

Imperfection is a Feature, Not a Bug

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One night, teaching Confirmation class decades ago in San Antonio, the conversation turned to discussion of a messianic era, a future utopia. One student opined that a perfect world would be “boring,” but the comeback to that is easy: “It wouldn’t be perfect then; would it?” Next, as so often happens when one has the privilege of teaching youth, one of the students said something profound: Maybe God purposefully created the world with flaws. Perhaps the world we live in is perfect, precisely by being imperfect. Working to combat those problems gives human beings an important role in the world, work we must take seriously, to build a better future.

I thought of that student—Marina Vishnevetsky, now United States Foreign Service Officer Marina Grayson—when I learned two rabbinic stories this summer. Professor Christine Hayes taught these narratives to illustrate a point—in her words, “Imperfection is a feature, not a bug” of the human design. In two different tales, our Talmudic sages suggest that God created humanity despite knowing that we would be flawed. Moreover, there would be no reason to give us Torah if we were perfect.ⁱ

In *B’reishit Rabbah*,ⁱⁱ the classical midrash on the Genesis, the rabbis ask why God created humanity in the first place. God, in the rabbinic conception, is omniscient, all-knowing, so God “foresaw [that both] righteous and wicked people would descend from” the first human that God proposed to create in Genesis 1. So, what did God do? God willfully ignored the problem, pretending not know that human-generated evil would be one of the results of creating humanity.

The midrash does not end there. Instead, the rabbis go on to identify this moment before creating the first human as the instant when God took on the attribute of mercy. If God were to create imperfect humans, God would need to be willing to forgive us when we go wrong.

The sages envision God quoting from Psalm 1: “Adonai knows the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked will be eradicated.”ⁱⁱⁱ I can think of two reasons this verse is quoted. First, virtuous people would be able and eager to uproot the work of evildoers. Just as important, God hoped that wrongdoers would come to see the error of their ways and repent, eradicating their own wickedness.

The midrash is not over, though, because the angels, God’s immortal heavenly counselors, are fighting among themselves about whether God should

create humanity. These angels have names corresponding to their attributes—kindness and truth, righteousness, and peace. Here is what the sages imagine transpiring among the angels: “Kindness said: ‘Let them be created, since they will perform acts of kindness.’ Truth replied: ‘Let them not be created, for they are full of lies.’ Righteousness said: ‘Let them be created, since they will do righteous deeds.’ Peace said, “Don’t create them, for they will constantly fight.””^{iv}

You’ll love what happens next: “While the ministering angels were busy debating one another about whether humans should be created, The Holy Blessed One created them! God asked them: ‘Why are you still debating? Humanity has already been created.’”

The upshot is that God creates us, hopeful that we will engage in the process laid out for us at this High Holy Day season. No, we will not always do what is right. Humans have the capacity for great goodness and for horrifying evil. All that is part of divine design, and with it comes the hope promised on the High Holy Days: ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירים את רע הגזרה, “Repentance, prayer, and acts of righteous giving temper judgment’s decree.”^v

The angels go at it again in the second story, this one from the Talmud.^{vi} When Moses ascends Mount Sinai—according to the rabbis, into the heavens—the angels are indignant. They ask God what a mere mortal is doing in **their** celestial domain. God responds matter-of-factly: “He has come to receive the Torah.”

Now, the angels are **really** rattled. According to rabbinic tradition, God wrote the Torah before creation—nine hundred seventy-four generations before creation, in fact, and it had remained in heaven ever since. Why send it to Earth now? Why give the Torah to a bunch of sin-prone human beings?

God asks Moses to answer the angels. Moses can’t do that, though, because he doesn’t yet know what’s in the Torah; so God leaks it out to Moses, one commandment at a time.

“I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt.”^{vii}

“Moses said to the angels: ‘Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh?’”

The answer is clear, but the angels still aren’t convinced that humans need Torah, so the pattern continues through the first several commandments. The angels, unlike the Israelites, don’t live among idolators, so they don’t need to be forbidden to worship multiple gods. The angels don’t have parents whom they need to honor. The angels never work, so they don’t need Shabbat. And so forth.

Finally, God teaches Moses commandments six, seven and eight—the prohibitions against murder, adultery, and stealing. Moses asks the angels if they have fights that could end in fatal violence. Are they tempted by *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination? “Immediately, they conceded.” Humans, not angels, need the Torah to guide our ways on Earth.

The upshot is reminiscent of a central feature of Judaism, explained by Michael Goldberg in his thirty-year-old book, *Jews and Christians Getting Our Stories Straight: The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection*. Judaism’s quintessential redemption story is the exodus from Egyptian bondage, in which Moses is God’s primary human agent of redemption. Torah teaches that, after Moses’s death, “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom Adonai singled out face to face.”^{viii} Still, Moses is deeply flawed. He loses his temper repeatedly. He even disobeys God.

Moses’s imperfection is a sign to all of us—we, who do not experience God so intimately but are, like Moses, prone to wrongdoing. Our imperfections do not exempt us, any more than they did Moses, from the struggle to be God’s partners to improve the world in which we live. Our fallibility does not make us unworthy of the work to build a better future, and we must begin with repairing ourselves.

I don’t know of a Talmudic story about the angels’ reaction to God’s commandment that we seek repentance at this season, culminating with Yom Kippur next Shabbat. If there were such a story, this time, the angels would applaud. If God was going to create humanity, and God did, the result would be far from perfect. Therefore, God gave us Torah, to guide our paths, to teach us right from wrong. Just as important, that Torah teaches us to come before *Avinu Malkeinu*, a God both Almighty and Merciful, to confess our wrongdoing, to resolve to change our way, and to chart a path to a better tomorrow.

Amen.

ⁱ Christine Hayes, “Humor and Play in Rabbinic Literature,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 14, 2024.

ⁱⁱ *B’reishit Rabbah* 8:4-5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 1:6.

^{iv} Psalms 85:12.

^v *Un’taneh Tokef*, High Holy Day liturgy.

^{vi} Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b-89a.

^{vii} Exodus 20:2.

^{viii} Exodus 34:10.