

Good & Evil

an explication for parshat Nitẓavim

Mois Navon

“(9) You are standing this day before the Lord your God ... (11) to be obligated in the covenant ... (12) In order that He will raise you today for a people unto himself and that He will be for you a God...”

Devarim (29:9-12).

From these words Moshe opens his speech imploring obedience to the brit – the mutual agreement between God and the people, as expressed in His Torah, as it states in Shabbat 33a – “Brit means nothing other than Torah.” For our entry into the brit, God “will raise [us] as His people” the verse continues “and He will be for you a God.” In a mutual agreement both sides are to perform, yet the text seems to only indicate God’s obligations, “He will raise...”, “He will be...”.

(1) So my first question is: Where is the mutuality in the agreement?

Now, whereas the opening verses speak of the brit from a positive perspective, the verses following them delineate the negative consequences:

“(18) And it shall come to pass, when he hears the words of this execration, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, though **I will go in the firmness of my heart**’...(19) then the wrath of God and His jealousy will smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall be upon him, and God shall wipe away his name from under heaven.”

Devarim (29:18-19).

Rather serious! From here we learn that if one ignores the brit, going after what seems fit in his eyes, he will incur the full measure of God’s wrath. However, most interesting here are the verses that follow, which elaborate on what later generations – Jew and Gentile – will say upon seeing God’s wrath meted out on the Jews for their disobedience:

“(21) And the later generation of your children that will rise up after you, and the alien that shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the diseases which God laid upon it; ... (23) All the nations will say, For what reason has the Lord done this unto the land? What is the meaning of this glowing great wrath? (24) Then men shall say, because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord... (25) **For they went and served other gods**, and bowed to them...”

Devarim (29:21-25).

From here we see a seeming contradiction: Initially Moshe tells the Jews that they will incur God’s wrath for going after their own hearts desires, but then he informs them that the wrath will be due to “serving other gods” – the simple meaning being “idol worship”. Now unless you want to say that everyone’s hearts desire is idol worship, we have some explaining to do.

(2) My second question is: For what then does God's wrath burn?

To answer these questions it is instructive to understand the nature of man in creation.

God created the world, in the words of the Ramchal, "for man's enjoyment."¹ In order for him to truly enjoy the gift of creation, man must have the satisfaction of earning the gift. He was placed in the garden of Eden with the positive task of working and keeping the garden and the negative commandment to not eat of the tree in the midst of the Garden. As we all know, Adam and Eve violated the commandment, and ate from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil. In their so doing, they changed the parameters of creation – they had now "become like God, knowing good and evil" (Ber. 3:5).²

The Abarbanel (and others) makes clear that this eating did not endow man with the ability to differentiate between good and evil, that capacity he had before the sin, for else how was he to choose to act in accordance with, or in opposition to, God's initial command. Rather it was in the very act of choosing to eat from the tree - which man described to himself as "good for food and a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6) – that man decided to be his own moral arbiter, to make the decision of what is good and what is evil – a task, that until then was entirely divine. And so the Torah describes God's reaction: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22). The Midrash (Ber. R. 21:5) elaborates: R. Akiva explained that it means that God set two paths before him, the path of life and the path of death, and he chose the other path (i.e., of death³)." Rav Hirsch (Ber. 3:22, p.91) explains the Midrash to mean:

God had left it for him to decide, of his own free will, whether he would **defer to the Will of God** in determining what was good, what bad, and thereby tread the path of life, or **decide himself** what was good or evil and thereby have to be fated to death.

We cannot necessarily fault Adam and Eve's choice. The path of the Tree of knowledge is one which is filled with growth, endeavor, and independence – nevertheless it is a path in which we willingly risk our lives to live in freedom.⁴ Ultimately, man's goal is to return to Eden, enriched through the full exercise of free will, ultimately choosing to do God's Will.⁵ This is the true "tikun olam" (world repair), the repair of the original sin which is indeed the source of all of man's undoing. The tikun (fix) is as simple as it is difficult: Defer moral arbitration back to God. We do this by stopping to choose what is right and wrong by what seems good to us, to stop walking in the "firmness of our heart" – but rather to choose what is right and wrong by what God says through His Torah (leaving aside a discussion of what the Torah says).

