

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 30

Breishis, Sicha 1

The Context:

The Torah begins with the account of G-d's creating the world with ten utterances. The fifth chapter of Pirkei Avos is structured as lists of significant numbers in creation and Torah. The first Mishnah reads:

"The world was created with ten utterances. What does this come to teach us? Certainly, it could have been created with a single utterance. However, this is in order to make the wicked accountable for destroying a world that was created with ten utterances, and to reward the righteous for sustaining a world that was created with ten utterances." (Avos 5:1)

The Question:

The Mishnah implies that the entire purpose of G-d creating the world in the manner He did was to exact maximum retribution from the wicked. If the world were to be created with one utterance, the damage would not be as severe as it is now,

that they are destroying a world created with ten Divine utterances.

The second clause of the Mishnah, that this also provides additional reward for the righteous, seems secondary, an afterthought.

How is it possible to say that an infinitely kind G-d should create the world deliberately in order to punish the wicked for their destruction?

Preface to the Explanation:

Before we proceed to understand this — a general question about the Mishnah: Why does the Mishnah throughout this chapter of numbered lists not mention the seemingly most obvious and important set, the ten commandments?

The number ten represents fullness, perfection, and completeness. This is the theme of the chapter, that the natural world finds completion in the number ten. Thus, creation was complete with ten utterances, the Divine attributes which are central to creation are ten, the very physical dimensions of objects have ten reference

points (width, length, breadth, each comprising a beginning, middle, and end, and the space the object occupies itself).

But surely G-d is not constrained by the number ten. G-d's infinite will could have chosen any number to represent perfection in the created realm. As our Mishnah says, "certainly, it could have been created with a single utterance," G-d could have decided that one is a number that implies fullness. The Torah is where G-d's will is expressed; it is the map, the blueprint, for how G-d decides to create.

Because G-d decided in his infinite will that the number ten is perfection, therefore the created world is ordered by the number ten. The ten commandments, therefore, are not another element of creation that finds completion in that number. The ten commandments are the origin and source for the idea that ten is considered fullness in the first place. That is the code that generates the subsequent use of the number ten within creation. The Torah is outside of creation, dictating the procedure that will unfold within creation.

Thus, this Mishnah which enumerates elements of creation that find fullness in ten, does not include the ten commandments, which is where the Divine will articulates that ten is indeed completion.

And yet, even after G-d chooses the number ten as perfection, that is only the perfection confined to the created realm. There still

exists, parallel to this, the possibility of the "one utterance," a transcendent Divine ability to decide that any "number," any way of being, can also be "perfect."

The Explanation:

These two possibilities, of the natural perfection of "ten" and the transcendence of "one," exist within the human realm as well. The perfectly righteous person lives his life in complete harmony with the Divine will, expressing the natural perfection of the soul. The penitent who has veered from the path and returned, on the other hand, disrupts the natural perfection of creation and touches an element of Divine chaos beyond creation.

Thus, the Mishnah explains that there are two possibilities with creation. "The world was created with ten utterances" — this is the natural perfection of the righteous. "It could have been created with a single utterance" — this is not just theoretical, it is the alternative world of the penitent which accesses G-d's single, transcendent utterance.

Now we can appreciate the continuation of the Mishnah: "However, this is in order to make the wicked accountable for destroying a world that was created with ten utterances, and to reward the righteous for sustaining a world that was created with ten utterances."

The Hebrew word used for "accountable" here literally means to "repay." This is

referring not to punishment, therefore, but the repayment of those who have sinned and become distant from G-d. They have incurred a debt, and their repayment is their act of repentance.

These penitents through their repentance “destroyed the world that was created with ten utterances,” they reconfigure reality by shattering the normative expectations and revealing the divine potential even with sin.

By using their negative past as fuel for their return, they break the serene world of “ten utterances” and reach for the essence of G-d that is found in the “one utterance” that transcends creation.

This is why this clause is stated first, before the reward of the righteous, because the penitent reveals a dimension of G-d that the righteous simply do not in their mode of consistent perfection.
