

# Creation — What is “Good”?

**A D’var Torah on *Parashat B’reishit* (Gen. 1:1 – 6:8)**

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*“B’reishit bara Elohim eit hashamayim v’eit ha-aretz...”*  
*“In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth...”*

I have always been fascinated with the first chapter of the Torah. It is not a unique cosmogony. Neighboring civilizations have enjoyed similar sorts of the Beginning. But ours is unique at least because of one word, “good.” God used the word “good” to describe the different components of his orderly creation, although with one exception. He creates the light, the earth and the sea, vegetation, the sun and the moon and the stars, animals and birds, even sea monsters, insects, man, and he labels all of them “good” with that same exception. But I am getting ahead of myself.

What does the word “good” mean? What a dumb question! Everyone knows what good means. It means ... I think it means ... We end up with a look of exasperation and perhaps a little irritation. Nobody likes being shown that he is not as brilliant as he thought he is. Don’t despair; we are in great company. Philosophers and religious thinkers since the dawn of recorded history have pondered this question and therefore there are no universally acceptable answers.

So what is “good”? Some say “good” is a divine attribute. It is what God says it is and it is therefore eternal, unchangeable and perfect. This is Plato’s good. The ultimate Good is out there; the good we identify on earth is a pale manifestation or poor copy of the Eternal good. Nevertheless, the Torah tells us what good is. The good is equivalent to holiness. But that is a general definition. The Torah goes on and gives us specific acts, which if performed, constitute the good. It turns out that the Torah’s good acts can be divided into ethical and ritual categories.

An ethical act is one in which the individual benefits another individual or individuals. An example of an ethical act is treating the stranger well or refraining from lying and cheating. Ethical utilitarianism is skeptical of man’s ability to ever know the absolute truth and, therefore, the Divine definition of good; it identifies the greatest good as the maximum good that can be applied to the greatest number of people. That “good” is not “out there;” it is contingent on context or the historical, economic, political, intellectual and moral factors of a given people at a given time. This is moral relativism. What’s good for you may not be good for me; and what was good yesterday may not be good today.

A ritual act is one in which the element of holiness is acted out or dramatized. An example of a ritual act is the separation of the Shabbat from the other days of the week. Ritual acts seem to be for our own good (there's that word again) rather than the good of someone else.

Here is an interesting sidelight. Is the good (or the holy) "good" because God *says* it is or because God *sees* that it is good? The latter definition implies that God is capable of recognizing a criterion of goodness that He, because of His honesty (goodness?), must obey. It also implies that man, through study, may also be capable of recognizing the criterion of that goodness. Judaism rejects this concept on the ground that the establishment of a criterion of good that is separate from God creates a God who is not supremely the One.

Here's another definition of good. Good is anything that gives us pleasure. Candy gives us pleasure but can also give us painful cavities. Ouch! A Mercedes can give us pleasure, but it can break our bank account. Ouch again! So, there is a difference between pleasures and the "good"? Some pleasures may cause pain. Some pleasures are brief; others last longer. Some pleasures are immediate; others are delayed. Some pleasures do not always seem good, at least not in the long run. Some pleasures appear greater than others, in that some pleasures are experienced as joy, and others are just plain fun. Are some pleasures different, or are some pleasures greater than others; and, therefore, are some "good(s)" better than others? The waters muddy!

Before getting to my definition of the "good," I should interject something about the ancient Greek concept of ethics. Ethics, in a nutshell, answers the question of "how should I behave?" or "what is the good way for me to act?" This was one of the most important questions asked by the Greeks. They believed that the good life is one in which the individual lives according to true general principles or Truth. Note that ethics, for the Greeks, did not mean only the good for others but included the good for the individual as well. Moreover, the truth was pursued not only rationally but also creatively, poetically, and passionately. One who lived the ethical life experienced the good life, the best life that one could experience.

This leads me to my definition of the "good" as it appears in Chapter One in *B'reishit*. The dramatic hook that was hinted at in the beginning of this commentary is that God, according to the great intellectuals and poets who wrote the Torah, identified the celestial bodies, the animals, vegetation, and so forth as "good" but did not say that man is "good." Even the Creation as a whole was "good." Not man!

What did God mean when He declared that the non-human elements of the Creation and the Creation itself were "good"? I think they were good because

He designed them as they were to be. He designed them perfectly. They were as they were to be. Each of his designed creatures was distinct and significant. Each had unique limitations and capacities. There were no duplicates. The sea will not become the land, and vice versa. The antelope is not in any way the equal of the eagle, and vice versa.

Well, why didn't God also declare man to be "good"? I think it is because God, at least in the eyes of the authors of the Torah, didn't know who man is. And, if God does not know who man is, then He cannot determine his "goodness." The Adam and Eve myth shows mankind attempting to transcend what it is. It is changing — trying to shed its limits and definitions, and growing. How can the authors and God say that man is "good" if he is always changing?

So how might *we*, you and I, define man so that we are able to call him "good"? Man, who was created by the same God who created everything else, is a living entity, who has been endowed by his Creator with an advanced mental architecture that functionally requires him to think rationally, think alogically (poetically, creatively, prophetically or spiritually), emotionally feel and act. By virtue of his God-endowed mental gifts, man is compelled to learn the Laws (of God), which include the Laws of Survival and the Law of the pleasure-pain principle. These Laws require him to grow, survive, and experience happiness. Sometimes life is confusing, and he forgets to search for these Laws, even though they are for his own benefit. Sometimes the Laws are difficult to interpret and mutually antagonistic. Sometimes, because of his own antagonistic wishes and agendas, he ignorantly and willfully rejects the Laws that were designed to help him. Nevertheless, when he ignores or refutes or, in a hostile manner, simply disobeys the Laws, sooner or later he faces an increased probability of pain or destruction. And then, he learns from these errors, and tries even harder to learn and obey what God wants (God's Laws).

Man does not study and obey only the so-called Divine Laws. He studies and learns the so-called secular Laws as well. These are the Laws of Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Psychology, and Metaphysics, for example. He has learned that the Law of Gravity states he should not jump out of tall buildings, and so he usually doesn't attempt that feat. The Laws of Chemistry describe the creation of antibiotics, and so he can now cure some infections. But aren't all of these so-called secular laws in fact God's Laws? When man obeys the Laws, he faces an increased probability of growth, survival and happiness, the purpose of God's Law of Survival.

So who is man and is he "good"? Man was designed to use God's tools, including thinking creatively and recognizing his emotions so that he can grow, survive and feel pleasure. That's the way God designed man; so man, like the rest of God's Creation is also "good."