

A TORAH WITH 70 DIFFERENT FACES

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Anyone who studies from a Rabbinic Bible, such as the *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, is struck by the number of different commentaries surrounding the few lines of biblical text on each page. Most religions that possess a sacred scripture have editions with a commentary attached. Sometimes they have two commentaries, but I am aware of no other religion that has editions of scripture surrounded by five to ten or more different commentaries. All of this traces back to a verse in the Book of Psalms: *One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard* (Ps. 62:12) and its gloss in the Talmud, "One biblical verse may convey several teachings . . . In R. Ishmael's School it was taught: *And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces* (Jer. 23:29), i.e., just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, so also may one biblical verse convey many teachings" (TB *Sanhedrin* 34a).¹ In other words, multiple interpretations of each verse of Scripture can be correct, even if they contradict one another. The term for this concept of pluralistic interpretation is *Shiv'im panim la-Torah* (each verse of Torah has 70 different faces/facets).

The earliest source for the term *Shiv'im panim la-Torah* is Numbers Rabbah 13:15-16, customarily dated to the twelfth century. The concept, though not the exact wording, also appears in another post-talmudic midrash, *Otiyyot de-Rabbi Akiva*, as *Torah nilmedah be-shiv'im panim* – "Torah is learned through 70 faces/facets." The term was used by the rationalist Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) in the introduction to his Torah commentary, and a century later by the mystic Nahmanides (d. 1270) in his commentary on Genesis 8:4. It also appears several times in the Zohar. That this concept was used both by rationalist and mystical Torah exegetes indicates how fundamental it is to understanding the meaning of Divine revelation. The figure 70 is used in rabbinic literature to indicate a large number, e.g., seventy nations or seventy languages,² and here too it reflects the idea that there are many different ways to interpret a biblical verse.

Jewish tradition enumerates four general types of interpretation: *Peshat*, the

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plain, simple meaning; *Remez*, the allegorical, metaphorical meaning; *Derash*, the moral, educational meaning; and *Sod*, the mystical, hidden meaning. However, there are other ways of categorizing the different commentaries to a given verse. For example, *God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good* (Gen. 1:31) has more than a dozen interpretations in classical rabbinic literature. The main question regarding this verse is that on the other days of Creation, God saw that what He made was "good"; only on the sixth day is the term "very good" used. What did God create on the sixth day that was so special as to make that day *very good*? I will categorize some of the classical interpretations in three groups, adding some of my own as well. Most of these interpretations are taken from Genesis Rabbah chapter 9, a collection of glosses on the phrase "very good."

CATEGORY A: VERY GOOD REFERS TO THE BEST THING IN ALL OF CREATION

Here the understanding is that "very good" refers to some particular aspect of Creation.

1) *Very good* refers to the creation of human beings (Genesis Rabbah 8:4).³
 2) *Very good* refers to the creation of women (Midrash on Psalms 59:2). 3) *Very good* indicates that God did not procrastinate but ecstatically enjoyed creation immediately, for He took pride and pleasure in creation (*Midrash Tanhuma, Shemini*). This represents an anti-ascetic view, teaching that it is appropriate to enjoy Creation. 4) *Very good* refers to all those creatures deemed unnecessary and useless in this world, like flies, gnats, etc., which have their allotted task in the scheme of creation (Exodus Rabbah 10:1 and TB *Shabbat* 77b). This represents the idea that all things have a purpose, even if we do not know what that purpose is, a pro-biological diversity view. 5) *Very good* refers to God, who is very good, or to Torah, or to Moses (*Midrash Alef-bet*). 6) R. Hiyya said *very good* means perfect, and creation should thus remain unchanged forever (*Zohar Hadash, Midrash ha-Ne'elam* 13a). This represents a very conservative view. 7) R. Simeon ben Eleazar said it means that sleep is very good (Genesis Rabbah 9:6). There it is clarified that sleep is good because it revitalizes people, making them able to study Torah. 8) R. Meir glossed "very good" as "death is good" (Genesis Rabbah 9:5). This startling idea seems to oppose the explicit statement in the Torah that God wants us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). Perhaps R. Meir meant that

death itself is good, because it urges all people to repent; or that mortality impels them to achieve what they are capable of rather than procrastinate indefinitely.

