



Making It Good • Parshat Shemot

As we open up the book of Exodus, we find ourselves in a time of transition. Joseph's death is recorded at the end of Genesis. A new Pharaoh is put in power. Leadership transitions are always concerning. Joseph's meteoric success and contributions are suddenly eclipsed by fear that the Israelites will become a fifth column. The new Pharaoh took desperate and despotic measures to reduce, quite literally, what he saw as a security threat: "Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, 'Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live'" (Ex. 1:22). Forced labor was not enough. Murder was the next step in eradicating our people.

Into this oppressive climate, we are introduced to two unnamed individuals as chapter two opens: "A certain member of the house of Levi went and took a woman of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months" (Ex. 2:1-2). The child is also not given a name. All we know is that the couple each have a noble tribal affiliation that will make an imprint on their baby. The Levites will soon emerge as spiritual leaders of their people.

When this Jewish mother sees her Jewish son right after Pharaoh promulgated his decree, her first two words should have been 'Oy Vey.' Instead they are "*ki tov*" – translated here in the English as "she saw how beautiful he was." Literally, the expression means he is good, or it is good. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Having a male child at this time was a death sentence.

Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam (R. Samuel ben Meir), simply directs readers, without any explanation, to the first chapter of Genesis, where the expression "*ki tov*," it is good, appears multiple times. The first was when God created light from darkness: "God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:4). Creating light from darkness is good. *Ki tov* is used another 5 times in this chapter, culminating in a superlative state of goodness "*tov me'od*," it was very good: "And God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen.1:31). Although not everything God creates is labeled good, altogether "*tov*" appears 7 times in the chapter, paralleling the days of creation and the idea of seven throughout the Bible as a state or cycle of completion.

It's easy to say that if God creates the result is good, until we arrive at chapter two when God is not satisfied with divine creation: "God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him'" (Gen. 2:18). The *New York Times* critic, A. O. Scott, in his book *Better Living through Criticism* claims that God's assessment here makes God the first critic! Scott cites the biologist E. O. Wilson, who contends that, "the creative arts became possible as an evolutionary advance when humans developed the capacity for abstract thought." Scott then compares the work of critics today to the "original critic" of Genesis, "who cast his eyes over what he had made and decided it was good."

Rashbam, in simply directing us from the beginning chapters of Exodus back to the beginning of Genesis, may be asking the reader to make comparisons between the world God created out of chaos and the nation that the Israelites had to build out of chaos. The ability to look at a situation that on the surface looks terrible and be able, despite the anguish, to recast it as something with the potential for goodness is a hallmark of leadership.

The recognition of goodness and the ability to label it as such is one of the key ways we act in imitation of God. “To see that someone is good and to say so is a creative act,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in “The Three Stages of Creation,” *Covenant & Conversation*, “one of the great creative acts... Within almost all of us is something positive and unique, but which is all too easily injured, and which only grows when exposed to the sunlight of someone else’s recognition and praise. To see the good in others and let them see themselves in the mirror of our regard is to help someone grow to become the best they can be.”

In leadership, recognizing and naming the good is essential for hiring talent, keeping talent, and sustaining reliable growth. In *Forbes*, Joyce E. A. Russell concludes, “...Positive leadership has been shown to be related to better organizational outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction job performance, going above and beyond at work, psychological well-being, organizational commitment, creativity) than negative leadership styles (which have been shown to be related to turnover intentions, stress, anxiety, absenteeism, job burnout, retaliatory behaviors). In short, leaders set the tone for their team and/or organization” (“Positive Leadership: It Makes a Difference”).

Emma Seppälä and Kim Cameron, in their *HBR* article “The Best Leaders Have a Contagious Positive Energy” (April 18, 2022) call such leaders “positive energizers” and identify qualities associated with positive energizers: “Energizers’ greatest secret is that, by uplifting others through authentic, values-based leadership,

they end up lifting up both themselves and their organizations. Positive energizers demonstrate and cultivate virtuous actions, including forgiveness, compassion, humility, kindness, trust, integrity, honesty, generosity, gratitude, and recognition in the organization. As a result, everyone flourishes.”

In Jewish law, we bless on the bad as we bless on the good. This is how we demonstrate acceptance of that which is beyond our control. It is also a way we imitate God. That which is good can become bad in our eyes, and that which is bad can become good. If our subjective analysis can go in either direction, we have a choice: will we be able to see the good in what is bad and make it so or will we see the bad in what is good?

This is a divine task of immense proportions and the challenge of living in a broken world. God models it and invites us to do the same. Moses’ mother models it and invites us to do the same. She was able to see beyond Pharaoh’s awful decree by looking at the exquisite innocence of her son and naming the unvarnished beauty and goodness she saw in front of her. Her optimism and fierce commitment at this difficult time had a prophetic impact on the Jewish future. She gave birth to Judaism’s greatest hero: “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses...” (Deut. 34:10).

What goodness is in front of you right now that you need to see and name?