human dignity*. The rabbinic insistence that the community provide the poor with enough money so that they themselves can give is a profound insight into the human condition.

Jewry has had many distinguished economists, from David Ricardo (whom Keynes called the greatest mind that ever addressed itself to economics), to John von Neumann (a physicist who, in his spare time, invented Game Theory), to Paul Samuelson, Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan. They have won an astonishing 38% of Nobel prizes in the field. Why should this have been so? Perhaps because Jews have long known that economics is one of the fundamental determinants of a society; that economic systems are not written into the structure of the universe, but are constructed by human beings and can be changed by human beings; and thus that poverty is not a fact of nature but can be alleviated, minimized, reduced. Economics is not a religious discipline. It is a secular art and science. Yet, deeply underlying the Jewish passion for economics is a religious imperative: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land."



A Blessing and a Curse

'See! I give you today (a choice of) a blessing and a curse. The blessing, when you listen to the commandments of God your Lord, which I command you today. The curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of God your Lord, and you deviate from the path which I command you today, in order to follow other gods which you did not know.' (Deut. 11:26-28)

This week's Torah portion begins with Moses placing before the people two choices: a blessing or a curse. These will be the results of following the word of God or alternatively abandoning the word of God and embarking on a path leading to idolatry.

These beginning verses encapsulate what follows. Much of this Torah portion is a polemic against idolatry, but in order to understand this, we first need to better understand the choice, i.e. the difference between the blessing and the curse.

Later on in this soliloquy, Moses describes the catastrophes and horrors which will inevitably result from deviation from the teachings of God:

'And God will get exceedingly angry with that land, to bring upon it all the curses written in this book ... And behold when all these things befall you,

the blessing and the curse which I placed before you ...' (Deut. 29:26 and 30:1)

Then the text concludes with these immortal words:

'See I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil ... I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you, life and death I have placed in front of you, the blessing and the curse - choose life in order that you and your children can live! (Deut. 30:19)

This text bears remarkable similarity with the beginning of our Torah portion, where the same formula was used: "See I have placed before you." But here the text identifies the blessing with life, and the curse with death.

This, then, is the real choice for man: life or death.

It is hard to imagine a more stark distinction than that between life and death. They stand at the opposite poles of the human experience. Why would anyone choose death over life? It would seem totally illogical.

Certainly, there are people for whom life becomes too painful, and they might choose to avoid their pain - some might choose drugs, while others go one step further and choose suicide/death. There are also those who seek to dull the reality of life, others choose to avoid life completely. But these are clearly maladjusted individuals. Why would the Torah have to speak at such great length about psychological maladies?

THE PRIMAL CHOICE

The choice between life and death has a famous parallel which was presented to man

at the very dawn of existence:

And God the Lord caused to grow from the ground every pleasant tree to the sight and good to eat, and the Tree of Life was in the Garden (of Eden) and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil ... And God the Lord took Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and to guard it. And God the Lord commanded Adam saying: 'From every tree in the Garden you shall eat. But from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, do not eat from it, for on the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.' (Genesis 2:9,16-17)

One tree is associated with life, the other with death. Clearly, no sane person would choose death over life, unless, of course, there is a serpent whispering seductive thoughts, leading the listener to self destruction.

This description is a paradigm for all humanity. We have all been placed in a Garden of Eden, life and death presented before us, and we are told by God to choose life. But alas, we continue to listen to the devious serpents, real or imagined, encouraging us to partake of the tree of death, despite the manifold curses which accompany that choice.

The world, from its very inception, was created with choices. Ultimately, these choices are between life and death, but rarely do people see their choices in such terms. The possibility for evil or pain is part of the process of creation, or, perhaps, is a result of creation:

And, behold, it was very good ... And, behold, it was good [in the Book of Genesis] alludes to the creation of man and the Good Inclination, and "very" alludes to the Evil Inclination. Is, then, the Evil Inclination "very good"? It is, in truth, to teach you that were it not for the Evil Inclination, no one would build

*a house, marry and beget children.
(Kohelet Rabba 3:15)*

The very creation includes the evil inclination, and without it one cannot speak of the world being very good. The possibility of evil is an essential part of the creation. This idea is expressed most clearly in this passage in the Book of Isaiah:

'I am the Lord, and there is no one else, there is no God beside me; I girded you, though you have not known me. That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is no one else. I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I the Lord do all these things.' (Isaiah 45:5-7)

Here, in unequivocal terms, God, "takes credit" for all phenomena, good and evil. To ascribe these things to any other power would necessarily impinge on the idea of monotheism. All things come from God.

BUT WHY?

