

TORAH TEACHES: “EVERYTHING IS VERY GOOD”

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1. Introduction

Some people are optimistic and some others are pessimistic. Some are hopeful and positive while some are despairing and negative about life and everything that surrounds it. A basic teaching of Judaism is that optimism, hope, and positive outlook are *Mitsvot* (Jewish religious duties). The natural world is neither fundamentally a place of suffering, pain, cruelty and sorrow, nor is the human world basically evil: a community filled with lust, violence and greed. Nature is good. Human society or history is improvable. Each individual's personal world can be good and improvable if he or she makes it so. Here are three examples of Jewish teachings of positive affirmation applied to nature, personal psychology, and a vision of historical development.

2. Nature and Goodness

The first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis describes God's creation of the universe in seven stages (days). Six times the Torah (first five books of the Bible) reports God's evaluation of the stages of creation, "God saw that 'X' was good" (1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, and 1:26). After the creation of human beings the Torah says: "God saw everything He had made and beheld it was very good" (1:31). What makes this stage of creation "very good"?

According to the Rabbis, with the creation of human beings, God introduced into our world creatures with free will. But, in order for them to choose, God had to create both positive and negative realities to provide for their choices: good and evil, reward and punishment, happiness and suffering, birth and death, co-operation and competition, etc. Since Judaism teaches that people are basically good, most people will use their

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free will to make positive choices most of the time. Thus, even with the introduction of negative forces and elements into the world, everything will be ‘very good’ because a ‘good’ world lacking creatures who can exercise free will is not that good.

Most of the teachings of Rabbinic Judaism from the 1st to the 6th centuries are gathered together in the Talmud or in various Midrash collections. In the Midrash Rabbah to Genesis chapter 9 there are a number of glosses of what makes the world ‘very good’. Most of the interpretations involve the introduction of a negative or challenging aspect of life. So Rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Isaac says ‘very good’ alludes to the angel of life vis-à-vis the angel of death. The joy of children and grandchildren is much greater than the inevitability of illness and death (which is sometimes also a cure for painful decay). The fact that we will get old, infirm and then die does not negate or overwhelm all the joys in life: a limited life teaches us to do good *now*.

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish holds that ‘very good’ refers to a kingdom of heaven and a kingdom of earth. The material world does not contradict, subvert or negate a spiritual holy life. The material world does give us the opportunity to make ordinary things holy. According to Rabbi Huna, ‘very good’ refers to happiness and suffering. You can’t have one without the other. Better to love and suffer a loss than not to love at all. In the same way Rabbi Simeon ben Abba opines that ‘very good’ refers to God’s bounty and to God’s punishment (i.e., moral acts should have consequences in this world). Further, Rabbi Ze’ira says: ‘very good’ refers to Paradise and Purgatory (i.e., moral acts also should have consequences in the world to come).

All of these Rabbis, thus, point to different aspects of human experience to illustrate the idea that the negative aspects of reality do not determine what reality really is. They are not the norms but the challenges necessary to enable us to have free choice. By choosing to do good we make the world ‘very good’. Indeed, many of our wild inclinations that can lead us into evil can also, if they are tamed by Torah’s moral discipline lead us to great achievements. Thus, Rabbi Samuel says: ‘good’ refers to the inclination toward good and very good refers to the inclination toward evil. Can the inclination toward evil be very good? Yes! If not for the inclination toward evil no man would build a house, marry, or beget children as it says, “excelling in work is due to a man’s rivalry with his neighbour” (Eccl. 4:4).

The Rabbis understood that life would be easier without temptation. They also realized that without trials and temptations we would not grow beyond our inner capacities. Thus, Satan – the tempter – is described in the book of Job as an angel/agent of God. (Job 1:6). Without opportunity and temptation to sin we would not have the ability to choose good. For, as God tells Cain, the first murderer, “Sin crouches at the doorway” (Genesis 4:7). We always have a choice. Rivalry and competition can lead to excelling or to destroying. The “evil” impulse (*yetzer*) is not inherently evil, but if untamed by a moral code (e.g., Torah) it easily leads us to do evil. Sex with love and marriage is good. Sex without love and marriage is not good. So also, extramarital sex or forced sex is evil. Our biology is simply the *Yetzer* or the *yetzer haRah* (the evil/wild impulse). Our *yetzer HaTov* (the good/tamed impulse) is our morally learned response that makes us into creatures in the Image of God. God sometimes does not favour us in order to challenge us and, thus, to grow stronger in taming our wild infantile urges.

