

Dear Chavraya,

A question was asked around the Shabbos table last week, whether there is a Hebrew word for “perfect,” used in the way that we speak of perfection in English. The question has stayed with me through the week, touching places of both pain and delight within myself. In the reflective mood of Shabbos, we considered Hebrew words that we might use to describe perfect. Even in my framing it as a “description” of perfection rather than speaking of a word that means perfect, there is a tantalizing hint of a Jewish view to the world and to people and to the nature of our striving, of our being and becoming. Indeed, if the goal is to be “perfect,” we should stop before we begin because there shall only be disappointment, hearts broken on paths of illusion. God’s most holy name is formed of the letters of the verb to be. The first of the holy names offered to Moses is *Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh/I shall be that which I shall be*. To be perfect is to be static, forever in the same place without possibility of growth. Of being and becoming, God becomes a model for our own striving. It is a different dimension of what it means to be created in God’s image.

As we sat around the table thinking about Hebrew words by which to convey perfection, and as I later sought the help of dictionaries, something quite fascinating emerged. Virtually all Hebrew words associated with perfection, by which to describe “perfect,” convey a spiritual and even moral quality deeply rooted in Jewish tradition as a way of being in the world. These are words that come to be more about how we carry ourselves in the world than about what we accomplish in the world. We find such words as *shalem/whole, complete*, root of *shalom*, most often used in regard to the heart, as in *lev shalem/whole hearted*. We might consider *tamim* or *tam/pure, innocent*, as in *ish tam v’yashar/a pure and upright person*. The word *niphla/wondrous* reminds us of a world that is so wondrous, so miraculous, for all that at times of natural disaster makes us recoil in fear before a world that seems so terrifyingly imperfect, and which is yet so perfectly wondrous. Even the word *tahor/pure* is used to describe perfection, and its synonym *zach*, as in *shemen zayit zach/pure olive oil*, as used in oil for holy lighting, as describing the human soul as being the light of God’s candle in the world.

In the Hebrew lexicon of perfection, wholeness includes brokenness as part of one whole, imperfection included in any construct of perfection. Through his own tears, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught, “there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.” If that were not the case, then how could we speak of perfection in a human key, to know of life’s wholeness in the midst of its certainty of brokenness? Death itself, wholeness and brokenness merging as one, is the homecoming of even the most perfectly lived life. Standards of perfection in human societies have been the source of so much violence, brutality, and hate. If some are perfect, then inevitably some are not, and the monster of an “uber mensch” is created, devouring the lesser beings.

It is of another way to speak of *mentsch* that for me would be the goal and aspiration, for all to strive to be fine human beings, decent, whole and upright of heart in all of our ways of interaction with people and with the world all around. With a focus on perfection in education, we lose the essence, the process and way

of learning as a path of joyful discovery. As a teacher and the school rabbi in a Jewish day school, I constantly challenged the drive for excellence. It is hardly that I oppose acquiring expertise, even excellence, but not at the cost of all else. I choose to emphasize goodness and the doing of each one's best, so to become "perfect" in the way of *shalem/wholeness* as the seedbed of peace. Encouraging students to do their best, I would subversively share with them one of my own mantra's, perfection is in the striving.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat P'kudei*, with the completion of *Sefer Sh'mot/the Book of Exodus*, so too the completion of the *Mishkan/the desert Sanctuary*. The Aramaic interpretive translation of Torah, the *Targum*, speaks of the completion of the work of building the Mishkan as *sh'laymat*. So the Sanctuary is complete, whole, but is it perfect? I imagine that there must have been mistakes that became part of its beauty, a hammer that missed the mark here, a dropped stitch and a loose thread there, perhaps a moment of *kavannah/intention* lacking in the making of one hook or the shaping of one board. All such little mistakes would have been the imperfections in the Mishkan that was so perfect nevertheless, for it was the place of the people's gathering, whole, complete, perfect in their coming together as one.

As the world itself is perfect in all of its imperfections, so too the Mishkan. The building of the Mishkan is compared to the creation of the world. The Mishkan represents the created world itself. The rabbis said of the Mishkan, *she'hu shakul k'neged ha'olam/it corresponds to the world*. When the creation is complete, the Torah sings with joyful song that becomes the Shabbos evening Kiddush, *va'y'chulu ha'sha'mayim v'ha'aretz v'chol tz'va'am/and the heaven and the earth and all their multitude were completed*. With bold revocalizing, the rabbis said to read *va'y'chulu* as *va'y'chalu*, shifting to the active form, *and they completed the heaven and the earth and all their multitude*. The "they" is us, the rabbis explain, God and people together completing creation. So the rabbis taught (Shabbat 119b), *whoever prays Va'y'chulu on Shabbos evening, Scripture treats as if they had become a partner to the Holy Blessed One in the act of creation/k'ilu na'aseh shutaf l'ha'kadosh baruch hu b'ma'aseh v'reishit*.

In allowing for partnership with imperfect partners, even God's perfection is of a different sort, open and encouraging. In a world that is so perfectly imperfect, so beautiful and precious for all that makes it hard to see such beauty at times, so it is for us, just "a little lower than the angels," so perfect in all the human frailty of our imperfections.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor