



**YOUNG ISRAEL
OF GREAT NECK**

236 Middle Neck Road, Great Neck, NY 11021 / 516-829-6040 / www.yign.org



The Parsha in Practice

Being a Mentch is Worth the Risk

Parshat Bereishit is full of mysteries. To understand the process of creation as described is difficult, but what is most surprising are not the scientific challenges, but the theological challenges that we are introduced to so early in the Torah. One of these challenges is found in the description that we are given of the creation of Man:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

In this verse, G-d seems to be consulting with the angels before embarking on the project of creating Adam. Was G-d questioning himself? Did he need a second opinion or require assistance? Rashi famously suggests that

אע"פ שלא סיעוהו ביצירתו ויש מקום למינים לרדות, לא נמנע הכתוב מללמד דרך ארץ ומדת ענוה שיהא הגדול נמלך ונוטל רשות מן הקטן; ואם כתב אעשה אדם, לא למדנו שיהא מדבר עם בית דינו, אלא עם עצמו, ותשובת המינים כתב בצדו, ויברא את האדם, ולא כתב ויבראו:

Although they did not assist Him in forming him (the man) and although this use of the plural may give the heretics an occasion to rebel, yet the verse does not refrain from teaching proper conduct and the virtue of humbleness, namely, that the greater should consult, and take permission from the smaller; for had it been written, "I shall make man", we could not, then, have learned that He spoke to His judicial council but to Himself. And as a refutation of the heretics it is written immediately after this verse "And God created the man", and it is not written "and they created" (Genesis Rabbah 8:9)

Rashi explains that although this expression can (and does) provide the argument for those who might deny the existence of a single god, it is still worth sharing, as the lesson of moral conduct, of the mentchlechkeit to consult with those who are junior to you, is an important one. Earlier, Rashi explains that G-d was additionally concerned for the "feelings" of the angels



as the human beings He would be creating would be "in their image," and considered the possibility that the creation of man might cause jealousy among the angels.

R' Elchanan Wasserman explains that there is another significant message here in addition to the lesson on sensitivity to others (even angels). He explains that when it comes to having good middot and concern for others, it is worth displaying that behavior, and teaching that lesson EVEN IF there will be significant theological risk in the process. Even if the phrase "let us make man" will create a serious challenge to our theological premise of G-d's singular unity, that risk is worthwhile if thoughtful and sensitive behavior can be taught with its use.

I have hesitated to "preach to my choir" about what we have been seeing and hearing in the news these past weeks concerning reckless behavior that is being condoned, or even promoted in the name of "keeping yeshivos and shuls open." It's a pretty easy argument to superficially draw from a lazy reading of the heroic stories of Chanukah or Pinchas and to declare that one's current movement to "save their religion," and avoid perceived "singled-out" persecution is a holy one and is theologically justified, no matter the outcome or effect on others.

Is it true that as observant Jews, we do occasionally place issues of theological importance before other values in the halachic strata. Think of the three cardinal sins - where we must sacrifice our lives before transgressing - as an example. More often, we encounter the difficult nuance and delicate dance that exists when two values oppose. Think truth (How do I look in this dress?) vs. peace (Amazing!) as but one example.

Rashi seems to be reminding us that most often, the clash of values is not so clear. Even in the area of theology, there might occasionally be a concession or religious risk that must be taken in order to illustrate proper behavior. Alternatively, even if you might need to use some theological license and flexibility, in the pursuit of mentchlechkeit, it is WORTH IT. It is too easy to imagine a one-sided response where we can maintain ideological purity and not be required to make concessions in any direction, but in the real world, such one-sided occasions rarely occur.

It is true that not all theological concessions are possible. But as G-d showed in our verse, we might sometimes risk having our religious values misconstrued to guarantee that our human values will never be.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach