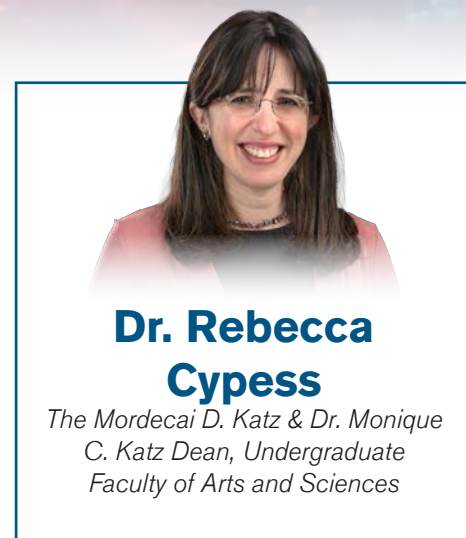




# Creativity as a model for Teshuvah

**E**ven before Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's death in 1791, he and his wife, Constanze, had begun destroying sketches and drafts of his compositions. After his death, Constanze continued this process, apparently to increase the public enthusiasm for her husband's music. After all, if Mozart was perceived as a divinely inspired genius who never sketched, never drafted, and never made mistakes, then surely his music would be considered worth hearing and celebrating again and again. Several early biographies of Mozart eagerly repeated this hype, effectively casting Mozart as a sort of automaton—a childlike savant who operated through some kind of artificial intelligence, creating music that was immediately “perfect” on the first attempt.<sup>1</sup>

In Jewish tradition, human creativity is not about behaving like an automaton or an AI bot that appears to achieve perfection with ease. While we might strive for perfection as a theoretical ideal, we know that there is no such thing as perfection where human beings are concerned. Instead, what is important is that we strive—that we engage in the process of imagining, drafting, creating, and recognizing imperfections, so that we can work to correct each error and try again. In this sense, creativity is a humbling process. It forces us to discipline ourselves in working towards technical mastery of each medium—in the arts and crafts, in the science lab, in the beis medrash—as we work to create something new, something that offers a glimpse of truth.<sup>2</sup> The creative process is as much about working on ourselves as it is



about generating a finished product. In fact, I suggest that Jewish tradition sees human creativity, with its demand for constant improvement, as a model for that most important of human processes: teshuvah.

*Bereishit Rabba* provides an opening to explore this idea by describing

Hashem's creative process. The midrash wonders why the Torah uses the phrase *va-yehi erev*, "and there was evening." What does the word "and" add to this sentence? Rabbi Abahu answers:

מְלַמֵּד שֶׁהָיָה בּוֹרָא עוֹלָמוֹת וּמַחְרִיבָן, עַד שֶׁבָּרָא אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַיָּמִין וְהַיָּמִין לֹא הֵגִינוּ לֵי.

*It teaches that He continuously created worlds and destroyed them, until He created this one. He said, "this one pleases Me, while those did not please Me."*

#### **Bereshit Rabba 3:7**

Hashem is depicted as "drafting" the world and discarding each draft until He arrives at a version that satisfies Him. The implication of this portrait might seem unsettling. Surely Hashem, who exists outside of time and can bring a perfect world into being in the blink of an eye, has no need for drafts. What, then, does this midrash hope to accomplish? I think Rabbi Abahu hopes to teach his readers a lesson: it is we, in emulating the divine attribute of creativity, who must be willing to throw out flawed drafts and try again.

The midrash contains the classical articulation of Hashem's desire for creative partnership with humanity:

**It was precisely because of Adam's sin and his expulsion from Eden that he needed the creative "spark" that would allow him to survive.**

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׂמוּאֵל בַּר אֲמִי, מִתְחַלֵּת בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם נִתְאַוָּה הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁתַּפּוּת בַּתְּחִילוּתִים

*Rabbi Shmuel bar Ami said: From the beginning of the creation of the world, the Holy One blessed be He desired to enter into a partnership with the creations below.*

#### **Bereishit Rabba 3:9**

By definition, such a partnership involves forgiveness for humanity's imperfections. This idea is suggested by the story of the creation of fire. As related by the Talmud Yerushalmi, on the first Saturday night after Adam and Chava were exiled from Eden because of their sin, Adam saw that the sun was setting, and he feared that he would be attacked by the snake as retribution for the snake's punishment. To give Adam a means of protection, Hashem provided a solution:

בְּאוֹתָהּ הַשָּׁעָה זָמַן לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁנֵי רִעְפִּין וְהִקְיִישׁן זֶה לְזֶה וַיִּצְאָ מֵהֶן הָאוּר

*At this moment the Holy One, blessed be He, let him find two flintstones that he knocked against each other and made fire.*

#### **Yerushalmi Berachot 8:5**

It was precisely because of Adam's sin and his expulsion from Eden that he needed the creative "spark" that would allow him to survive. Indeed, Adam's creation of fire is what led him to recognize Hashem's own great creativity, such that Adam invented the blessing *borei me'orei ha-eish*—"blessed is He who illuminates fire." Adam's creative act brought him face-to-face with his own insufficiency. If Hashem had not invited Adam to be creative, he would never have survived after squandering his home within the perfect, protective environment of Eden.

