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The Fruits of Gratitude

The Midrash suggests a surprising reason for the creation of the world: The world was created in the merit of *bikkurim* (the first-fruit offerings), as it is written, “*Bereishis — for the first and foremost thing — God created Heaven and earth.*” The word “first” can refer only to *bikkurim*, as it is written, “*The choicest first fruits of your land [shall you bring to the House of Hashem your God].*”^{1,2}

What is the unique significance of *bikkurim*, the first fruits, that more than any other of the 613 mitzvot, the Midrash understood it to be the very reason for creation?

Each mitzvah has its own special *segulah*, spiritual energy, and its own nurturing influence on human character, which helps us become finer, kinder people.³ The influence of *bikkurim* in particular is to develop the character trait of gratitude, perhaps the most crucial of all traits, without which we cannot possibly hope to develop a healthy relationship with our Creator or with our fellow man.

When a Jew would offer *bikkurim* in the Holy

Temple, he would recall all the kindness God has done for him personally, and for his ancestors before him:

*“Then you shall call out and say before Hashem, your God, ‘An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation — great, strong, and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. Then we cried out to Hashem, the God of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail, and our oppression. Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and He gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O Hashem!’ And you shall lay it before Hashem, your God, and you shall prostrate yourself before Hashem, your God. And you shall rejoice with all the goodness that Hashem your God has given you and your household — you and the Levi and the proselyte who is in your midst.”*⁴

Although a Jew must work to perfect all the traits of his character, the trait of gratitude is the very purpose of creation. Hence the paramount importance of *bikkurim*, which nurtures this trait. The Ramban writes: The purpose of all the mitzvot is to express our faith in our God and thank Him for having created us. This is the very purpose of creation, since there is no other fathomable reason for primordial creation, nor any desire that Hashem may have from His lower worlds, but that man should recognize and thank his God Who created him.⁵

The Targum Yonasan interprets the verse, “Yehudah, your brothers will acknowledge you,”⁶ to mean that all Jews will be called “Yehudim” in his honor. The significance of this name was first expressed by Yehudah’s mother, Leah, when she chose it: “She said, ‘This time, I shall thank (odeh) Hashem,’ and she named him Yehudah.”⁷

Our title of “Yehudim” highlights the essence of our collective identity, and our purpose as the Chosen Nation, which is to recognize God’s involvement in our lives, and to thank Him for His never-ending kindness.

Gratitude is the foundation of any healthy relationship between husband and wife, between neighbors, or between friends. It teaches a person to be humble and respectful to those around him, in recognition of how much he owes them. It enables him to be happy with his portion, and content to be surrounded by people who do so much for his benefit. It nurtures in his heart a sense of love for mankind, and a peaceful contentment with all the good things in life that might otherwise have been overlooked.

In contrast, those who are not grateful for the gifts they receive are perpetually bitter about everything they lack, and are at odds with their relatives and friends, whom they resent for denying them the honor or favors they think they deserve.

Gratitude is also the foundation of our relationship with God. In the admonitions of *Parashas Haazinu*, Moses scolded the Children of Israel by saying: “Is it to Hashem that you do this, O vile (naval) and unwise people?”⁸

The Ramban comments that the Hebrew word “naval” refers to those who ungratefully repay kindness with injury. Accordingly, this admonition is not so much for the sins themselves, but for the failure to recognize God’s kindness and to conduct our lives accordingly. Since God rewards on a scale five

hundred times greater than that with which He punishes,⁹ we can only imagine the great reward that awaits those who appreciate His kindness, and who devote themselves to His service with joy and gratitude. It is thus quite clear why *bikkurim* and the attribute of gratitude that this mitzvah engenders are indeed the very purpose of creation and the reason for the Jewish People’s existence.

1. Shemos 23:19.
2. Bereishis Rabbah 1:4.
3. See Midrash Tanchuma, Shemini 12.
4. Devarim 26:5-11.
5. Ramban to Shemos 13:16.
6. Bereishis 49:8.
7. *Ibid.* 29:35.
8. Devarim 32:6.
9. Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 21.