We are not told why God favoured Abel, and not Cain. It is not important because throughout life we will have to deal with failure and rejection. Often we succeed in love, in business, in sports, etc., and sometimes we fail or are rejected. Cain deals with rejection by blaming and killing his rival. Cain takes his rejection as a personal insult. If Cain was more enlightened he could react dispassionately and avoid hatred and murder. Even better, by suffering how defeat and loss could be beneficial, Cain could try another offering, or another time, or another way.

Many people think that nature is loaded with harmful and annoying creatures. In opposition to this view we find the statement “Very good refers to all those creatures deemed unnecessary and useless in this world like flies, gnats, etc., who have their allotted task in the scheme of creation (Midrash Exodus Rabbah). In opposition to those who saw woman as a major source of defilement, sin, or the cause for original sin there is the statement “Very good refers to the creation of women,” i.e., an anti-celibacy and anti-misogynist view (Midrash on Psalms).

In opposition to the view that renunciation of the pleasures of this world is the best way to elevate one spiritually there is the statement “Very good indicates that God did not procrastinate but ecstatically enjoyed creation immediately for God took pride and pleasure in creation” (Midrash Tanhuma). Thus, God is both an effective creator, and a joyful, enthusiastic, and proud creator.

3. Personal Psychology and Positive Affirmation

That creation is good is clear. But it is also clear that all people lose people they love to death. This is painful and sorrowful. Also all people fear serious illness and their own death. It is true that in our generation many elderly people look forward to death as a cure for decrepitude, chronic pain, and infirmity. It is also true that advances in medical care have reduced greatly the frequency of early death. Today, issues of depression, anxiety, frustration, and purposelessness create misery for an increasing number of people. Training people to view their own life positively is increasingly important.

One way of influencing people to think positively about their lives is to teach them the importance of saying blessings for the many things they experience, both in their ordinary daily and weekly life, and at occasional extraordinary times. It is a *Mitsvah* (Jewish religious duty) to say blessings at every meal over food and drink. Every morning when we awake it is a *Mitsvah* to say several blessings because various parts of our mind and body still work. During daily prayer there are 18 blessings, and there are blessings for the weekly celebration of the Sabbath. There are also blessings to say for special occasions, for our sages urge us to thank God for as many blessings as we can, since the more blessings one can say, the more blessed one becomes. Indeed, Jewish tradition maintains that everyone who is able to say 100 blessings a day is truly blessed. Among the special occasion blessings, there is a blessing for seeing a non-Jewish sage and another one for seeing a Jewish sage. There is a blessing for hearing good news and another one for hearing bad news in accordance with Rabbi Huna's view that we need both joy and suffering to experience 'very good'. Here are a few examples of blessings for special occasions:

Special Occasion	Blessing
On beholding fragrant trees	"Praised be Adonai our God, Ruler of space and time, creator of fragrant trees."
On seeing trees in blossom	"Praised be Adonai our God, Ruler of space and time, whose world lacks nothing we need, who has fashioned 'goodly' creatures and lovely trees that enchant the heart."

On seeing an unusual looking person	“Praised be Adonai our God, Ruler of space and time, who makes every person unique.”
On seeing a large number of people	“Praised be Adonai our God, Ruler of space and time, the wise one of secrets, for just as no person’s opinion is like that of another, so their faces are different from one another.”
On seeing evidence of charitable efforts	“Praised be Adonai our God, ruler of space and time, who clothes the naked.”
On seeing people who overcome adversity	“Praised be Adonai our God, ruler of space and time, who gives strength to the weary.”

Understanding that suffering, sorrow and even death do not nullify the basic goodness of the world God has created, and training ourselves to see all the blessings that surround us, are two of the many ways the Torah tradition in Judaism teaches Jews to have a positive and optimistic view of both the natural world and the human world we live in. But, although individuals can train themselves to make their lives joyful and holy, some would say that civilization has corrupted the world of nature with sin, lust, greed, violence and immorality. It is true that prior to the creation of self-conscious moral creatures the world was free of evil. However, at that time the world also lacked good for there were no creatures who could choose to do good and not evil (Angels in Jewish thought have no free will and are, thus, inferior to humans.) It is possible to think of nature as always pure and modern civilization as always a corrupting influence. Indeed, this seems to be a popular view among many Western ecology activists.