But why would God create a world with these things? Furthermore, how can the Midrash label these things as "very good"? How can a God who is all good, who defines good, cause evil?

On the one hand, we can appreciate that if all things come from heaven - including pain and punishment - all of these things are motivated by God's absolute love for us. As a parent must discipline their children, so does God treat us. It seems clear that if a parent responds to a child's anti-social behavior with rewards, the child will most likely become a sociopath. Likewise, if God responds to the anti-social behavior of the masses with rewards and gifts, an entire generation or nation of sociopaths

would result.

But there is more to it.

The verse cited above from Isaiah deserve a second reading. Close inspection of the text offers a fascinating insight. Light is formed, while darkness is created; peace is made while evil is created.

What is the difference between "formation" versus "creation"? Formation indicates an appearance of "something from something," while creation indicates ex nihilo - "something from nothing."

We may learn from careful examination of Isaiah's words that light, or good, is derived/formed from a primordial source - from God, while evil is created. Despite the fact that evil was created by God, it does not emanate from God. Light is refracted from the supernal good, while the result of a separate act of creation results in the appearance of something new, not part of God, called evil.

The mystics described this process as *tzimtzum*, Divine contraction. This process of creation allows the appearance of something other than God, which needed to be created because it did not exist in God's sphere. This concept is encapsulated in a one-line phrase in the Midrash:

*No evil descends from heaven.
(Yalkut Shimoni Va'era 186)*

The Midrash is clearly aware of the verse in Isaiah cited above, but simply assumes, as we do, that creation differs from formation; therefore, evil does not emanate from heaven, rather it is a by-product of creation.

Likewise, commenting on our Torah portion, Rabbi Chaim of Aleppo (a student of Rabbi Chaim Vital) noted:

See! I give you today (literally, 'I place before you') a blessing and a curse. 'Before you' and not 'on you,' for no evil descends from heaven, rather it is placed before you. The choice is yours. (Torat Haham 419:3)

IS GOD COMPLETELY GOOD?

In a certain sense, this may sound like theological double talk. In a lengthy passage, the Zohar addresses this question:

True love of the Holy One, blessed be He, consists in just this, that we give over to Him all our emotional, intell, and material faculties and possessions, and love Him. Should it be asked: How can a man love Him with the evil inclination? Is not the evil inclination, the seducer, preventing man from approaching the Holy One to serve Him? How, then, can man use the evil inclination as an instrument of love to God? The answer lies in this, that there can be no greater service done to the Holy One than to bring into subjection the evil inclination by the power of love to the Holy One, blessed be He. For, when it is subdued and its power broken by man in this way, then he becomes a true lover of the Holy One, since he has learnt how to make the evil inclination itself serve the Holy One.

Here is a mystery entrusted to the masters of esoteric lore. All that the Holy One has made, both above and below, is for the purpose of manifesting His glory and to make all things serve Him. Now, would a master permit his servant to work against him, and to continually lay plans to counteract his will? It is the will of the Holy One that men should worship Him and walk in the way of truth that they may be

rewarded with many benefits. How, then, can an evil servant come and counteract the will of his Master by tempting man to walk in an evil way, seducing him from the good way and causing him to disobey the will of his Lord? But, indeed, the evil inclination also does through this the will of its Lord.

It is as if a king had an only son whom he dearly loved, and just for that cause he warned him not to be enticed by bad women, saying that anyone defiled might not enter his palace. The son promised his father to do his will in love. Outside the palace, however, there lived a beautiful harlot. After a while the king thought: "I will see how far my son is devoted to me." So he sent to the woman and commanded her, saying: "Entice my son, for I wish to test his obedience to my will." So she used every blandishment to lure him into her embraces. But the son, being good, obeyed the commandment of his father. He refused her allurements and thrust her from him. Then did the father rejoice exceedingly, and, bringing him in to the innermost chamber of the palace, bestowed upon him gifts from his best treasures, and showed him every honor. And who was the cause of all this joy? The harlot! Is she to be praised or blamed for it? To be praised, surely, on all accounts, for on the one hand she fulfilled the king's command and carried out his plans for him, and on the other hand she caused the son to receive all the good gifts and deepened the king's love to his son.

Therefore it is written, "And the Lord saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good", where the word "very" refers to the angel of death (i.e. the evil inclination). Similarly, if it were not

for this accuser, the righteous would not possess the supernal treasures in the world to come. Happy, therefore, are they who, coming into conflict with the tempter, prevail against him, for through him will they attain bliss, and all the good and desirable possessions of the world to come. (Zohar, Sh'mot, Sec. 2, p. 163b)

The Zohar, in this remarkable passage, describes in the clearest of terms how it is possible for the "king" - a metaphor for God - to allow this scenario to unfold outside the palace. The impetus for evil is the king's will. The king wishes for evil to be rejected, but this is not possible within the palace walls. Likewise, man prior to creation possesses a soul, but no free choice. He lives in the palace. Outside the palace, in this world, temptation exists - in order to be rejected.

