

The Root of Moral Consciousness (From “Toladot--The Ten Generations from Adam to Noah”)

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Shiur 1: The Idea of “Toladot”

We will quickly see that the central idea which we need to address is the expression that the Torah uses: “**toladot.**” This is a word which is usually used in Hebrew to mean “history.” But first we must understand it etymologically. Let’s try to understand what this Hebrew concept--which is used to describe “history”--means on its own. Undoubtedly from a structural perspective, I think there is a huge difference in how this concept is understood in a philosophical mindset-- which we are familiar with through broader culture--and how it is understood in Hebrew. The general understanding of history is that events seem to be the most important things. This is a history of events. The Hebrew concept of “toladot” is used to describe history and how we see it through the stories and descriptions of events themselves by the Torah. **This forms much more of a history of human identity itself rather than a history of the events that shape it.** The events of history are noteworthy only in their scope and how they demarcate changes in human identity across history. History then is the history of humanity much more than it is a history of the events that happen in different time periods of human history. In truth, in Hebrew “toladot” means genealogy. We are guided through history whose end goal is to allow us to understand the different permutations and changes of human identity through the “toladot.” “So-and-so gave birth to so-and-so” is not only meant to inform us that in this generation some person birthed a child, but rather there is a “birthing” of human identity through a newborn, and the names of people in each generation indicate a significant human identity which is found in the progression of change from the start of human history until--as it is called in Messianic thinking--the appearance of the “ben adam.” We see here the general principle that history is the history of humanity, meaning that it is the history of one existence which is working towards birthing another form of existence which progresses from it, called in the language of the Prophets “ben adam.” This history is the history of humanity. It is a history of pregnancy, of birth. Therefore, the idea of referring to “history” in Hebrew as “toladot” is much closer to meaning the following: the birthing of human identity from itself via historical events. The Torah describes these events and we accordingly experience them as identity-related issues much more than as situational issues.

This links to the important distinction between the traditional thinking of the Torah and the philosophical way of thinking: philosophical thought is fine with evaluating everything related to human existence as a series of calculated events which are random and

impersonal, a random string of events. Traditional thought is the opposite: it tries to evaluate human existence and its identity, the meaning of events themselves.

This is the first important concept: *toladot*. It indicates that human identity is a process of birth from the start. We must become familiar with the phraseologies which are rooted in the language of the midrash: humanity was created as the parent of the *ben adam*. We see here the idea that the history in which we participate is not--as the philosophers of broader culture understood it to be--a history of "being," but rather a history which preceded "being." It might seem that I have gotten into a series of philosophical inquiries which might seem off topic, but we are in fact at the heart of the matter. An understanding of human history, from the point of view of the Messianic arc, would look as follows: human history is the history that precedes existence. Allegorically, we could say that this process of birthing humanity did not end, and instead showcases the different progressions which are needed to bring about the final birth of a complete humanity, which is to say a human existence which is able to truly exemplify the Creator's project. This is the primary framework through which the story of human history can be seen as understood in the common terms of the Torah. And again, this idea of "*toladot*" which is repeated over and over in the Torah, and in particular *Sefer Bereishit* as well as throughout the Biblical text, means essentially that the Torah desires to emphasize to us the critical moments of this history, the "junctures" in which we see a change in identity, and after which judgment can be passed on whether this change brings us towards actualized our goal or if it misses it, if its tangential, a backsliding or a failing. From the start we see a continuous series of events which serves to form the "I.D." of human existence throughout history with this criteria: we must judge whether it brings us towards success or in a direction which misses or fails.

So there is a sense of **intention** which is part of the idea of *toladot*. We are not only told the facts, "a couple gets married and has many children;" rather, through this idea of "*toladot*," we try to know how these changes to human identity constitute a starting point that we will define later knowing that the ultimate realization is that which is labeled Messianic consciousness.

This is the first examination which is essential in order to enter into the recurring sequences of the stories of the Torah. The idea of "Adam" as representing human identity brings with it the idea of "Ben Adam," the history of "Adam" and successors within the "Ben Adam"

Three Dimensions Through Which To Read The Torah

We will start first of all to "define," starting with the most general ideas, how to understand the trademarks of this story. I want for us to get quickly to this next definition, which is unique to monotheistic thought, to the Torah's conceptual monism: **in addition to the logic of history**--as the Torah describes it to use--**the ethical problem and the metaphysical**

problem are identical. In general culture we commonly distinguish between these lexicons. There is the world of history, the world of ethics, and the world of experience or metaphysical inquiry. Here, a priori, we come across a “language” which equates all three. History, ethics, and metaphysics have the same “destiny,” the same structure, the same “logos” in Greek. That which the moral quandary seeks to impart to us, that which the historical fact seeks to impart to us, and that which the problem of “being” seeks to impart to us, are actually three identical vocabularies, and so in the same story we encounter the development of moral quandary, the development of human identity in a historical key, and ultimately the problem of mission which is the metaphysical problem of our “being” as we come to understand ourselves.

