

Shabbat UK/Parshat Lech Lecha 5778

The Gemara in Shabbos 119b quotes Rav Hamnuna: “whoever davens on Friday night and says Veyuchulu, the Torah considers as if he has become a partner with Hashem in the act of Creation; as it says וַיִּכְלֹוּ (and they were finished); do not read it as וַיִּכְלֹוּ, rather וַיִּכְלֹוּ (and they finished)” What is so significant about the Parsha of Vayechula that enables one who says it to achieve such a lofty status as a partner in Creation?

To begin to understand this, we can consider two Midrashim relating to this week’s Parsha.

The first in Bereishis Rabbah 39:1 considers the start of Avraham’s journey to the service of Hashem. “And Hashem said to Avram: leave your land...’ To what can this be compared? To a man who was travelling when he saw a palace in flames? He wondered ‘is it possible that the palace has no owner?!’ The owner of the palace looked out and said ‘I am the owner of the palace.’ So too Avraham Avinu said ‘is it possible the world lacks a ruler?!’ Thus Hashem looked out and said to him ‘I am the ruler, the King of the Universe”

Rabbi Sacks, in his book a Letter in the Scroll, sees in this Midrash that not only did Avram realise that the world, with its magnificent design and vast scale had a Creator but also that the palace was in flames, that ‘the world is full of disorder of evil, violence and injustice’. In other words, he saw a world which, though intricate and beautiful in design is not a perfect world; it contains evil and Avraham understood that it would be his and his descendant’s mission to call to, and listen to, the instruction of the Owner of the world in order to be able to perfect it.

A similar idea emerges from the famous conversation between Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva in Tanchuma Tazria 5: “Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva ‘whose actions are more beautiful - those of man or those of G-d’? Rabbi Akiva replied ‘those of man’. Turnus Rufus then asked (having expected Rabbi Akiva to answer ‘those of G-d’) ‘why do you perform Bris Milah’? Rabbi Akiva replied ‘I knew you were going to ask me this, hence I answered those of man are more beautiful. Rabbi Akiva brought him sheaves of wheat and cakes and said ‘these (the sheaves are the work of G-d and these (the cakes) are the works of man - are these not more beautiful than the sheaves? So Turnus Rufus retorted ‘if He desires Milah, why is a child not born circumcised’... Rabbi Akiva replied ‘Hashem gave the Mitzvos to the Jews to purify them through their performance’.

This Midrash expresses the idea slightly differently but similarly highlights that Creation is not complete; man has the capacity to improve the world in a physical sense such as by processing wheat into cakes and in a spiritual sense through the performance of Mitzvos.

And not only is the world imperfect such that it is the role of man to perfect the world around him but perhaps most fundamentally, his role is to perfect himself, As the Ramchal writes (Da’as Tevunos - Introduction) “G-d could have created man complete and indeed this would have been appropriate given G-d Himself is perfect; however His wisdom decreed to...create them imperfect in order that they can perfect themselves and this perfection will (in itself) be their reward for their effort to achieve it”

From all the above, we see that though Hashem created a world with great intricacy and beauty, at a point He stopped and left the world incomplete, allowing for the possibility of evil and for it to be further perfected, in order that man would have the ability to perfect himself and the world around him. This was the message that Avraham understood at the start of his journey and our people and the message Rabbi Akiva gave to Turnus Rufus.

I think a close reading of the Parsha of Vayechulu can also show us this message. It says ‘and G-d completed on the 7th day the work which He did and he rested on the 7th day from all the work which He did’. Why emphasise the work ‘which He did’? Surely this phrase is superfluous? I think one can suggest that it means that G-d completed **His** work but there was still more work to do, namely the work of man to bring Creation to ultimate perfection.

One can now understand how, by saying the Parsha of Vayechulu and internalising its message, namely that G-d finished His work but has left room for man to complete it, allows one to become a partner in Creation. Understanding that we have this role in the world and through performing Torah and Mitzvos in order to complete **His** work with **our** work truly enables us to become G-d’s partners.

We can thus suggest that Shabbos is the day where we cease from work and reflect not only on the fact that G-d created the world but also on mankind’s role within it, giving context to all which we do throughout the rest of the week.