Ultimately, all temptation is sent by God in order to be rejected. Therefore, evil can be said to be good "incognito." Despite the allure of desire at the moment of passion, the sinner will one day come to realize that what he embraced is merely an emissary of the king/God which was meant to be rejected. This is the meaning of the Midrash, "No evil descends from heaven."

Likewise, now we can understand how the term "very good" may apply to the evil inclination. By rejecting the evil inclination, man is enabled to reach a spiritual level unattainable in heaven, where only good is a reality. The Talmud adds that this is the desire of the Satan:

Rabbi Levi said: "Both Satan and Peninah had a pious purpose [in acting as adversaries]. Satan, when he saw God inclined to favor Job said, 'Far be it that God should forget the love of Abraham.' Of Peninah it is written, 'And her rival provoked her sore for to make

her fret.'" When Rabbi Aha ben Jacob gave this exposition in Papunia, Satan came and kissed his feet. (Baba Bathra 16a)

We further understand that our view of the world is somewhat skewed. We see evil as a reality, thus failing to realize that it is actually a servant of the King "dressed up." Evil, by virtue of being a "creation," does not really exist in the palace of God. Rather, it is the result of an act creation and will one day dissipate.

WHO IS SATAN?

But what is the evil inclination? The Talmud identifies it with other known adversaries:

Resh Lakish said: "Satan, the Evil Inclination, and the Angel of Death are all one." (Baba Bathra 16a)

These three forces are instilled in the world as part of a cosmic balancing act, in order to give man free choice. The verse which we began with "See! I give you today a blessing and a curse" is only relevant if man has free choice.

Man's evil inclination does not necessarily work by calling upon man to perform objectively evil deeds. Any action which distances man from God is sought out by the evil inclination. Furthermore, at times the choices with which man is faced are both positive, but one will bring man closer to God than the other.

In such cases, the evil inclination is particularly insidious, for man himself may be unsure which choice represents the good inclination, and which the evil. The litmus test must always be which of these choices will bring the individual closer to God. The Talmud expresses this succinctly:

*If God created the Evil Inclination, He also
created the Torah as its antidote.
(Baba Bathra 16a)*

The Torah is the only objective source which we possess which forces man to follow the good inclination. Following its rules, laws, morals, and systems of prioritizing, is what enables man to define right and wrong, and therefore to choose right from wrong. There are often situations which seem to fall in the "gray area." It is precisely in such cases that we must remind ourselves that the Torah defines "right" and "wrong."

Now we can return to this week's Torah portion. One of the major attractions of idolatry was the possibility for local worship, "under every leafy tree" (Deut. 12:2). The motivation of such worship was immediate gratification, which resulted from man worshipping his own desires, and not God. We can appreciate how individuals who followed idolatrous practices could have deceived themselves into thinking that it was God that they were serving, here and now.

The Torah instead calls upon man to practice a centralized religion with its spiritual capital in a chosen place (Deut. 12:5). This would force man to objectify his religious practice and take it out of the realm of instinct.

How was the individual, who felt a burning need inside to reach out to God, to know if his desire emanated from a place of holiness, or self-destruction? The only possible answer is to follow the rules set out in the Torah.

How can we, as individuals, know if an apparently holy person is "the real thing" or a false prophet, a charlatan? Again, the objective system is Torah: If the "prophet" encourages practices alien to the Torah, he is to be executed.

At times, though, such issues are not as black

and white as we would like. Once we realize that the evil inclination entices with arguments and experiences which are not intrinsically, objectively evil but are simply not the best way to relate to God, we are armed for this mortal spiritual combat.

Ultimately, the evil inclination leads to self-deception and destru. The choice between life and death is the result of the battle, but far more often than not, the battle is waged in more innocuous settings. The people entering the land would only be spiritually armed for the ensuing battles if they were made aware that a spiritual battleground awaited them, and they were armed with the ability to be victorious:

'See I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil ... I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you, life and death I have placed in front of you, the blessing and the curse - choose life in order that you and your children can live! (Deut. 30:19)

Indeed, let us choose life, the Tree of Life - the words of the Living God - let us choose life!



Seeing Is Believing

Quirks in the grammar of the Torah's verses hold many lessons for us. Hashem tells the Jewish people, "See (*re'eh*), I am setting before

you (*lifneichem*), on this day, blessings and curses." The word *re'eh* is the singular form of the verb, but the preposition *lifneichem* is plural. Why the discrepancy?

