

Tov Me'od: Good and More

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

“When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void—
God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב

God saw that the light was *tov*, it was good¹...”

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate another year since the creation of the world, since that
moment of “*va-yehi or* - let there be light.”

“God said, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land
may appear.” ...God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters God called Seas. And
God saw that this was good, was *tov*².”

In the Genesis story of creation, not only do we learn what was created--light, dark,
land, sea, and separation--we learn that as God created each addition to the heavens and the
earth: plants, stars and animals, God saw that all of this was good, was “*tov*”.

“And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation” ...and this was good, was *tov*...God
said, “Let there be lights in the sky to separate day from night... and this was good, it was *tov*.
God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the
earth across the expanse of the sky... And God saw that this was good, was *tov*³.”

¹ Genesis 1:1-4

² Genesis 1:9-10

³ Genesis 1:11-21

Tov is notably undefined. What does it mean to say that light, plants and animals are good? We're told that all of the elements of creation are good, are *tov*. And at this season we ourselves are trying to figure out what it means to be good, to be *tov*. To understand how we engage in the process of *teshuvah*--reflection and repentance--we need to understand this critical word *tov*. Rosh Hashanah and the story of creation gives us just such an opportunity. What is it to be good, to be *tov*?

First, to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be *tov*, we can explore its opposite, "*lo tov*," not *tov*, not good, as there are only two instances of *lo tov* in the entire Torah. One comes in the very next chapter,

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הֵיטֵב הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ

God said, "It is *lo tov*, not *tov*, not good, for a human to be alone⁴."

Another comes later in the Torah, in the portion Yitro, famous for the Ten Commandments. Moses is working alone to answer all of the questions and solve all of the disputes among the Israelites and his father-in-law, Jethro, says,

לֹא-טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה

"What you are doing is *lo tov*, it is not *tov*, not good, you will surely wear yourself out⁵."

Usually, we understand *lo tov* as "not good", and on a basic level, that certainly makes sense here. It is not good for humans to be or act alone. But *lo tov* is not the same as *ra*, "bad". Why does the Torah say *lo tov* and not "bad"? If it is "not good" for humans to be or act alone, isn't it bad? 16th century Italian commentator Obadiah Sforno posits that the *lo tov* here isn't about good or bad, rather it is referring to the impossibility that just one individual, could fulfill

⁴ Genesis 2:18

⁵ Exodus 18:17

God's intentions of what it means to be made in God's image⁶. In other words, God sees Adam, the first human attempting to fulfill all of the tasks that God has set out--tiling and tending the earth, naming the animals, but Adam is unable to meet God's intentions for humanity alone.

The same could be applied to Moses. Moses, in attempting to help each and every Israelite individually, cannot possibly meet the community's expectations or serve their needs. He cannot possibly serve as the leader he is meant to be. When we go it alone, that is when we are "*lo tov*, not good." Estrangement from community, from loved ones, from the rest of creation is *lo tov*. *Lo tov* is not an objective measure of "goodness" or "badness", but rather it teaches us that being lonely or acting alone is the singular thing we might do that is not good. Acting alone is not what our community wants for us. Being lonely is not what God intended for us.

If *lo tov* teaches us what God does not want for God's creations: loneliness and disconnection, then *tov* teaches us the opposite, what God does intend for God's creations: companionship and connection. We learn from Adam and Moses that God wants all of creation to be connected.

"And God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature...And God saw that this was good, was *tov*, was connected as God intended⁷."

But there is one element of creation that exceeds God's intentions, one creation that is more than just another successful part of the plan.

⁶ Genesis 2:18, Sforno's commentary on "*lo tov heyot ha-adam l'vado*".

⁷ Genesis 1:24-25

“God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness... And God created humanity in God’s image...God blessed them...And God saw all that God had made, and found it *tov me’od*, very *tov*, very good⁸.”

After God created humans, and creation was complete, God says that it is, that we are, “*tov me’od*”. *Tov* - exactly the next piece in the puzzle of creation as God intended, and also *me’od*, something more. The word “*od*” means “more”. For example, in Hebrew if you want a refill of coffee you ask for “*od*” for more. We also use “*od*” in the Aleinu, we say that God is “*ein od*, there are no more gods besides God”. When God remarks on God’s completion of creation with humanity, made in God’s image, God says, “this is *tov me’od*--it is exactly as I intended and more.” The whole of creation, with humans finally part of it, exceeded God’s expectations.

What exactly made creation with us in it, *me’od*, beyond what God expected? 16th century Spanish commentator, Rabbeinu Bahya teaches that *tov me’od* refers to the interdependence of all of creation. “Every component of the universe is dependent on its continued existence on another component. Assuming that there was only a single species of living being on earth, this species could not survive unless it had earth to subsist on. On the other hand, earth itself could not endure unless the heavens were operating normally as it depends on the celestial bodies orbiting properly. So you see, every single component of the universe is interdependent on other components⁹.”

For everything else that God created, God said it was good, it was *tov*, it was part of some greater connected whole. But with us, God said, we are more than good, we are more than just another functional part of the ecosystem, more than just tillers and tenders. We were

⁸ Genesis 1:26-31

⁹ Genesis 1:31, Rabbeinu Bahya commentary on, “*vayar elohim et kol asher asa v’hinei tov me’od*”

created in such a way that we already exceeded God's expectations. How can we live up to this legacy? What does it mean to be *tov me'od*, good and more? According to Rabbeinu Bahya, we are interconnected yes, dependent upon all of God's other creations, and moreover, being *tov me'od*, we are and must be conscious of these connections, we are more than a part in a whole, we can comprehend the whole, our place in it and contributions to it.

What distinguishes human beings from all other creations is that we are self-aware that we are part of a created world. We are the only species that is aware of this interconnectedness, that is aware that our destinies are tied. My dog doesn't wake up in the morning and say, what can I do to make the world a better place for the next generation of puppies? Which brand of kibble has the least impact on the environment? She isn't aware of the ecosystem of the dog park or her part in it. Though she lives in a home with two rabbis, she isn't celebrating Rosh Hashanah today. Being *tov me'od* means that we can and we are called to understand how our actions, our choices, our lives radiate out and touch and affect all of those around us, all of humanity, and perhaps all of creation.

In his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly¹⁰."

"...We are tied in a single garment of destiny..." Goodness is inherently relational. "Good and more" is acting with the full knowledge and faith that my destiny is yours, and yours mine.

¹⁰ King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. <afrika.upenn.edu>.

These high holy days give us the space to consider that destiny. Though we may not be able to answer, on these days it is important to be able to ask ourselves: How can I make the world a better place for my children? How am I connected with people around the world? What is my part in it all?

When God said “*tov meod*” for the first time throughout all of creation, there was a creation that could hear. And that creation was us. *Hinei tov*, this is good, *me’od*, make it more. Don’t be alone. Don’t act alone. We are interconnected and interdependent. Remember that you are part of the “inescapable network of [human] mutuality.” You and I and all of humanity are “tied in a single garment of destiny.” This world is good, and together we can make it so much more.