4. Influence of Human History

A third important Jewish teaching concerns the outcome of human history. Most ancient philosophies saw human history as cyclical. Others saw the cycle as a declining one, with each age followed by a more degenerate one. The present age was often considered to be dire and always getting worse. The Prophets of Israel (from the 10th century to the 5th century BCE), especially Isaiah, introduced God’s assurance of a Messianic Age to come

when all nations would achieve all-enveloping peace, prosperity, and justice.

How can people, especially Jews, believe in a Messianic Age after all that the world went through in the 20th century? It is true that human society changed more rapidly, violently and fundamentally in the last century than ever before in history. While doctors saved the lives of millions, dictators sacrificed the lives of millions. Populations exploded and birth rates declined. Technology produced both worldwide prosperity and poverty at the same time. Knowing all this, how can we look upon the future with optimistic hope? Are we – along with the entire world and our society – heading towards a wonder-filled new age, or a doomsday; or else, are they both occurring concurrently because breakdown is always a prelude to breakthrough? Many who believe in the Biblical vision of a Messianic Age use the insights of the Prophets of Israel to provide guidance in understanding the social, economic, scientific and cultural upheavals sweeping the society. Usually it is the dramatic dangers of the pre-Messianic tribulation that are being emphasized. I will focus more on some positive signs developing throughout the world that accord with a positive Messianic vision of the Jewish Prophets.

In most religious traditions, redemption is defined in terms of individual enlightenment or personal salvation. However, the Prophets of Israel conceived redemption as a transformation of human society that would occur through the catalytic transformation of the Jewish community. This transformation, which will take place in this world at some future time, is called the Messianic Age. The transition to the Messianic Age is called the birth pangs of the Messiah. The birth of a redeemed messianic world may be the result of an easy or difficult labour. If all would simply live according to the moral teachings of their religious traditions, they would themselves bring about the Messianic Age. But, if they would not do it voluntarily, it would come through social and political upheavals, worldwide conflicts and generation gaps. The Messiah refers to an agent of God who helps bring about this transformation. The Jewish tradition teaches that this agent of God (and there may be two or three such agents) will be a human being, a descendant of King David, with great leadership qualities similar to Moses or Mohammed. The arrival of the Messianic Age is what's really important, not the personality of the agents who bring it about, since they are simply the instruments of God, who ultimately is the real Redeemer.

The Messianic Age is usually seen as the solution to all of humanity's basic problems. This may be true in the long run but the vast changes the transition to the Messianic Age entails will provide challenges to society for many generations to come. For twenty-five centuries Jews have prayed for the day when Isaiah's vision of a radically new world in which Jerusalem would be fulfilled with joy for "no more shall there be in it an infant that lives only a few days" (65:20). Before the mid-19th century, the annual death rate for humans fluctuated from year to year but always remained high, between 30 and over 50 deaths per 1,000 individuals. Infectious and parasitic diseases primarily caused those elevated and unstable rates. The toll from disease among the young was especially high. Almost 1/3 of the children born in any year died before their first birthday; in some subgroups, half died. Because childbirth was hazardous, mortality among pregnant women was also high. A century ago, the infant mortality rate in Jerusalem (as in most of the world) was 25-30%. Now it is less than 1%. For thousands of years almost every family in the world suffered the loss of at least one or two infants; now it happens to less than one out of a hundred.

If this radical improvement had occurred over a few years, it would have greatly impressed people. But since it occurred gradually over several generations, people take it for granted. Also, it seems to be part of human nature that most people focus on complaining about the less than 1% that still die (an individual family tragedy heightened by the fact that it is unexpected because it is so rare) rather than be grateful that the infant mortality rate has been reduced by over 95%.