The Faith of God

There is a deep question at the heart of Jewish faith, and it is very rarely asked. As the Torah opens we see God creating the universe day by day, bringing order out of chaos, life out of inanimate matter, flora and fauna in all their wondrous diversity. At each stage God sees what He has made and declares it good.

What then went wrong? How did evil enter the picture, setting in motion the drama of which the Torah – in a sense, the whole of history – is a record? The short answer is man, *Homo sapiens*, us. We, alone of the life forms thus far known to us, have freewill, choice and moral

responsibility. Cats do not debate the ethics of killing mice. Vampire bats do not become vegetarians. Cows do not worry about global warming.

It is this complex capacity to speak, think and choose between alternative courses of action, that is at once our glory, our burden and our shame. When we do good we are little lower than the angels. When we do evil we fall lower than the beasts. Why then did God take the risk of creating the one form of life capable of destroying the very order He had made and declared good? Why did God create us?

That is the question posed by the Gemara in Sanhedrin:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create man, He created a group of ministering angels and asked them, "Do you agree that we should make man in our image?"

They replied, "Sovereign of the Universe, what will be his deeds?"

God showed them the history of mankind.

The angels replied, "What is man that You are mindful of him?" [Let man not be created].

God destroyed the angels.

He created a second group, and asked them the same question, and they gave the same answer.

God destroyed them.

He created a third group of angels, and they replied, "Sovereign of the Universe, the first and second group of angels told You not to create man, and it did not avail them. You did not listen. What then can we say but this: The

universe is Yours. Do with it as You wish."

And God created man.

But when it came to the generation of the Flood, and then to the generation of those who built the Tower of Babel, the angels said to God, "Were not the first angels right? See how great is the corruption of mankind."

And God replied (Isaiah 46:4), "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38b]

Technically the Gemara is addressing a stylistic challenge in the text. For every other act of creation in Genesis 1, the Torah tells us, "God said, 'Let there be' ... And there was..." In the case of the creation of humankind alone, there is a preface, a prelude. Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ..." Who is the "us"? And why the preamble?

In their seemingly innocent and childlike – actually subtle and profound – way the sages answered both questions by saying that with (to quote Hamlet) an enterprise of this pith and moment, God consulted with the angels. They were the "us".

But now the question becomes very deep indeed. For, in creating humans, God brought into existence the one life form with the sole exception of Himself, capable of freedom and choice. That is what the phrase means when it says, "Let us make mankind in our image after our likeness." For the salient fact is that God has no image. To make an image of God is the archetypal act of idolatry.

This means not just the obvious fact that God is invisible. He cannot be seen. He cannot be identified with anything in nature: not the sun,

the moon, thunder, lightning, the ocean or any of the other objects or forces people worshipped in those days. In this superficial sense, God has no image. That, wrote Sigmund Freud in his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, was Judaism's greatest contribution. By worshipping an invisible God, Jews tilted the balance of civilisation from the physical to the spiritual.

But the idea that God has no image goes far deeper than this. It means that we cannot conceptualise God, understand Him or predict Him. God is not an abstract essence; He is a living presence. That is the meaning of God's own self-definition to Moses at the Burning Bush: "I will be what I will be" – meaning, "I will be what I choose to be." I am the God of freedom, who endowed humankind with freedom, and I am about to lead the children of Israel from slavery to freedom.

When God made humanity in His image, it means that He gave humans the freedom to choose, so that you can never fully predict what they will do. They too – within the limits of our finitude and mortality – will be what they choose to be. Which means that when God gave humans the freedom to act well, he gave them the freedom to act badly. There is no way of avoiding this dilemma even for God himself. And so it was. Adam and Eve sinned. The first human child, Cain, murdered the second, Abel, and within a short space of time the world was filled with violence.

