

Shabbat shalom. Yashar koach Eliana and Asher. This morning, you have taught us some very beautiful and important Torah. You shared ideas that I for sure wish I had understood when I was 13.

Eliana, you uncovered something really compelling about the description of God creating the world. You noticed that on each day, after creating the particular geography or animals of that day, it says: *Vayar Elohim ki tov* - "and God saw that it was good." *Tov* - it was **good**. Notably, at no time, does God say: *ki m'tzuyan* - that it was excellent. Or *ki mushlam*. That it was perfect.

And you extrapolated this idea to teach us that if all of creation was simply good - then we, too, can strive to be good. That excellent, and perfect are not on our primordial menu. That's interesting. Applying it to yourself, with some relief, you affirmed that this day is not about presenting some finished version of yourself. Polished. Perfected. No - you are a work in progress, like I am, like Asher is. Like all of us are, and that's not just okay, that is "tov" - the same tov, perhaps of the first days of creation. A tov that has room to fail and make mistakes and learn and improve and grow. This is a template first for a happy life - and second for an interesting life, and finally, for a productive life, which I want to come back to in a bit.

Now, Asher, you took on a very rich question, too: what does it mean to be created in the image of God? And, compellingly, you also found comfort in knowing that it doesn't mean we have to be flawless. That being created in God's image can also mean that we make mistakes, we stumble, but that we can repair the ways we fail. That imperfections are part of what it means to be a human being created B'tzelem Elohim.

You concluded that this phrase does not mean to look like God or just to be intellectually advanced, but rather to try to be . . . and here it is again . . . good. In this case, morally good. Ethically effortful. To not worry about perfection in our *accomplishments*, but instead to focus on how well we care for other people and living things and this planet with compassion. That because of some reflection of divinity in us, we have the **capacity** for good, and so the **responsibility** to aim for that as our target.

Perhaps in order to be good - Asher's teaching - we have to allow ourselves to be good - Eliana's teaching. And maybe striving for some imposed rule of perfection gets in the way of both.

So, a confession . . . I had a fairly mediocre week last week. I had said yes to a number of things that were a bit of a stretch for me. And I tried. And like . . . eh. Some things I did well. Some things I did . . . fine. At least one was a bit of a disaster. It often doesn't feel good to make mistakes - but especially so when we convince ourselves that we are already supposed to know how to do things amazingly.

But then I remembered this idea called Beginner's Mind. It's a kind of mindfulness practice where whenever we encounter something, we try to approach it with joyful curiosity, as if it's the first time we're meeting this thing. Our purpose is to learn from it and grow, so if we're not good

at it already, that's not a surprise because we're beginners at it. As if we are just *b'reishit*, in the beginning, like the first word of this week's Torah portion.

And so, as you put it Eliana - we give ourselves some space to be new at this, whatever the **this** might be, to be human, Asher, in the **image** of God, but not to **be** God.

And this made me think - because of your teachings - that the entire structure of creation, which begins with the word *b'reishit* - is set up to help us remember this.

For example, on the third day, God creates *mazria zera* - seed-bearing plants. This is a fascinating choice. God doesn't set up a system of continuous miraculous creation by God - archetypal mango after archetypal mango. No, from the drop, God creates fruit with seeds in it. Seeds are, by nature, meant to be planted, nurtured - they're in need of the right amount of sunlight, water, and nutrient rich soil.

In this sacred narrative of ours, this is not a world of miracles, but a world of tending and failing and repairing and literally - of growing. And figuratively - of growing.

There's a story I was told once, but I have no memory of who shared it with me. So my apologies for not sharing it in their name. But it goes like so - our people have come to the end of our 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and they're about to cross the Jordan River into Israel. And there's a mother standing with her daughter, gazing into the land and they're incredulous. The mother is explaining to her child that in this land, there would be no manna falling from heaven. Food wouldn't arrive as a miracle with each morning's dew. They would have to plant seeds, and tend the land, care for their plants, and harvest them, in order to have food to sustain them. It felt shocking, but then again - this is not a world of miracles, it's a world of participating and trying and cultivating and doing stuff that we don't know how to do until we know how to do it better. And that, and not perfectly sweet manna from Heaven, is what ends up sustaining us and satisfying us, if we will let.

Now it's not easy to strive to be good - to act in the image of God, and it's not easy to give ourselves permission to stumble and be imperfect, in a world that is often not just telling us, but selling us, that we need to be perfect - how we look, how we act, our school work, our job. But this pressure cooker of perfection is not the wisdom of these two young people and it's not the wisdom that Torah teaches us through the unfolding of creation.

It is teaching us, I believe, to participate, to try things. To see a way we can become good mirrors of the image of God - loving and compassionate and caring - and to try it. Even if we're bad at it. To find a corner of the world which we think could be better and to plant a seed there, even if we're still just learning how to cultivate that seed. To do things purposely outside of what we're already capable of in order to try to advance the world toward something better. To take a risk. A holy risk. Something that would be impossible to do if we had to be excellent and perfect all of the time. Because it is the risk, and not the perfection, that makes a better world and a better us possible.

Even the trees know this. Let me explain. On the same day as seeded fruit is created, so also the trees are created. We read in the text that God wants to create: *eitz pri* - fruit trees. The commentator Chizkuni interprets this to mean that the way God wanted to create the tree was as if the entire thing was fruit for eating. As in . . . you walk over to a big old tree in Prospect Park and take a bite. Of the tree. Like the trunk part. And, according to Chizkuni, the earth, hearing this was like . . . uuuummmm, I don't know. What if we try it like this instead? And so created trees we don't eat, with fruit that we do.

"We can deduce," Chizkuni writes. "that the earth was well intentioned. It reasoned that if the trunks were edible it would not take long before many such species of trees would die out, as the creatures on earth would consume both the fruit and the trunks."

It was a risky idea that the earth had to make things better. The earth was literally brand new at this and very much could have failed. And, yes, apparently, in this telling, God did get mad and did not like that. But it **was** better this way. And it wouldn't have happened if perfect were the baseline. Even the earth, even the creating God, even human beings in our very first breaths, were gorgeously imperfect, and it was through this imperfection that the ideas of possibility, trying, failing, growing, forgiving, and hope were born. How boring and impossible would be this life without those ideas. How stuck and rigid would be our future if we had to get it all right the first time around. The idea of "good" being enough is perhaps Torah's first gift to us.

When you look at this world and see whatever is your version of "fully edible trees" and think . . . I think there's a better way . . . but you're not sure if you know how, or if you might fail - try it anyway. For the Torah isn't meant to be just a bedtime story - it's meant to change us. And teach us. So imagine: Where might you try to make your difference?

Eliana and Asher, your teachings today matter, so I want to say this to you and all of us: be gorgeously imperfect. Take risks. Develop a Beginner's Mind. Be terrible at things until you get better at them. Keep working on being the compassionate, loving, brave people that you are. This is not a world of miracles. It's a world of seeds.

May we plant them and use the wrong potting soil and try again and add too much water and try again and nurture all that we plant until we have learned how to grow something sweet and good in this world. Amen.