Furthermore, why was it necessary to preface the gift with the word "see"? If you give someone a present, is it necessary to tell him, "Look, I am giving you a present"? Is it necessary to point out the obvious?

The answer is that blessings are not always so obvious. If we don't make an effort to "see" them, to perceive them, we may not even be aware that we have been blessed. If we think about it, life is full of blessings. In fact, life itself is the greatest blessing. But we take all these thing for granted and do not realize how blessed we are. Therefore, Hashem reminds us to "see" the blessing He has given us.

The Kotzker Rebbe points out that blessings can be given collectively to many people, but each individual will perceive it in his own way, depending on his own particular personality and outlook. Blessings can be universal, but the perception of them is always individual. Therefore, when Hashem tells us to "see" He uses the singular form, but the placement of the blessing is expressed in the plural.

The Talmud tells us (*Taanis* 30b), "Whoever mourns the destruction of Yerushalayim will eventually merit to see its joy." Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohein Kook asks a simple question. If we are talking about someone who mourns the "destruction of Yerushalayim," then his reward should be to see it rebuilt. Why do the Sages speak about its "joy"?

Rav Kook explains that even when Yerushalayim will be rebuilt not everyone will "see" the profound depths of its joy; that will take a special blessing. The Sages are telling us that if one truly mourns the destruction of Yerushalayim, not only will he see the physical rebuilding of it, he will also be deemed worthy of seeing "joy."



The Mind's Eye

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In the opening verse of this week's parsha, Moses speaks to the Jewish people and says, "See (*re'eh*), I have set before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26). The word "*re'eh*" seems out of place here. Moses is not *showing* anything to the people; he is merely informing them about the consequences of their actions! Why does the Torah present this information in terms of "seeing," when it would have made more sense to use the idea of "hearing"?

Later in the parsha, the verse instructs us "to do what is good and upright in the eyes of God" (Deut. 12:28). Rashi (quoting the Midrash Sifri) divides this verse into two parts: the word "good" (*tov*) refers to doing good in the eyes of God, whereas the word "upright" (*yashar*) refers to acting righteously in the eyes of other people. This is a very puzzling comment. Since the verse itself links both of these qualities ("good" and "upright") to God, how can the Midrash claim that the word "upright" refers to other people? This seems contrary to the literal meaning of the text!

A passage in the Talmud (*Brachot* 28b) will help us resolve both difficulties:

The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai came to visit him when he was on his deathbed. They gathered around their teacher and requested a blessing. Rabbi Yochanan

replied, "May it be God's will that your fear of Heaven be *as great* as your fear of people." This unusual blessing surprised the students: "Is that all?" they exclaimed. It would seem that a person's fear of God should be *even greater* than his fear of people! Rabbi Yochanan responded: "You should know that when a person commits a crime, his first thought is always, 'Did anybody see me?'"

This Talmudic passage provides an insight into the Midrash's division of the verse in Parshat Re'eh. The Torah counsels, "Do what is good and upright in the eyes of God." But how are we to know what is "good" in God's eyes? The seemingly superfluous word "upright" is included in the verse to teach us the following lesson. We do what is good in the eyes of God by imagining what our conduct would be if we were in the presence of important people. Acting righteously, with other people in mind, is a prerequisite to pleasing to the Divine. This interpretation does not contradict the literal meaning of the verse; rather, it teaches us an approach we must take in our daily lives to help ensure that we are doing what is "good in God's eyes."

VIVID IMAGE

Now we can understand the use of the word "*re'eh*" in terms of this idea. The Talmud teaches, "Who is wise? One who sees the future" (Tamid 32a). It is interesting that the Talmud does not attribute wisdom to one who *knows* the future. Instead, the word "see" is used. This teaches us an important lesson. A person who *knows* what will happen may not change his behavior - but a person who vividly sees, with his mind's eye, the potential outcome of his actions, may choose to act differently.

(We all know that our time on earth is finite, yet this *knowledge* of our own mortality rarely spurs us to make positive changes in our lives. However, if we were to *see*, in our imagination, the actual moment of our death, that

frightening vision of stretchers and paramedics would make us aware of our true priorities far more powerfully than mere knowledge!)

This is why Moses uses the word "*re'eh*" in addressing the Jewish people. Moses does not want the people simply to *listen* to his words - he wants them to vividly imagine the results of obeying or disobeying them.

May we all be blessed with a dynamic imagination that will lead us to an awareness of God's Presence. May we use our vision to truly see the ramifications of our action, speech and thought so that we can live our lives according to what is good and upright in God's eyes.