CATEGORY B: VERY GOOD REFERS TO THE CHALLENGE AND VALUE OF CONFLICTING POSSIBILITIES

Here the emphasis is on recognizing that all the evils in the world are really good, because temptations and challenges enable humans to become morally and spiritually stronger and holier.

9) R. Samuel ben R. Isaac said that "good" alludes to the angel of life and "very good" to the angel of death, meaning human awareness of the blessing of life and the inevitability of death (Genesis Rabbah 9:10). 10) R. Simeon ben Lakish said that it refers to a kingdom of heaven and a kingdom of earth, a spiritual realm and a material realm (Genesis Rabbah 9:13). 11) Rav Huna said "good" refers to happiness and "very good" to suffering, since facing suffering and adversity helps people to earn a portion in the World to Come (Genesis Rabbah 9:8). 12) R. Simeon ben Abba said it refers to God's bounty and to His punishments, the idea being that moral acts have consequences in this world and that God metes out punishment in an appropriate manner (Genesis Rabbah 9:11). 13) R. Zeira said "good" refers to Paradise and "very good" to Gehinnom, teaching that moral acts also have consequences in the World to Come (Genesis Rabbah 9:9). 14) R. Samuel ben Nahman taught that "good" refers to the good inclination and "very good" to the evil inclination [*yetzer ha-ra*]. Can the latter be good? Yes! But for the evil inclination, no man would build a house, marry, or beget children, as it is said (Eccl. 4:4): *All labor and all skillful enterprise spring from man's rivalry with his neighbor* (Genesis Rabbah 9:7).

CATEGORY C: VERY GOOD REFERS TO THE BEGINNING OF A MORE ADVANCED STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

According to this approach, "very good" refers to an advanced stage of development in contrast to a previous state of existence.

15) R. Abahu said that "very good" means that God created previous worlds and then destroyed them, because they were not good enough. Our world is "very good" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11). 16) R. Abba said that all God's creation was performed through a mediating agency, i.e., earth or water (in

modern terminology, natural evolution). Now that all was done, God praised the whole work (Zohar, *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*). 17) I would add that "very good" may refer to language. Animals can act cooperatively, but only through language can one take in ethical and moral principles. Thus, mankind's development of language must precede the ability to internalize morality. 18) I also suggest that "good" refers to the Tree of Life that extends human life, while "very good" refers to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that expands human morality. Quality is more important than quantity. Thank heaven Eve chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and not from the Tree of Life! 19) We can further maintain that "good" refers to the comfortable womb-like Garden of Eden, and "very good" to the expulsion from Eden into a challenging real world. Freedom/moral choice is more important than security and comfort. Becoming an adult is far better than remaining a happy infant. 20) We can also explain that "good" refers to the forces of nature/evolution that primarily fashioned the world up to the creation of man, while "very good" refers to man's cultural and moral activity that will fashion the world from this point onward. These approaches all have a common theme – that "very good" refers to the challenges of free will and responsibility, something already hinted at in the rabbinic idea that "very good" refers to the evil inclination.

Whenever students of Torah, like the readers and writers of this journal, hit upon a new insight that becomes part of the ongoing Jewish tradition, they reveal another facet of meaning that was hidden prior to their discovery.

NOTES

1. Rabbenu Tam, basing himself on Lamentations Rabbah 4:7, explains that it is not the rock but the hammer that is shattered in pieces. Just as the hammer, when it strikes a very hard object, may itself be shattered, so too a biblical verse, when subjected to the scrutiny of a very keen intellect, can be split into different meanings. Rabbenu Tam's gloss indicates that when humans (the hammer) encounter God (the Rock of Israel), they experience and react in many different ways, each being authentic.
2. See *Midrash Zuta, Shir ha-Shirim* 1:1, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 24.
3. This is based on the fact that the three Hebrew letters of the word *me'od* ("very"), when placed in a different order, spell *adam*, "mankind."