In one of the most searing passages in the whole of Tanakh, we read at the end of this week's parsha:

God saw that man's wickedness on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thought was only for evil, all day long. God regretted that He had made man on earth, and He was pained to His very core. (Gen. 6:5-6)

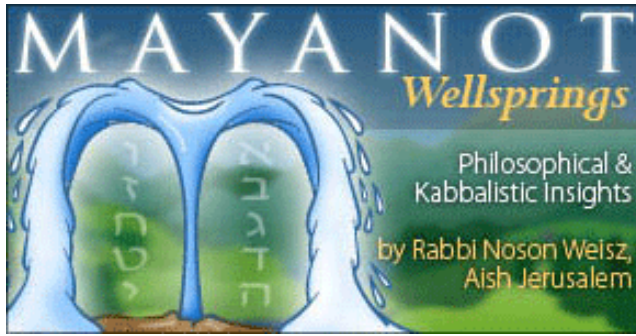
Hence the angels' question, the ultimate question at the heart of faith. Why did God,

knowing the risks and dangers, make a species that could and did rebel against Him, devastate the natural environment, hunt species to extinction, and oppress and kill his fellow man?

The Talmud, imagining a conversation between God and the angels, is suggesting a tension within the mind of God himself. The answer God gives the angels is extraordinary: "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." Meaning: I, God, am prepared to wait. If it takes ten generations for a Noah to emerge, and another ten for an Abraham, I will be patient. However many times humans disappoint Me, I will not change. However much evil they do in the world I will not despair. I despaired once, and brought a Flood. But after I saw that humans are merely human, I will never bring a Flood again.

God created humanity because God has faith in humanity. Far more than we have faith in God, God has faith in us. We may fail many times, but each time we fail, God says: "Even to old age I will not change, and even to grey hair, I will still be patient." I will never give up on humanity. I will never lose faith. I will wait for as long as it takes for humans to learn not to oppress, enslave or use violence against other humans. That, implies the Talmud, is the only conceivable explanation for why a good, wise, all-seeing and all-powerful God created such fallible, destructive creatures as us. God has patience. God has forgiveness. God has compassion. God has love.

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have been looking at religion upside down. The real phenomenon at its heart – the mystery and miracle – is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us.



Her Ways Considered

One of the most intriguing aspects of the creation of the human being involves the separation of the sexes. Unlike the rest of the life forms God created, who were separated into male and female from the moment of their initial creation, the separation of human beings into males and females does not occur until Genesis 2. What is more, it comes about as a result of Adam's own desire.

YHVH God said, "It is not good that man be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him." Now, YHVH God had formed out of the ground every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the Adam to see what he would call each one; and whatever Adam called each living creature, that remained its name. And Adam assigned names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to every beast of the field; but as for man, he did not find a helper corresponding to him. So YHVH God cast a deep sleep upon the man and he slept; and He took one of his sides and He filled flesh in its place. Then YHVH God fashioned the side that He had taken from Adam into a woman, and He brought her to the Adam. And Adam said, "This time is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This shall be called woman for from man was she taken." (Genesis 2:18-23)

This is a perplexing passage indeed!

1. God had independently concluded that it was not good for man to be alone. Nachmonides explains (Genesis 1:4) that the word "good" has the connotation of everlasting. Thus the phrase 'God saw that it was good' which keeps cropping up in Genesis 1 means that after God brought things into being he bestowed upon His creatures the gift of everlasting existence, a separate aspect of their essential being. If so, God's statement that "it is not *good* for man to be alone" amounts to a judgment that man is not viable unless he is separated into male and female. If so, why didn't God create man that way in the first place?
2. According to the commentators, [see Rashi] the incident involving the naming of living creatures is inserted between God's own conclusion that it was not good for man to be alone, and the actual creation of woman, because God wanted Adam himself to crave the companionship of a mate and to realize the necessity of her existence to his well being before He created her. For some reason, God was unwilling to proceed on the course that He knew was necessary without Adam's specific agreement. Why not? We do not find that He consulted man on other aspects of creation. Why was it necessary for man to provide the initial impetus for the actualization of this specific creation?
3. How does this story square with the following verse: *So God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them* (Genesis, 1:27)? We will focus on the Midrashic explanation that Rashi brings. Initially God created man as a creature with the male and female aspects combined in a single corporate

entity. The story in Genesis 2 quoted earlier is the description of the separation of Adam's male and female aspects into two separate beings capable of facing one another.

What does it mean that man originally had two aspects rolled into one?