In the world of our general culture, these three vocabularies make up three completely different worlds. In philosophical thought, the idea that the laws of history, morality, and ontology (of being, of metaphysics) share a common origin is completely foreign, while the deep intuition of the Hebrew consciousness is that we are speaking about the same things that have the same logic, the same structure. The uniqueness of the language of the Torah is meant to describe to us the history of human identity in a way which can be understood through these three vocabularies simultaneously (while there are other levels, these are the central ones).

The Concept of “Creation” Through These Three Dimensions

We will begin from a concept which is essential and unique in the Torah’s language, **the concept of creation**. First through this inquiry we must understand what actually takes place in human history according to the Torah and then we will try to articulate each of these three elements within this concept. I mean to say that while definitionally, the concept of creation is given to us with metaphysical implications, it also has at the same time historical and ethical implications.

The first concept that comes up in the historical narrative of the Torah--which is a sort of introduction to the Torah as law--is the concept of creation. At first glance it seems to us to be a philosophical or metaphysical topic. However, the Torah speaks about it as an “event,” as a historical notion. The Torah doesn’t simply tell us that the world is created, but rather that the world is created in the beginning, which seems philosophically to be a tautology! And so when we read the first verse “in the beginning God created etc.,” there is apparently a certain repetition in the two ideas of beginning and creation: if we take the concept of creation seriously, creation must certainly constitute some sort of start. It is incumbent on us to ask what the novelty is in the Torah telling us that in the beginning there was creation, since it is part of the definition of creation that it is a beginning. So we see that this is an “historic” expression, meaning that the concept of creation as it appears in the Biblical narrative is an event within history.

So first of all, this philosophical examination of this idea raises a question: in the vocabulary which unifies all three vocabularies in question, how should we understand the fact emphasized by the Torah that there was a creation since human reason cannot understand this concept? To specify further--without falling into the mistaken belief that this is a clear-cut concept--the concept of creation is closed off to human understanding. Human understanding does not grasp the meaning of "creating," insofar as it is taken seriously: that there was nothing and now there is something, *ex nihilo*. This is incomprehensible to the mind.

And what emerges from the primary commentators, and from the "tone" of the words in Hebrew, is that the lesson that is given to us here, beyond just the confirmation that creation occurred, that there was nothing and now there is something, is that there is a historical concept at play here, it is latent within this story from its start that it can be classified within the historical dimension. "There is a start," which is to say a "duration." There is a direction. That "there is a start" means that what was begun will be brought to a certain conclusion. Therefore, this concept of creation itself--without any connection to philosophical meaning, since as I mentioned previously, taking it in isolation will make it closed off to human understanding--**has an intended meaning on the level of the event, in the historical dimension.**

And simultaneously there is more. One can identify in this idea an ethical lesson. This will bring us further on to that which was the essential experience of Abraham. When the Midrash defines Abraham--and this stems from the following profound experience of Abraham from which the identity of Israel begins to issue forth--as the first person who understood himself as a creation, then the experience of knowing that I am created becomes one that is unique to Hebrew consciousness on the level I am describing to you, in which metaphysical intuition, historical intuition, and ethical intuition are identical. I will explain myself: in order to know yourself as a created being means precisely to be aware of oneself as a being that comes to be and whose existence was given. This class of "creation" in Hebrew is first of all a class which ultimately showcases two different levels of existence: the existence of the Creator and the existence of the created. This is to say that being receives being and that being bestows being. I think you are already accustomed to these categories. Meaning: the experience of knowing with conviction that one is a created being brings together immediately a complete perspective with which to understand the concepts of history and ethics. The root of this monistic, even monotheistic, Hebrew language is simultaneously the root of Messianic language.

No matter what happens in human history, what problem is before us, what certain way the Torah tells and describes something, this is the initial idea which emerges from this foundational narrative: there is before everything something unique about a person who can understand themselves as a creation, an idea which has philosophical, ethical, temporal, and historical implications. This moment which is described as the beginning

continues forward. Something happens during this duration of time, something substantive and not meaningless.

However, I think that the essential lesson this verse that “in the beginning God created” is that the being that understands itself as a creation is immediately brought into a certain perspective on ethical quandaries. Is this all clear?

This means to say, that as we know from elsewhere in the study of Midrashim which discuss Abraham’s experience, there is an ethical experience which precedes the philosophical experience. The conviction that the world is created and that therefore there is a Creator is more connected to the ethical experience than it is to the philosophical. In fact it shows a fundamental opposition: philosophical uncertainty leaves belief as the only option, since human reasoning cannot grasp the meaning of this idea. We will see further on why this human understanding cannot clarify this concept on its own, why it is a contradictory idea for it. Beginning from a moral standpoint allows for certainty about this concept within human reasoning.

