“I was for it before I was against it!” –The Value of Regret

Parashat Bereishit

October 25, 2008

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There are many firsts in this week’s Torah portion: It’s the first time the world is created. The first time anything is created. In this parashah, we’re introduced to the first couple,—and the first act of disobedience; the first set of children—and the first example of fratricide.

It’s perhaps, then, no surprise that in this parashah we’re also introduced for the first time to the emotion, or the feeling known as REGRET.

Regret is a change of heart. It’s a feeling that comes over one AFTER—one has done something, when one realized that one wishes that one had done something differently.

A classic way of putting it is the statement: “If I only knew then what I know now, then I wouldn’t have done it.”

What may be surprising is that the one who experiences regret in this week’s parashah is NONE OTHER THAN THAN GOD.

We’re told of God’s regret toward the end of the parashah, in these words: “The LORD saw how great was human wickedness on earth, and how every plan his mind devised was nothing but evil all the time. AND THE LORD regretted that he had made human beings on earth and His heart was SADENED. (Gen. 6: 5-7)

Now, this is surprising because the image of God that many people have in their heads is of an all-powerful and all-knowing entity. How could it be that such a God regrets? That just doesn’t make any sense! In fact, the Bible itself (in I Sam. 15:29) says exactly that: “God is not human that He should change His mind!” So this little portion of today’s parashah, in which we learn that God regrets, and actually admits to his regret, and decides to act on his regret, is theologically challenging.

There have been a number of responses to this difficulty over the centuries. Let me just briefly review them.
One approach is to say: It’s a mystery. Don’t try to make any sense out of it. After all, as Isaiah once said, “[God’s] plans are not [our] plans.” (Isaiah 55:8).

Most commentators respond with the classic rabbinic statement, “Dibrah Torah bilshon b’nei adam.”—“The Torah speaks in human terms.” Radak [Rabbi David Kimche] says it explicitly: though the Torah may speaking of God, the language the Torah uses to do so is human.

Maimonides puts it this way: Most people cannot imagine existence without imagining a physical form; therefore, the Torah at times suggests that God has a physical form. Similarly, most people can’t imagine someone acting without feelings, so the Torah describes “The One”—namely, God—as having feelings, even though God is not a human that He should have feelings. Maimonides would put it this way: When the Torah describes God as regretful, it’s saying that God acted in such a way that, if a human were in the same position, the human would be regretful.

But most commentators aren’t so bothered by the idea of God being regretful. Instead, they want to focus on exactly what it is that God regrets.

In B’reishit Rabbah (Ch. 27), Rabbi Judah says that God said, “I regretted making him on earth; if I’d created him in Heaven, he wouldn’t have behaved the way he did.”

Rabbi Aivo says that God regretted having created the human being with an evil impulse as well as a good impulse, for had He done it differently, Mankind wouldn’t have rebelled.

By the way, since these two opinions arise in the Midrash, it’s perhaps not surprising that there are responses to each of them. Rabbi Judah’s statement is responded to by Rabbi Nehemiah who says, “No, if God had created Humankind in the heavens, he would have rebelled up there.” And Rabbi Levi explains that the price of creating the human being out of the earth is that he necessarily has the capacity to do evil.

The bottom line is this: Whatever the precise basis for God’s regret, God isn’t happy with the ways things turned out. He wishes they had turned out differently and he vows to wipe out practically the entire world and start over with Noah and his family.
But to return to that nagging question: How could God have made such a big mistake? How could God, Who created the universe, not have known how things were going to run out? How could God, Who knew what He was doing, have done it the way He did? That just seems ridiculous.

Today, it might be easier for us to understand this. Just yesterday, there was a picture and a statement that shocked many people. The picture was of Alan Greenspan, the man who headed up the Federal Reserve for 18 years, the man referred to (by Bob Woodward) as the “Maestro” of the American economy. It was a picture of Alan Greenspan expressing regret. In the caption, it stated that he had publicly admitted that “he had put too much faith in the self-correcting power of free markets and had failed to anticipate the self-destructive power of wanton mortgage lending, leaving him “in a state of shocked disbelief.”

“Shocked disbelief” isn’t exactly Genesis’s “sad heart”, but it’s close.

Apparently, it isn’t as unreasonable as we may have thought for God not to realize the evil human beings are capable of. After all, if Alan Greenspan didn’t anticipate the power of human greed, why should we expect God to have anticipated humanity’s capacity for evil?

Putting aside the humor, why do we have such a theologically scandalous image in our tradition? What purpose does it serve?

Most anthropomorphisms teach us important lessons, not only about God, but about ourselves. I’m reminded of a conversation I had with a young person in our community last week. He was telling me that the rabbi of the school he goes to always refers to God as “She.” He once asked him why. The answer was that God has no gender and the teacher wanted to remind himself (and everyone else) of that every time he mentioned God. “Why then not refer to God as an ‘it’?” the student asked. The answer his teacher gave to that is that it would be disrespectful. My answer would be different: it is that God, in our conception, has a personality. “Its” don’t have personalities. And the lesson is clear: just as God has a personality, so too, must we.

What purpose does it serve to describe God as regretful?

What kind of a question is that to ask right after the high holidays? What better model for the human being than a regretful God?
One might get the impression, from our sobriety on the High Holidays, that our focus on those days, as on other ones, is on perfection. But it isn’t. No one—not even God, as we’ve seen in our discussion today—is perfect.

Our focus on the high holidays is on learning from our mistakes (which all of us make), and improving our conduct. What better story to teach this lesson than this week’s parashah?

Regret is a very important feeling to be capable of. If we can’t feel regret, we can’t learn from the past. We can’t learn from our own mistakes. The seeds of TESHUVAH, Repentance, are contained within HARATAH, regret. Only through regret can we try to be better and seek to do better next time.

Incidentally, this is one reason that I find our political culture so disappointing. In politics, too often, regret is seen as a sign of weakness, of waffling, of ‘flip-flopping’. What’s the most critical, mocking remark you can make about an opponent these days? “He was for it before he was against it.” Yet such a statement sounds reasonable to me. Why can’t we be mature enough not only to tolerate regret, but to demand a wholesome approach to regret on the part of our political leaders?

When all is said and done, isn’t it too much to expect God to have gotten it right the first time? Creating a human being out of the earth with a divine breath—how could it ever have been wholly satisfying?

Let’s each of us be willing to look honestly at our conduct, and be bold enough to discern those choices which, had we known then what we know now, we would have made differently. Let’s be willing to feel regret, to express our regret, and to act upon it.

*Shabbat Shalom.*

[This dvar torah was inspired and informed by “The Lord and Regret,” by Dr. Yair Barkai, Bar Ilan University’s Parashat Hashavua Study Center, Parashat Bereshit 5769.]