Man Is Unlike Other Life Forms

The key to all this is the fact that the creation of man, unlike the creation of all other forms of life, takes place on several levels, since man is a composite creature. The Torah employs three different creation verbs to describe the process through which man was formed: the word *Bara* in Genesis 1, the word *Vayizer* in Genesis 2, and the word *Vaya'as* in Genesis 5.

According to Rabbi Chaim of Voloz'hin, the word *Bara* refers to man's *neshama*, what we call his soul, the word *Vayizer* refers to man's *ruach*, or the human spirit, while the word *Vaya'as* refers to man's physical life force.

Following the implications of this division, in terms of man's *neshama*, the creation word [*Bara*] used to describe him in Genesis 1, man remains undifferentiated and has a male-female aspect within a single entity. It is only from the realm of *Yezira* described in Genesis 2, which corresponds to the realm of the '*ruach*', the human spirit and downwards that man is a separate male-female entity.

This crucial mental step allows us to understand why other species of life were created initially in male-female pairs whereas man was not. Man is essentially a spiritual being. Imagine that you were a pure spirit. You were neither tall nor short, dark nor light; you had no nose, eyes or mouth, no hands or feet. Could you then tell yourself apart from your fellow human beings? Not necessarily. Individual differences would have to be based

on the much more subtle phenomena of personality: sense of humor, congeniality and the like; even the distinctions of I.Q., based as they are on physical brain power would disappear.

Maleness and Femaleness Are Spiritual Phenomena In Humans

But the Torah writes that even on this level there is already a male?female aspect to the human personality. Thus according to the Torah, maleness and femaleness as they manifest themselves in human beings are spiritual phenomena; their physical manifestation is not their essence.

What is more, the idea of reproduction is already part of God's design for humanity in Genesis 1, even though on the level discussed in this first chapter, the level of *Briah*, man remains undifferentiated in terms of male-female. *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it...."*(1, 28)

Thus God can simultaneously declare at the end of the sixth day, *And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good* (1,31) and at the same time say in Genesis 2,18, *It is not good that man be alone*. In terms of man as a spiritual creature with the ability to survive permanently, he had all the necessary inputs that were required by the end of Genesis 1. He was both male and female, could reproduce and rule the rest of creation, could communicate with God. In terms of what is being referred to in Genesis 1, it was indeed true to say that man was 'very good'.

To isolate the area where separation was an issue, let us next take note of the fact that the other life forms besides man, which all exist on the level of *Assiyah*, or on the level of the physical only, all come fully separated into male and female forms. If we make the

assumption that this ought to apply to man as well, then we see that the issue of separation exists solely on the level described by Genesis 2, the level of *Yezirah*, or '*ruach*', which we have referred to as the human spirit.

The Issue Of Separation Must Be Understood In Terms Of Loneliness

The issue on this level is loneliness, not reproduction or survival.

To see this clearly, let us attempt to carefully analyze God's statement in Genesis 2,18, cited earlier, *It is not good that man be alone; I will make him a helper corresponding to him.*

What does the Torah mean by describing the female as a helper? The question is deliberately put in terms of female in the abstract rather than in human terms; it isn't only woman who is described as a helper; when Adam named the life forms brought before him by God, the Torah remarks; *but as for man he did not find a helper corresponding to him.* (2,20)

Helpers are not individuals of secondary importance, as the surface impression of the description would imply. God Himself is described as a helper — we end the first blessing of the Amida singing the praises of God by declaring that God is a Helper, a Savior, and a Shield. Without help, man is totally unable to actualize his plans and designs in the real world.

The process of the transformation of a potential into a reality has two distinct elements. Firstly you must have an understanding of what it is that you desire to actualize. Secondly you must have an understanding of how to fit the proposed object of your dreams into the actual reality of the outside world. Just as we describe God as our Helper because we require His direct

assistance in order to be able to actualize anything at all, the female is described as a helper in this same sense — without her contribution we could not actualize any portion of our human potential.

In terms of the lower forms of life this helper concept boils down to the element of self-perpetuation in terms of reproduction, but in terms of human beings the matter is much more complex. Human beings not only produce children; they also actualize ideas and transform plans into realities. Indeed, even their children are raised to be extensions of their spirits. The properly reared human child is infinitely more than a biological continuation of his or her parents. Humans need help to express their spirits as well as their bodies. The power to transform any type of potential into reality, without which man would be totally impotent, is described by the Torah as female.

