

והיית לנו לעינים

“...and you *shall be* as eyes for us...”

a view from a *GER*

יונתן נח בן אברהם

yonason noach *BEN AVRAHAM*

Parashas Bereshis

‘Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics?’

One of the most puzzling *passukim* in *Torah Shebiksav* is found in the first *Sedra* of *Sefer Bereshis*. The *passuk* reads: ויאמר אלקים נעשה אדם בצלמנו -- **And G-d said, "Let us make humankind in our image..."** (**Bereshis 1:26**) It is the plural “us” that seems to be problematic. After surveying how the *Meforshim* have understood this text, I -- respectfully -- would like to pose a “novel” understanding .

First we shall look at a *Midrash*:

When Moses was engaged in writing the *Torah*, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, **AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN**, etc., he said: ‘**Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics?**’ ‘Write,’ replied HaShem, ‘Whoever wishes to err may err.’

Bereshis Rabbah 8:8

Here we see the concept of *b’chirah chafshis* being built into the *Torah Shebiksav*. **HaShem is telling Moshe that all who desire to “get it wrong” will get it wrong no matter how the text of the Torah is written.** Keeping this in mind, we will now examine the *Meforshim* on this *passuk*.

The *Targum Yonason* paraphrases the *passuk*: ‘**And God said to the Ministering Angels... “Let us make man...”**’ thus understanding the *passuk* to be referring to an exchange between HaShem and His heavenly court, depicting the humility of our Creator. Other *Meforshim* who concur are Rashi, the Rambam (in *Moreh Nevuchim 2:6*), and the Ibn Ezra.

The Ramban teaches us that the plural “us” refers to HaShem speaking to the earth, from which the *gashmius* portion of mankind is formed (**And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground -- *Bereshis 2:7***). The Vilna Gaon goes even further by stating that HaShem was addressing all of creation as each element within creation is symbolic of various aspects of mankind, e.g. man’s strength is compared to that of a lion, man’s swiftness is compared to an eagle, his cunning can be likened to that of a fox, his potential for growth is compared to the flora, and man’s soul is likened to all living beings.

Another way which this *passuk* is interpreted is referred to as the “*pluralis majestatis*” (the royal ‘we’). Likewise, the plural “us” can also be attributed to the uniqueness of Hebrew language, which, according to Rav Sa’ adiah Gaon, allows a distinguished person to refer to himself in the plural, e.g. Balak: “*Perhaps I shall prevail that we may smite them*” (***Bamidbar 22:6***), and Daniel: “*This is the*

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dream, and we will tell its interpretation to the king” (Daniel 2:36). Rav Hirsch also interprets the *passuk* in a likewise fashion.

With the traditional interpretations noted, let us delve into this *passuk* from another direction.

There is a Torah concept brought down by the Chofetz Chaim in *Sefer Shem Olam, perek yud-bais*. The Chofetz Chaim there teaches us about **נְהַמָּה דְכִסּוּפָא** (“the bread of humiliation”). We learn there that HaShem created our *neshamos* in such a way that we are shamed when we receive reward which we did not earn. Thus, of course, the purpose of *Olam Haze* is defined: This world is a “proving-ground” for the *neshamah* -- housed within a physical form -- and thus given freedom of choice. The *neshamah* then can choose the kind and degree of the relationship between itself and HaShem, and once its mission is completed, it can return to HaShem and receive reward without shame.

The *neshamah*, the *ruchnious* side of mankind, would naturally do the will of its Creator. Just as an angel, a *malach*, can do only what HaShem assigns it to do, so too would the pure *neshamah* serve HaShem without ever faltering. But again, without *b’chirah chafshis*, any reward would be unearned, and thus shameful to the *neshamah*.

But it is the *guf*, the physical body, which we must focus on. The Torah teaches us that, **וַיִּצַר יְקוֹק אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה** “***And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground...***” (*Bereshis 2:7*). Thus we see that mankind is formed from the very dust, the very ground from which the animals are fashioned (**וַיִּצְרֵי יְקוֹק אֱלֹקִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה**) “***And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air....***” (*Bereshis 2:19*), and in truth, if we do not live up to our potential, if we fail to utilize the Torah to elevate ourselves, we sink to a level LOWER than the animal world.

