

Imperfect Perfection

By Mendel Kalmenson

Can something be both complete and incomplete at the same time? Is perfection relative?

That depends on your vantage point.

Are three hairs a little or a lot?

That depends on whether they're on your head or in your soup.

The Midrash tells us¹ that "everything created in the six days of creation needs fixing."

Sounds somewhat offensive to the Creator, doesn't it? Where's the source for this assertion?

The same Midrash that reports on the world's imperfection also describes the world as having been created perfect!

"G-d blessed the seventh day... because on it, He ceased from all His work which G-d created to do."²

If I were G-d's publicist, I would have said, "G-d blessed the seventh day... because on it He ceased from all of the work *He had done*." "Which G-d created to do" indeed implies that G-d created the world with some odds and ends left unfinished and in need of (what the Midrash calls) "fixing."

And yet, a few short chapters later, the Midrash states firmly that "the world was created complete."

How ironic that the same Midrash that reports on the world's inherent *imperfection* goes on to describe the world as having been created perfect!

The key to reconciliation in our case, as in many others, is to look at the timing of the contradictory statements.

"G-d blessed the *seventh day*... because on it He ceased from all His work which G-d created to do." Only on the seventh day of creation – on Shabbat – was reference made to the world's limitations.

Earlier that week no such talk was heard.

And that's not because something suddenly went wrong on Shabbat, changing things for the worse. "Which G-d created to do" tells us that the imperfection of our world, or the "to do," was part of its creation. So why

not mention it earlier, in the account of the world's creation in six days? Why wait until Shabbat, when the work of creation is already complete, to deliver the sobering news?

All of existence suddenly became aware. It dawned on the world that there was so much more it could be

That's because the world recognized its lack only with the coming of Shabbat. On the first six days of its existence, it lacked this awareness. On Shabbat, however, with the ascent of the world to a higher state of consciousness, with the presence of G-d more palpable and real, all of existence suddenly became aware. It dawned on the world that there was so much more it could be, and there was so much more to be done.

So the world was both perfect and imperfect throughout its creation. Perfect relative to where it was, imperfect relative to where it could be.

The six days of creation represent the perfection of today; Shabbat represents the perfection of tomorrow.

Chasidim of old were wont to say, "*Morgen vet zein gar andersh*," Yiddish for, "tomorrow will be very different."

According to Chassidic teachings, even the perfect *tzaddik*, the most saintly individual, must repent. Not for sins he has committed today—for he has none; but for the perfect mitzvot he fulfilled yesterday—considered to be imperfect today.

Consider the man who makes one hundred dollars today. He will give ten percent to charity. Consider the very same man, promoted, now making two hundred dollars. He will continue to give ten percent to charity, just as he did yesterday. But ten percent of today is far more than it was yesterday.

Could this shed light on our request for forgiveness in the *amidah* prayer, considered to be the most elevated segment of prayer? Aren't we beyond sin, and the need for forgiveness, at that point?

The perfect tzaddik must repent—for the perfect mitzvot he fulfilled yesterday

Prayer is likened to a ladder. The *amidah* is considered to be the highest rung, the loftiest point of communion. It is precisely when we reach that level that we see how deficient we used to be.

As we become bigger and better, so does the standard to which we are held.

We may have been perfect then, but we can be more perfect now, and yet more perfect tomorrow.

So would you say that the world was created perfect or imperfect, or both? ³

Amidah

Teshuvah

Creation

Self Improvement

Shabbat

Perfection

Parshah

Bereishit

FOOTNOTES

1. Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 11:6.

2. Genesis 2:3.

3. Adapted from a talk by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Likutei Sichot vol. 25 pg. 14-18.

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