

### Creation from Deepest Darkness

Dan and I are very organized people. We like things to go where they go. We set our spaces back to neutral each night as we turn off the lights. Unfolded laundry in its basket, folded clothes in the dresser. Remote controls on the coffee table.

Back in March, at the start of this pandemic, suddenly, as it was for so many of us, our once orderly home, descended into chaos. We both brought home our offices. Binders, folders, papers, multi-volume torah commentaries, cables, snacks, books were everywhere. Ring lights, microphones, ethernet cables, were arriving daily. And there was no place for them.

Our tradition teaches that, “When God began to create heaven and earth,” the earth was “*tohu vavohu*--the earth was unformed and void,”<sup>1</sup> What is *tohu vavohu*? This March I gained a new appreciation of this state of being: *tohu va-vohu* might have been binders, folders, papers, multi-volume torah commentaries, cables, snacks, books, ring lights, everywhere! All kinds of new things with no assigned place.

The Spanish commentator, Rabbeinu Bachya, agrees, teaching that *tohu va-vohu* was the chaotic state of all of the raw material before it was formed and named. On the other hand, the medieval French commentator, Rashi, picked up on the sense of emptiness that comes with such a loss of control. He explained that *tohu va-vohu* was an astonishing, amazing emptiness<sup>2</sup>. And a midrash<sup>3</sup> adds that it was at this moment of creation, in the midst of the deep darkness, astonishing emptiness, and unformed chaos, just as God was about to create, that God foresaw the destruction of the Temple.

The destruction of the Temple is symbolic in our Jewish tradition. It represents the most profound loss that we can imagine. In saying that “God foresaw the destruction of the Temple,” this midrash teaches us that God experienced the deepest darkness, vast emptiness and chaos and knew that God’s future creations would someday experience these depths too. And yet, God had hope. Even with the first spark of creation, the first something out of the great, ultimate nothingness, God knew that profound despair was possible. And yet, God still uttered, “Let there be light.”

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we mark a New Year. But Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, isn’t actually the anniversary of, “Let there be light,” that *first* day of creation. Rather, we

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Rabbeinu Bachya and Rashi on Genesis 1:2

<sup>3</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 2:5

begin our counting of the years since creation from the *sixth* day, the creation of humanity. What does the deep darkness at the very start of creation help us to understand about the creation of humanity, which we celebrate today?

One word that repeats throughout the creation story gives us some insight. Throughout the days of creation, God sees what God has made and declares it “*tov*.” Usually we translate “*tov*” as “good”. “And God saw that it was good, *tov*.” But “good,” while it is a nice translation of “*tov*”, one that makes us feel, well, good, isn’t quite accurate. I’d like to suggest a more technical translation, that “*tov*” means “viable.” This is evidenced by the use of “*tov*” later in the Torah. When Moses is born his mother, “Saw that he was “*tov*”<sup>4</sup>. Given the circumstances during which Moses was born--a trying time for the Hebrew people, during Pharaoh’s decree to kill all newborn baby boys--it is likely that Moses’ mother saw that he was a viable baby, that he would live and be healthy, that she could save him and he would survive.

Similarly, there are only two instances of “*lo tov*, not *tov*, or not viable,” in the Torah. First, in Genesis we read, “*lo tov he’yot ha-adam l’vado*--it is “*lo tov*” for a human to be alone.”<sup>5</sup> Human life is not viable alone. One person literally cannot be “fruitful and multiply” alone. We need the rest of creation and we need companionship.

And second, later in Exodus, Moses is told that he ought not do all of the work of resolving conflicts amongst the Israelites alone, “*lo tov ha-davar asher ata oseh*--doing all of this yourself is *lo tov*, is unsustainable, you will burn out.”<sup>6</sup> All of these examples seem to indicate that “*tov*,” is not about God’s creations being good as opposed to bad, but rather that creation is viable. It is as if God is saying every day, “This thing that I’ve created is not perfect, but it is going to work.” And why is it going to work? Because God created the world, knowing that God would also create partners, humanity.

But here is something interesting, after God created us, God didn’t say that we were “*tov*,” God said even more, that we are “*tov me’od*”. *Tov* is viable. *Tov meod* is viable and more. *Tov meod* is not a measure of our goodness or badness, lightness or darkness, it is a measure of our resilience, the potential within us to live and bring forth light from within and despite darkness.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar captures this image beautifully. She writes, “Make of me a vessel. I call upon the deep, the dark, hovering spirit, the creation, the muse of the creative impulse. Make of me a vessel...so that I may be a force for good...For in the beginning there was good, and this our human destiny. To be created in the image of those earliest moments of divinity when darkness danced with flowing circles with light and beauty cast a hue on all things simple and complex, known and unknown, returning, always turning. The deep, the dark, hovering

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 2:2

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 18:17-18

spirit of God, of creation, I call upon you, Creator of the universe. Make of me a vessel, in your image, of paradoxical beauty, of mystery, of oneness, of love. Of love.

Being *tov meod* will not protect us from despair, we know that destruction is possible, even inevitable. *Tov meod* is the hope that God sparked at the very beginning and implanted in each one of us. God knows despair and still says “Let there be light.”

“Yea, though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me;”<sup>7</sup> even when emptiness and deep darkness are all around me, I can still say, I am hopeful, I am resilient, I am *tov meod*, I too, will let there be light.

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 23:4