An account in the Bavli affords a closer look at this moment of creativity,

explaining how Adam had the idea of knocking the two flintstones together:

בְּמוֹצָאֵי שַׁבָּת נָתַן הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא דִּיעָה בְּאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן מַעֲשֵׂיו דְּוִגְמָא שְׁל מַעְלָה, וְהִבִּיא שְׁנֵי אֲבָנִים וְסָחָןן זֶו בְּזֶו, וַיִּצְאָ מֵהֶן אוּר

*At the conclusion of Shabbat, the Holy One, Blessed be He, presented to Adam a heavenly example, and he brought two rocks and rubbed them against each other, and the first fire emerged*

#### **Pesachim 54a**

This concept of the *dugma shel ma'alah*—a "heavenly example"—offers an idea of how Hashem guides us to be creative people.

It must have been a similar *dugma shel ma'alah* that Hashem presented to Moshe when Moshe was trying to construct the Menorah for the Mishkan. Hashem instructed Moshe to create the Menorah, but Moshe immediately forgot the instructions and had to ask Hashem to repeat them. It was at that point that Hashem "took a pattern of fire and showed him its construction" (*Midrash Tanchuma, Beha'alotecha* 6). Still, Moshe had trouble. Hashem instructed Moshe to commission the Menorah from Betzalel, and Betzalel made it immediately.

Betzalel's success may be rooted in his family heritage. His grandmother, Miriam, was also an artist; like all creative people, Miriam understood that inspiration is not enough. Rather, human beings require steady practice and improvement. This point becomes clear when Miriam leads the women in song after they cross the Red Sea. While the men had sung without instrumental accompaniment, the women are described as singing and dancing *be-tupim u-vimcholot*, "with timbrels and hand drums" (*Shemot* 15:20). Rashi, adapting the Mechilta, explains where these instruments came from:

מבטחות היו צדקניות שבדור שהקב"ה עושה  
להם נסים והוציאו תפים ממצרים

*The righteous women of that generation were certain that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would perform miracles for them, and they brought their timbrels with them from Egypt.*

**Rashi on Shemot 15:20.**

The point is not just that Miriam and the other women knew that Hashem would save them at the time of the Exodus, but that the women had been practicing with their instruments for the entire duration of the slavery in Egypt so they would be prepared to celebrate God's miracles at the moment of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Their faith kept them practicing; conversely, their regular practice may have helped them maintain their faith by disciplining their minds to focus on a better future.

So, too, Betzalel. Moshe, the greatest of all prophets, might have perceived Hashem's *dugma shel ma'alah*. Yet, to realize Hashem's instructions, he needed to turn to an artisan who knew the value of long, disciplined practice. Through practiced artisanship, Betzalel's mind and hands were ready to translate Hashem's *dugma shel ma'alah* into reality. Nor was he alone: an army of artisans contributed a host of skills to creating the Mishkan, a space for Hashem on earth. Although this was not done in the blink of an eye, it was done with skill and wisdom—what the Torah describes as *chochmat lev*.

The connection between creativity and teshuvah underlies the requirement that our creations remain flawed. Specifically, when we erect a new building, we must leave a portion of it unfinished as a remembrance of the destruction of the Temple (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 560* based on *Bava Batra 60b*). On one side, this law is about curtailing the joy we feel in



Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Boeckhorst, King David Playing the Harp, ca. 1616, Städels Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

creating something new. Seen from another perspective, the unfinished wall is a reminder that we are flawed as people; we have not yet done teshuvah to the point that would warrant the rebuilding of the Temple and the full redemption of the world.

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, HaRav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l, describes the creativity of Adam in the first chapter of Bereishit ("Adam I") as a creativity driven toward mastery of nature. As E-lokim, the universal God, a God of justice, commands: *p'ru u-r'vu*

*u-milu et ha-aretz ve-kivshuha*—"Be fruitful and increase; fill the earth and master it." For the Rav, Adam I is thus inherently a lofty, "dignified" creature who sees himself as embodying aspects of the divine. By contrast, Adam II, the Adam of the second chapter of Bereishit, is born to humility; seeking a personal relationship with Hashem, he cannot help but recognize his own flaws.

Yet Adam II is also creative, as Rashi explains: seeing that the earth required rain, Adam created prayer (Rashi

on Bereshit 2:5). Prayer, as the Rav explains, is one key to the personal relationship between humanity and the divine. “Even though,” the Rav writes, “the man of faith is provoked, like Adam the first, by the cosmos about which he is inquisitive, the covenant, not the cosmos, provides him with an answer to his questions.”<sup>4</sup> That covenantal relationship inspired Betzalel and Miriam; it inspired Adam to invent the blessing *borei me’orei ha-eish* and to pray for rain; it inspired Chazal to elaborate on the creation of the world in an effort to shape us as creative people striving for the divine.