Females Have The Skill Of Transforming The Potential Into The Actual

Clearly, without a female aspect, man is not a viable proposition. If we now sum up the two extreme aspects of man's being in terms of the relation between male and female we get the following result. In terms of man's *neshama*, or soul, which exists on the level of *beriah* described in Genesis 1, there is no need for the differentiation of the male and female aspects of man into separate parts. In terms of man's physical animal aspect, referred to in Genesis 5, there is no reason to think that man should be any different than other forms of life. It would make sense to separate his male and female aspect into separate parts.

It is from this standpoint that we should approach the situation presented to us in Genesis 2, which deals with what we call the *ruach*, or the human spirit.

We explained at length in last year's essay on Bereishit, [The Determinism of Free Will](#), that it is in the human spirit that the capacity for free will is located. Man's *neshama*, his soul aspect is created by God holy and pure and draws man toward the spiritual and the selfless; man's physical aspect was created by God as self-centered and materialistic and automatically draws man toward the physical and the egotistical; what is up for grabs is man's '*ruach*', his human spirit, located midway between the two.

Inasmuch as this is the area that touches upon man's free will, anything in this area that depends on considerations of judgment rather than necessity is left up to man to decide. The issue of confronting loneliness is exactly such a consideration. Man is already a viable proposition as a *neshama* in which the male and female aspects of his being remain integrated and as a physically corporate being with a separated male and female aspect akin to other life forms. Whether there should be a separation on the level of the human spirit between male and female is the sole decision that requires a judgment call.

Separation as a Judgment Call

On the one hand all the beauty of personal relationships and the love that is associated with them originates in the bond between husband and wife, but on the other hand all the strife and the discord and the misunderstanding in the world also originates in this relationship.

To understand what is involved in the separation on this level, let us closely examine the first sin. The snake approached the woman, not the man.

And the woman perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree

was desirable as a means to wisdom, and she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her and he ate. (Genesis 3,6)

He approached her because she was the one in charge. What to eat or not to eat involves interaction with the outside world and belongs to the realm of the actualization of ideas — the domain of the female. Having weighed and considered, she made her decision and her husband followed her. After all, she was the expert on what to take from the outside world and what to reject, not he. On being confronted by God, his instinctive reaction was to say, "*The woman whom You gave to be with me? she gave me of the tree and I ate.*"

In other words, the story tells us that had there been no separation between the male and female aspect of man on the spiritual level the sin would not have occurred. Rolled into a single entity the balance between the body and the soul would have enabled man to resist the temptation offered by the snake.

Areas Of Specialization Following Separation

In the division on the level of the human spirit, the female half of man, in charge of actualizing ideas in the real world, was given a relatively stronger attachment and a better understanding of how this real world actually operates and what is possible within the context of this type of reality and the things that ought to be avoided. On the other hand, the male half of man was given a relative preponderance of a bent towards the accumulation of abstract ideas and the mustering of the energy that is required in the actualization process.

The completeness of the human spirit requires both. The original plan was to place the woman in charge of employing the

accumulated energy to actualize man's abstract ideas and bring them down to reality and that is why she made the first crucial decision in human history. She did not lose her expertise in the area of actualization, but forfeited her leadership role as a consequence of having made the wrong leadership decision.

At issue in Genesis 2, was the decision whether to separate the male from the female on the level of decision-making, where free will issues are involved. Because this is the level on which decisions are taken, this is the level on which mistakes are made and consequently it is the origin of all disharmony and discord.

The Loneliness Of Responsibility

But it is also the level where man is most vulnerable to the angst of human loneliness. It is in the area of responsibility where we must bear the burden of our choices that we feel the great weight of our isolation and loneliness.

God knew that the human spirit could not survive this existential loneliness. He saw that for man to be alone was 'not good.' Nevertheless on the level of the human spirit all the decisions must be made by man. This is the area of his free will. It is only after man chose to have his 'helper' become a separate being whom he could confront instead of being an adjunct of himself that God implemented the step that He in His wisdom felt all along was necessary.