The world stands and falls precisely on the recognition that ultimately it is God, and only God, who can be the arbiter of good and evil. This message has been made ever so clear to the world in recent times by the traumatic events that took place today, 23 Elul, exactly two years ago – more popularly known as September 11, 2001. (Of course, we living in the holy land have been only too painfully aware of the evil run rampant in our world long before September 11; but for the world at large, it was the events of this day which sounded the warning bell). This new awareness is most poignantly captured in an essay commemorating the one year anniversary of the September 11 attacks entitled,

“Shaking the world to its foundations: Metaphysical musings about 9/11” (Jerusalem Post, Sep. 5, 2002) by American Philosopher Michael Novak:

On that quiet, halcyon September morning of 2001 when first one Boeing 767 heavy with fuel and bound for California, and then another, flew silently into the two towers of the World Trade Center, and within seconds burst into orange balls of flame coming out the other side, something metaphysical in the structure of our world, not just psychological, snapped and came alive.

...

At least at first, the gradual trend toward multicultural relativism snapped. “Well,” people were getting accustomed to saying, “we can’t be judgmental. You may look at things one way, but other peoples look at it another way. There’s no such thing as good and evil. There’s only preferences. Yours, his, everybody’s, it’s all the same. It all boils down to tolerance.” Sorry, as the two towers slid down rapidly from floor to floor entombing hundreds of living human beings in the fire and ash, Americans rediscovered an evil that was not just a preference like any other. This one had to be rejected, stopped, and as far as possible torn out by its roots.

Metaphysically, the category of evil came back into civilized discourse. Indeed, a deeper point was grasped. Civilization arises from a grasp of the distinction between good and evil.

Thus creation is dependent on ultimately arriving at the understanding that moral relativism is totally unacceptable, that every man going according to the “firmness of his heart” will lead only to mayhem and destruction. “I’m OK, You’re OK” is simply not OK.

With this understanding of the human condition, let us return to our original questions from the parsha.

- (1) When Moshe introduced the obligation of the brit, he explained that it was “In order that He will raise you today for a people unto himself and that He will be for you a God”. Though initially we might have understood this to be describing God’s side of the brit, in fact this sentence really describes the two sides of the brit:⁶ “He will take you to be a people” – this is God’s part of the brit; “and He will be for you a God” – this is the people’s side of the brit!! Our obligation to the brit is that we take upon ourselves to have God as our moral arbiter – as expressed through His Torah.⁷
- (2) On the negative side we asked how could Moshe at first say that the Jews will incur God’s wrath for “going after the firmness of [their] own hearts”, yet later inform them that the wrath will be due to “serving other gods”. But really they are one and the same thing! The gravity of “serving other gods” is not due to the simple bowing or burning of incense, etc.; but rather becoming beholden to that deity’s morality. A “god” is only significant in that he defines of good and evil. Thus going “after one’s heart” and “serving other gods” both have precisely the same sin at their core – removing God as one’s moral arbiter. Perhaps this is why idol worship is on the top the list of the Ten Commandments, a “die and not transgress” commandment, its violation holding the heaviest death penalty.⁸

This message of choosing God is particularly appropriate on this week before Rosh Hashanah. For the primary dynamic of Rosh Hashanah is “kingship”, which demands of

us to choose God as our King. If this choosing is not to be merely cosmetic, superficial, then we must choose God as our moral arbiter, we must consciously defer to His Will. In the words of the Torah: “Choose Life”, choose God.

¹ Ramchal, Derech Hashem.

² See Zohar (Ber. 36a).

³ See Rashi on Midrash; Yefe Toar; Maharzu.

⁴ See “God and Evil”, Birnbaum, p.88.

⁵ See R. Hirsch (Gen. 3:24, p.92).

⁶ See R. Hirsch (Dev. 29:12).

⁷ See Bechor Shor (Dev. 29:12).

⁸ False judgment is that which goes against God’s law; it is the result of the lack of recognition of who is the true lawgiver. As such both idol worship and false judgment have their roots in the same world view that lacks acceptance of one God. The Talmud itself makes this comparison stating that, “One who appoints an unworthy judge is like one who plants an *Asbeirab* (tree of idol worship)” (Sanhedrin 7b).