By placing the *neshamah* within a *goshmeistic* body which has base wants and desires, HaShem has set the stage for the free-will struggle that confronts each of us every day. Consider that many of the things we do are *goshmeistic* in nature: we eat, we drink, we relieve ourselves. We have family relations, we sleep. But through the Torah, and the decrees of our Sages, we are tasked with adding an element of *ruchnious* to these *goshmeistic* actions. By saying *b’rachos* before and after eating and drinking, by limiting that which we put in our mouths, by reciting a blessing after using the facilities, we elevate the world of the physical toward the world of the spiritual. By restraining ourselves from actions which the Torah forbids, and by recognizing that each day is a gift from HaShem by reciting *Modeh Ani* each morning, we raise these everyday elements of our lives above *goshmeius*, and separate ourselves from the physical world around us.

So, too, must we elevate the entire *guf* and differentiate ourselves from the *goshmeistic* world surrounding us. The *B’chor Shor* points out that the verb **נָעַשָׂה** (“make”), which we find in our *passuk*, suggests ‘bringing to a state of completion’. Yet we understand that we are never to be complacent with our accomplishments; we are never to say: “Been there, done that,” as it is our task during our one hundred and twenty years to strive toward perfection while being aware that the concept of perfection cannot be equated with mankind. Yet the lifelong struggle goes on, and **if the *goshmeius* side of man rules, rather than the element of *ruchnious* within him, then, again, man is deemed lower than an animal.** But Torah provides for us a path by which we CAN and MUST elevate ourselves above the base elements out of which our bodies are made.

In the *Midrash*, we find a key to our *chiddush*:

Now all that you see are the offspring of heaven and earth, as it is said, In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. On the second day, His creations were of the celestial world: And God said: Let there be a firmament, etc. (*Bereshis 1:6*); on the third, they were of the terrestrial: And God said:

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Let the earth put forth grass (*Bereshis* 1:11); on the fourth, of the celestial: Let there be light (*Bereshis* 1:14); the fifth, of the terrestrial: Let the waters swarm, etc. (*Bereshis* 1:20). On the sixth day, He came to create man. Said He: **“If I create him belonging to the celestial world, this will outnumber the terrestrial by one creation, and there will be no peace in the universe; while if he is of the terrestrial world it will be likewise. But lo! I will create him as partaking of both the celestial and the terrestrial worlds, for the sake of peace.”** Hence it is written, ***Then the Lord God formed man (אדם) of the dust of the ground (בְּיַד הָאֲדָמָה), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) (Bereshis 2:7).***

Bereshis Rabbah 12:8

It is thus the task of the *neshamah* driven *guf* to chose which world he is to be a part of. Does he desire the things of the earth, or does he rise above the temporal pleasures and gravitate towards his spiritual side, that element within him that seeks communion with The Eternal? Please note the order of the text in *Bereshis* 2:7 -- that the being HaShem created was termed “man” BEFORE He breathed a *neshamah* into him. And with this we have the answer to our question. Who was HaShem speaking to in *Bereshis* 1:26? He was challenging **the *neshamah*** to lift this *guf* made of *adamah* (אדמה) out of the realm of the *goshmeistic*, and to make it part of the sphere of *ruchnious*. **“Let US -- you the *neshamah*, with the help of Me and My Torah -- make this “man” (אדם) in our SPIRITUAL image -- in our SPIRITUAL likeness.”** He was speaking to your *neshamah* as well as mine. He was tasking us with utilizing His Torah to navigate along the roads of life, and to avoid every pothole that we are able to. He was giving each *neshamah* a “pep-talk” before placing it in a world where it -- encased within the *guf* -- is as free to “get it wrong” as it is to “get it right”. And only thereafter will HaShem allow us to enjoy the rewards that He desires to heap upon us, but which we will enjoy when we earn them.

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