

LESSON THREE

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN KABBALAH

TEXT ONE --- Sefer ha-Bahir, #162

A king had a beautiful daughter, and others desired her. The king knew about it, but could not fight those who wanted to bring his daughter to evil ways. He came to his house and warned her, saying, “My daughter, do not pay attention to the words of these enemies and they will not be able to overcome you. Do not leave the house, but do all your work at home. Do not sit idle, even for a single moment. Then they will not be able to see you and harm you.

They have one attribute which causes them to leave aside every good way and choose every evil way. When they see a person directing himself along a good way, they hate him. What is [this attribute]? It is the Satan.

This teaches us that the Blessed Holy One has an attribute whose name is evil. It is to the north of the Blessed Holy One, as it is written: *From the north will evil come forth, upon all the inhabitants of the earth.* (Jer. 1:14) Any evil that comes to *all the inhabitants of the earth* comes from the north.

TEXT TWO --- Talmud, **Chullin** 60b

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raises a contradiction (between two parts of the same verse). *And God made the two great lights. The greater light to dominate the day, and the lesser light to dominate the night.* (Gen. 1:16) (He explains: when God first created the sun and the moon, they were equally bright.) The moon said before the Blessed Holy One: Master of the Universe, can two kings serve with one crown? (One must be subservient.) God said to her: Go and diminish yourself.

She said before Him: Master of the Universe, I said correctly before You; why must I diminish myself? He said to her: (As compensation,) go and rule during the day (with the sun) and during the night. She said to Him: What’s so great about that (shining along with the sun)? What use is a candle in the middle of the day? He said to her: Go, let the Jewish people count the days and years with you. (That will be compensation.) She said to Him: They count with the sun as well; it is impossible that they will not count seasons with it...God said to her: Go, let righteous men be named after you. (Just as you are called **ha-katan**, the lesser light,) there will be Ya-akov **ha-Katan** (see Amos 7:2), (the sage) Shmuel **ha-Katan**, and (King) David **ha-Katan** (see I Samuel 17:14).

God saw she was not comforted. The Blessed Holy One said: Bring atonement for me, since I diminished the moon. And this is what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: What is special about the goat offering of the New Moon, that it is stated with regard to it, *For the Lord* (Numb. 28:15)? The Blessed Holy One said: This goat shall be an atonement (for Me,) for having diminished the moon.

TEXT THREE --- Byron Sherwin, Toward a Jewish Theology, p. 71

In the Talmudic text, God is described as having made a flawed creation...and as having “sinned.” Even more remarkable is this text’s assertion that human beings may act to atone for God’s “sin.”

In this view, evil is an ontologically necessary component of existence, and perhaps even a theologically necessary feature of the divine. Rather than concluding that the necessary existence of evil leads inescapably to nihilism and despair, and rather than perceiving the human condition as one of random victimization, this position asserts to the contrary that the human person may become an active protagonist in the ongoing battle to contain and to control the evil element within the self and within the world. This approach aims at reducing the power of evil in the self, in the world, and even within God, by means of redemptive deeds. This approach perceives evil to be a fact of life, a feature of existence to be reckoned with, rather than a problem to be solved...

TEXT FOUR --- Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 9:2

And God saw all He had made, and found it very good (Gen. 1:31). Rabbi Tanchuma opened: *He brings everything to pass precisely at its time* (Eccl. 3:11). Rabbi Tanchuma said: The world was created when it was due, and it was not fit to be created earlier. Rabbi Abbahu said: From here, we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created these [heaven and earth] and then He said: “These please Me; those did not please me.” Rabbi Pinchas said: The reason for Rabbi Abbahu’s statement is *And God saw all He had made, and found it very good*, (meaning:) “These please Me; those did not please me.”

TEXT FIVE --- Isaiah 45:7

I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things.

TEXT SIX --- Isaiah Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, p. 448

Whenever man opts for evil, God brings the power of evil into play against him...consequently the evil inclination which seduces and leads man astray, the accusing angel, and the angels of destruction, who chastise and kill, are all the creatures of God, and they all act on His instructions.

TEXT SEVEN --- **Zohar**, III, 74a

Rabbi Eleazar was sitting before his father (Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai). He said to him: If there is a defender in the world, it is found in the Matronita (the Queen, i.e., **Malkhut**). And if there is a prosecutor in the world, it is found in the Matronita. Why? He continued: This may be compared to a King who had a son from his Matronita. As long as the son does the will of the King, the King made his dwelling with the Matronita. But whenever the son did not do the will of the King, the King separated his dwelling from the Matronita. So it is with the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Assembly of Israel (**Knesset Yisrael**): As long as Israel does the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells with the Assembly of Israel. But whenever Israel does not do the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, does not put His dwelling with the Assembly of Israel. What is the reason? Israel is the firstborn son of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: *Israel is My firstborn son* (Ex. 4:22)...As long as Israel are remote from the palace of the King, it is as if the Matronita is remote together with them. What is the reason? Because the Matronita did not enforce the rules and strike the son, to guide him on the upright path. For the King never strikes his son but leaves everything in the hands of the Matronita, to govern the palace, to discipline her son and guide him on the path of truth toward the King.