Something of this striving is captured in the early seventeenth-century portrait of King David by Peter Paul Rubens. For all his majesty, David appears here as a deeply human figure, his mouth open, his hands grasping his harp, as he searches for the words and sounds to capture that momentary, elusive glimpse of the divine, as described by the Rav: “At the level of his cosmic confrontation with God, man is faced with an exasperating paradox. On the one hand, he beholds God in every nook and corner of creation, in the flowering of the plant, in the rushing of the tide, and in the movement of his own muscle, as if God were at hand close to and beside man, engaging with him in a friendly dialogue. And yet, the very moment man turns his face to God, he finds Him remote, unapproachable, enveloped in transcendence and mystery.”<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence that King David, perhaps the greatest creative spirit in Jewish tradition, is so inherently bound up with the concept of teshuvah. Like his ancestor, Yehudah, who falls and repents, David experiences the greatest highs and lows of human existence. His Psalms show him grappling with his own fallibility and mistakes. He thanks Hashem in his moments of triumph, and he calls to Hashem in his moments of deepest despair. His poetry reflects all these experiences. Yet it does more than reflect: sacred poetry constituted a medium that allowed David to work through his failures, repent, and achieve something better. David’s creativity was itself a path to teshuvah.

Mozart’s early biographers missed the point. In casting the composer as a genius who never made mistakes and whose successes were effortless, they failed to recognize the dedicated labor that went into his creations, and they made his creativity appear unattainable by ordinary people.

Jewish tradition knows better. It teaches that Hashem provides pathways for each of us to explore our full humanity by partnering with Him in creation, and that such explorations teach us the value of hard work, repeated practice, and an unflinching commitment to recognizing our own flaws. After all, to be a creative person is to try and fail. If we “outsource” our creative labor to artificial intelligence, we lose out on

the opportunity to develop our self-discipline and our imagination. Without those, how can we hope to realize Hashem’s vision—for ourselves and for the world—when the opportunity arises? If, as I have suggested, Jewish tradition sees creativity as a model for teshuvah, then giving up on the creative process means giving up on ourselves.

## Endnotes

1. I am indebted to my family for discussing these ideas with me during Sukkot 5785.

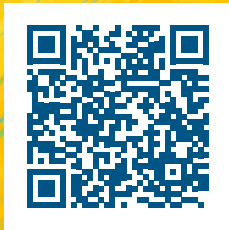
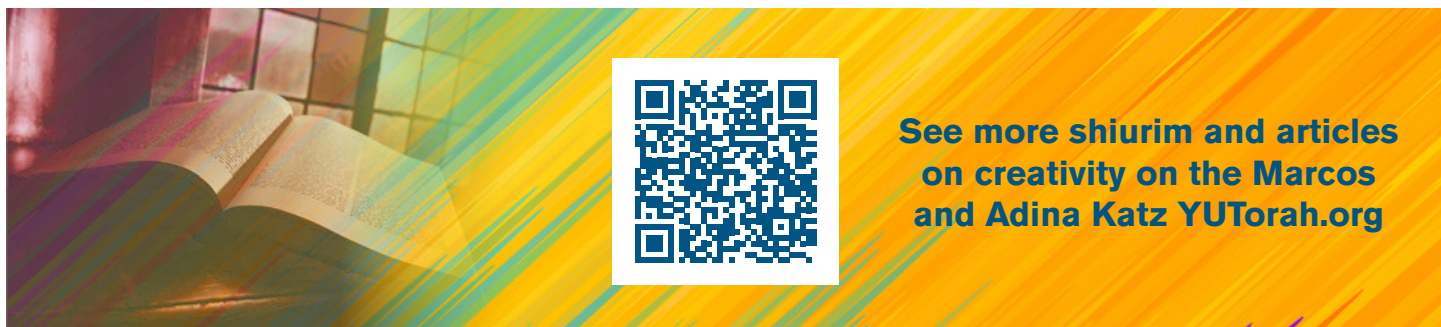
A more realistic view of Mozart’s creative process is in Neal Zaslaw, “Mozart as a Working Stiff,” in *On Mozart*, ed. James M. Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102–12.

2. On the balance between creativity and tradition in the halachic process, see Michael Rosensweig, “Creativity as a Foundation of Torah Life,” *Tradition* 53, no. 3 (2021):182–91.

3. I have explored the Jewish women’s music in slavery, comparing it to evidence of music-making among enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century, in Rebecca Cypess, “Miriam’s Song and the Persistence of Music in Dark Times,” *The Lehrhaus*, January 30, 2023, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/miriams-song-and-the-persistence-of-music-in-dark-times/>.

4. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 47.

5. *Ibid.*, 48.



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