Also, people are quick to point out that as a result of the great reduction in the infant mortality rate, the world's population has expanded tremendously, which is, and will continue causing major social and economic problems in non-Western societies. The answer to this problem is birth control, which has already radically affected birth rates in Europe, North America, and Japan. For example, in Japan the number of children born in a woman's lifetime declined from 4.72 in 1930, to 2.13 in 1970, to 1.29 in 2003, a 75% decline. Sixty-four of the world's nations now have birth rates lower than the 2.1 children per woman required to keep a population stable. In another generation or two, populations will be declining throughout the world. Since that will occur in the future, and since we are suffering the negative consequences of over population now, very few people see the whole transformation as a Messianic one in spite

of the fact that it is a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Finally, the great increase in the number of people who live long enough to become "elders" provides us with a new set of challenges (a 5-10 year increase in life expectancy is bad news for pension plans and good news for healthcare workers).

Initially, decrease in infant, child and maternal death rates makes the population younger by expanding the base of the age pyramid. Yet, that improvement in survival, along with social and economic development, leads to a drop in birth rates and the beginning of a population with a disproportionately increasing percentage of elderly people. In 1900 there were 10-17 million people at age 65 or older, making up 6.2% of the world population. By the year 2050, people over 65 will number at least 2.5 billion – about 1/5 of the world's projected population. Barring catastrophes that raise death rates substantially or a huge inflation in birth rates, the human population will achieve an age composition within our children's lifetime, which will be absolutely unique in human history. These improvements in human health are unprecedented in human history. Truly, we will be coming close to Isaiah's prophecy: "One who dies at 100 years shall be reckoned a youth, and one who fails to reach 100 shall be reckoned accursed" (65:20). Such radical changes will necessitate major changes in the way we think and act when faced with decisions about life and death. Yet who among us would want to return to the high mortality rates and early deaths of previous centuries? The challenges we now face are not those of survival, but of opportunity.

Where does a Messiah fit in with all of this? He will still have lots to do when he arrives. Most Orthodox Jews would not commit themselves to any individual as a Messiah unless he successfully rebuilds the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecy of Zachariah, "He shall build the Temple of the Lord, and he shall bear the glory, he shall sit on the throne and rule, there shall be a priest before the throne, and peaceful counsel will exist between both of them" (6:13). Now that a large part of the Jewish people have returned to the Land of Israel, and resurrected a Jewish State, one might think that rebuilding a temple of the site where Solomon originally built one almost 3,000 years ago, would be relatively simple. It would, except for the fact that a Muslim Shrine, The Dome of the Rock, presently occupies the site. Often erroneously called the Mosque of Omar, it is not a mosque and was not built by Omar. It was built in 691 by Abd-Al-Malik and is regarded by Muslims as the third

holiest site in the world. Any attempt to replace the Dome of the Rock would provoke a Muslim Holy War of cataclysmic proportions.

There is, however, a lot of vacant land on the Temple Mount, and a Jewish house of worship could be built adjacent to the Dome of the Rock provided the Muslims would cooperate. Most observers agree that anyone who could arrange such Jewish-Muslim cooperation would really be the Messianic Ruler of Peace (Isaiah 9:5). Christian support for such a cooperative venture would also be important. Anyone who can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together in mutual respect and cooperation would surely fulfil the greatest of all Messianic predictions: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning knives; nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again teach war" (Isaiah 2:4). Indeed, such Jewish/Christian/ Muslim cooperation would not be possible without great spiritual leadership in all three communities. Thus, each community could consider its leadership to be the Messiah and this would fulfil the culminating verses of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy as enlarged upon by Micah, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning knives. Nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again teach war, but every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to disturb him. For, it is the Lord of Hosts who spoke. Though all peoples walk each in the name of its God, we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever" (4:3-5). If each people truly follows the best of its own religious teachings the Messiah will surely have arrived, and God's Kingdom will be established. This is the most optimistic and positive vision one can have and one that we can all work for together.

5. Conclusion

Hope and trust in God are very important components of Jewish teaching. Personal hope is strengthened by the exercise of saying dozens of blessings every day. Also important is being constantly aware of the challenges and obstacles that are not interruptions in our path; instead they constitute an integral part in our path. Finally, belief in a future Messianic Age prevents one from becoming cynical and resigned about the problems of community and humanity. All of these Torah teachings help explain why Jews in the 19th and 20th century have been disproportionately over involved in every major movement in Europe and America to improve the state of society and advance human improvement.