TEXT EIGHT --- Moshe Cordovero, Pardes Rimmonim, **Sha'ar ha-Temurot**, ch. 1, p. 416

...Where did the evil powers and impurities come from; where were they before their creation? This seems to be a penetrating and difficult question which could confuse the wise, but we have received from our teachers a fine answer to it. This

is like wheat which had been cleansed from every impure element so that it is clean and pure; still, when a man eats it and the food is digested in his stomach, a great deal of dirt and excrement will remain there. Now shall we say that when he ate the food, he ate filth and excrement? Of course not. Before it was eaten, that food was truly as pure as could be, completely separated from any excrement or filth. But after it was eaten, the best part is separated from the food, and the excrement remains, even though it did not previously exist.

TEXT NINE --- Cordovero, Tomer Devorah, chapter four

Know that Cain himself was evil and derived from the serpent, yet it was said to him: *If you do good, there is uplift* (Gen. 4:7). Do not think that because you derive from evil, there is no hope for you. This is false. *If you do good*, and root yourself firmly in repentance, *there is uplift*: you will enter that place according to the secret of the good rooted there. For every supernal bitterness has a sweet root, and he could have entered by way of that root to become good. Thus man may turn his evil deeds into good, and his deliberate transgressions are turned into merits. For those (evil) deeds which he committed were prosecutors from the Left Side, but when one returns in complete repentance, he causes those deeds to enter and be rooted above. And all those prosecutors are not nullified, but they transform themselves into good and are rooted in holiness, just as Cain was told he could be good.

Know that if Cain had repented and repaired (his sin), then (even) the sin of Adam --through which Cain was conceived--would have been accounted to him for merit, according to the mystical meaning of “the son brings merit to the father” (Talmud, **Sanhedrin** 104a). But Cain did not want to repent, and therefore the entire Left Side draws its sustenance from there. But all its branches will eventually become sweet and be perfect once again. This is for the reason we have given, that man roots himself in the secret of evil and renders it sweet and restores it to good. Therefore, man purifies the evil impulse and brings it into the good so it becomes rooted in holiness above. This is the high level of repentance by which a person should conduct himself; he must ponder on it each day, and repent in some fashion each day, so that all his days will be spent in repentance.

TEXT TEN --- Exodus 32:3-4/32:7 and Rashi's commentary

And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten

calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Once he cast the gold into the fire in the crucible, the sorcerers of the mixed multitude ("erev rav") who ascended with the Israelites from Egypt came and made it through witchcraft.

The Lord spoke to Moses: "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely..."

It does not say THE people have acted basely, but rather, YOUR nation, the mixed multitude whom you accepted on your own and converted, but you did not consult Me, and about whom you said "It is good that converts should cling to the **Shekhinah** (Divine Presence)," they became base and caused baseness in others.

TEXT ELEVEN --- **Zohar** I, 28b (**Tikkunei Zohar**)

"The son of David (Messiah) will not come until all the souls will be born." At that time renewal will come to the world. Then the mixed multitude (**erev rav**) will be erased (**mit'avrin**) from the world. Then it will be said to Israel and Moses that all will have their proper soul mates, and both Adam and Eve will be naked (**arumim**); they will not be ashamed since licentiousness (**ervah**) will be erased from the world. **Ervah** is the **erev rav** who brought exile into the world: precisely the **erev rav**! It is said about the **erev rav**: *the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts the Lord God had made* (Gen. 3:1). He was shrewd for evil purposes more than *all the wild beasts*, who are the idolatrous nations of the world. The **erev rav** are the children of the serpent in the garden who enticed Eve; they are surely the filth which the serpent placed inside Eve. Cain, who came from this filth, killed his brother Abel...

TEXT TWELVE --- **Tzava'at Ha-Rivash** ("Testament of the Ba'al Shem Tov", 18th c.), #130

It is reasonable to wonder why the Torah specifies, *And behold, it was very good.* (Gen. 1:31) However, we also read *See, I have set before you life and good, death and evil.* (Deut. 30:15) Where did the evil come from?

We cannot read this as if evil were actually real; rather, the evil is also good, except that it is on a lower level than the completely good. And this is hinted at when the **Zohar** (I, 49b) speaks of “from above and from below.”

In this way when one does good, then the evil is also transformed into good. However, when committing sins, the evil is made manifest. This is like the case of a household broom, designed to sweep the house. It is fairly good, even on its low level. But when it is used to strike a child who is misbehaving, then the broom is transformed into something completely evil.

TEXT THIRTEEN --- comment on the above text by Hillel Zeitlin (20th c. mystic), Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era, p. 187

The **Besht** (Ba'al Shem Tov) thinks about it this way: Evil is the lowest level of the good. It is not the opposite of the good. It is the very same stuff as goodness, but in a much lesser concentration. Because people do not see the bit of goodness that lies within it, they call it evil. Everything in the world contains varied levels of reality, from highest to lowest. Goodness also contains many levels. In the highest of these, the goodness is very great; in the lower, it is a weaker presence. In the very lowest, there is only the smallest bit of goodness. But something of goodness is in fact present everywhere. Without this nothing can exist.

TEXT FOURTEEN --- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, p. 207.

Lurianic Kabbalah was a vision of cosmic catastrophe, but it was a healing vision. Somewhere among the debris...are fragments of divine light, and our task is to rescue them and restore them to their place in an ordered universe, a structure of fragile but recoverable harmony. The only way to fight evil the morning after the storm is to do good, countering hate with a no less determined love.