

Bereishit 5786

October 18, 2025

B'not mitzvah of Eloise Berlach and Una Huang-Ehrenfeld

Eloise and Una, phenomenal divrei Torah, both of you. Your divrei Torah are not only excellent, but they are complementary. Una, you're asking about why human beings, created in the image of G-d, aren't just good, especially if that was the hope and expectation in their creation. You explored why G-d gave us free will, whether our selfish impulses might have purpose, and whether it might be possible for us to apply even our selfish impulses toward good. Eloise, you explored our responsibility to one another, in a family, in the Jewish family, and in the human family. The question about whether and how we fulfill our responsibility to one another is very much caught up in the question about how we use our selfish impulses and whether we can turn them toward the good. It might even be the same question.

To explore that intersection a little more deeply, I looked at the sixth day of creation and then I went back to look at the first day. At the end of the sixth day of creation, the day on which humanity was formed, the Torah says וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים

אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד

“G-d saw all that had been made and found it very good.” This line is well known, because at the end of the previous five days, G-d looked and saw that it was good. The sixth day, the day with the humans, was the only day G-d saw as very good.

Of course there are those who interpret this to mean that we're the best, superior, the pinnacle of creation. But Ramban looks at this and says, “The meaning of the word *me'od* (very) is “mostly.” On this sixth day [G-d] added this word because [G-d] is saying that creation ...contains evil in some part of it. Thus [G-d] said that *it was very good*, meaning ...[even the small part of it which is evil is basically also good...] It was on the day that humans were created that the potential for evil was introduced into the world, and it too has potential to be part of the good.

The Rabbis agree with you, Una, that the selfish impulse, known as the evil inclination or yetser ra, is necessary. Commenting on this same verse in Bereishit

Rabbah, Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman said ...: “Behold it was very good” – this is the good inclination; “and behold it was very good” – this is the evil inclination. Is the evil inclination, then, very good? This is a rhetorical question. Rather, were it not for the evil inclination, a man would never build a house, would never marry a wife, would never beget children, and would never engage in commerce.”

The evil inclination is necessary. The entire Torah, possibly the entire project of humanity, is to learn to keep that evil inclination in balance and turn it toward the good. And what does that look like? Primarily it looks like turning toward responsibility for others, as you taught us, Eloise. Think about it. If you build a house for yourself, that’s neither considered good nor evil. That’s the yetser ra in balance. If you steal from others to build houses only for yourself, most people would call that bad or wrong. That’s the yetser ra out of balance. If you build houses not only for yourself but also for others, that’s the yetser ra turning toward the good. Being our brother’s keeper. Reaching beyond ourselves to care for our literal brother, our neighbor, our fellow Jew, the vulnerable person in our city, for the greater good.

The even better news is that we don’t only have the yetser ra, the evil inclination. We also have the yetser tov, the inclination toward good, which G-d expected to win out all along, and which might still do so.

That brings us back to the first day of creation. The day when light was made. Another famous observation about this parasha is that light is created on day one and the sun and stars are created on day four, so what and where is that original light? The Rabbis teach that it is an or ganuz, hidden light that is stored away for when righteousness takes over the whole world. The Kabbalists teach that this original light burst the primordial vessels of creation and shattered into shards of light, sparks, that are within everything. They called that light chesed, lovingkindness. Proverbs teaches that the soul of a human being is ner Adonai, the light of G-d. The soul of every human is one of those sparks of chesed, of lovingkindness, some of that light from the first day. And as you taught us, Eloise, tikkun olam, repair of the world, is about gathering up all of those sparks of light and uniting them.

I'll add one more idea to this, from the morning prayers. When we wake up in the morning, we say to G-d that the soul we have been given is pure. Tehora hi, we say. That purity is untouchable. It cannot be sullied by our actions, by the work of the evil inclination. No matter what we do, no matter how far away we get from it, our soul always remains a pure shining light inside of us that we can return to. That's what the High Holy Days that we just observed are all about.

This week, we have two historic events that represent this or ganuz, this hidden light of righteousness, this yetser tov, this good inclination within us. The first was on Monday. We watched, riveted, our hearts in our throats, as the last living hostages came home to their families. I don't know about you, but I could not stop crying and I could not stop watching, as mothers and fathers wailed in embracing their sons, kissing them all over their heads, touching their faces again and again. As husbands and wives looked into each other's eyes, as fathers played with their children or held them so very close. That love, that overpowering, all-encompassing love for another human being, a feeling we all know, a feeling we have all experienced so strongly that we are riveted watching it in others, that is the yetser tov. That is the or ganuz, the hidden light. That is the neshama tehora, the pure soul. That is the light of day one. That is hashomer achi anochi. I am my brother's keeper. That is kol yisrael arevim zeh vazeh – all of Israel is responsible for each other. That is veahavta lereacha kamocha, love your fellow human being as you love yourself.

The second historic event is taking place right now. The No Kings March, in which millions of Americans are going to fill the streets to show that we care what happens to one another. That we're not just selfish, that we're not ok with corruption or absolute power or violence against the most vulnerable in our society. We care about more than ourselves. We care what happens to one another. We care that people have enough to eat and health care for their bodies. We care that we tell each other the truth. We care that people not be snatched off the streets by masked men because their skin is brown or they speak Spanish. We care that the military not be deployed into our cities for no reason other than vengeance or to try to score political points by provoking a fight with the people who live there. We care that we not become callous to one another's humanity, that we not give in to the yetser ra, but reach beyond ourselves for the greater good.

Every one of the people who fills the streets today across our country is inconveniencing themselves, maybe even endangering themselves, because they care. Because they feel responsible for others. Because that love that we saw on Monday is in all of us, and not just for our immediate family (though of course strongest there), but also for concentric circles of care that stretch far beyond us. And that is the project of Torah, to stretch those circles wider, and I think that's why we were created the way we were, for the process of choosing to reach beyond ourselves, to let our inner light glow outward toward others.

It is very possible to focus only or primarily on all of the wrongs in the world, on all of the manifestations of the yetser ra that shock us and disappoint us and upset us. The list of them is long, and it is important that we not look away. But let us not forget to see the yetser tov as well, all of the ways that human beings reach beyond themselves to care for others, all of that hidden light of goodness and purity that's right before our eyes. It is just as real and just as true, and it is what, in the end, will prevail.

Shabbat Shalom.