This idea that the world is created is another problematic idea. It leads essentially to a question that comes to us through our conception of the world, asking us a sort of self-aware question: is the world that we are in created or not? Philosophical thought cannot determine theoretically whether there are more arguments for its being created than those against it. Meaning, whatever serves to underlie our conception of the world is ambiguous. The response of consciousness could be the conclusion “therefore that the world was created” or “therefore that the world was not created.” We can examine this a bit further if you desire: the structure of the world that we create for ourselves eludes our rational understanding. For the human mind there are an equal number of proofs that the world comes about on its own and is governed by impersonal laws as there are proofs that “it is impossible that this work has no Creator,” to return to the classical phraseology. And so in the end if human understanding concludes positively “yes” on this matter, then this is in fact the belief that the world as it appears to me suggests that I am created. Or if it concludes oppositely “no,” then the world as it appears to me suggests that I am not created. This means that there is here a choice that comes from the deepest place within our minds, and according to the Hebrew tradition, this choice depends on the specific manner in which we understand ourselves in relation to ethics. **This is to say that the philosophical choice of whether or not the world was created is rooted in the standpoint of ethical experience.** Here we arrive at the most uniquely Hebrew examination of the concept of creation--and we will confirm this with our reading of Rashi on the first verse: that understanding oneself as a being that comes to be in a limited fashion and which receives its existence connects with ethics before it connects to the mind. This is what we must understand.

Audience: *Somebody asks a question*

Manitou: No, we are not speaking now about what I am defining as the root of the ethical experience in the human being of the Torah. The first ethical experience is the conviction that I am created. I feel that this is something new to arise in the vocabulary of general culture, and it can throw us off in how we relate to the general Western way of thought. In the world of Western philosophy, the concept of creation comes up as a metaphysical and intellectual subject. This is why I said to you that in the language of the Torah when discussing history, the first concept to appear is that humanity is created. We are not accustomed to understanding this idea of creation as primarily a historical concept before it is a philosophical one, and as a historical idea, it is primarily one related to the ethical experience. This is the novelty that must be understood. I think it would be worthwhile to expand on this until it is clear. We can do so by taking questions.

Audience: Can the understanding that I receive my existence never be rational?

Manitou: In a secondary way. Primarily it is a moral experience, and the belief in this moral consciousness comes to enlighten the intellectual consciousness. Meaning another way that since I have taken on the belief that the world is created then I can see the world in a certain way rationally. When you bring together two philosophies, one which opines that the world was created and another which does not, on the level of one's internal monologue there is no ability to compromise. The rational logic proving that the world was created and the rational logic proving that it wasn't created have equal weight. It is one logic against another. One cannot live this way.

I will offer parenthetically, and anyone here who has studied a bit of philosophy of science or the methods of science will understand my intent and help me to clarify: generally, scientific thought is excited by events which can be repeated. In order to determine a law from amongst a collection of occurrences, that occurrence must be studied, meaning that it must be repeated. Scientific thought is excited by that which is stable, determined, universal amongst occurrences. But in order that the universal, "the determined" can be grasped, there needs to be repetition of an occurrence. **Definitionally, an event which occurs only once does not enter into the domain of scientific thought. And if there is any such object in this discussion, it must be creation because definitionally it is a fully one-time occurrence.** There is only one beginning if there is a beginning. Therefore the idea of a beginning is not relevant to scientific thought and not to reasoning.

Therefore when the philosopher concludes in their philosophical manner, in accordance with their conception of the world, that either the world was created or is eternal, this decision comes from somewhere other than rational logic.

The Jewish tradition uncovers the manner of being that belongs to ethical consciousness. I still have not said what its moral quality is, and I want to formally point to it as the foundation of ethics in the Hebrew consciousness. The revealing of this moral consciousness by Abraham was done through the revelation that there was a Creator. This

is the novelty of Jewish thought: that theology and ethics are one and the same. That which the philosophers call “philosophical certainty” for us begins with ethical experience. As to why this is so important: because the ethical consciousness is universal, in the sense that every person can experience it, whereas philosophical certainty is a privilege reserved for the philosophical aristocracy.

We run into an additional issue here which is very important, parenthetical again but highly important nonetheless: if salvation were to come via the philosophical mind, it would not be apportioned out to every person. We must cut ourselves off from the philosophical stance on questions of mission or theological questions in general.

We have arrived at the point of our first investigation, which is as follows: we are accustomed to think that the concept of creation in the language of the Torah is a philosophical notion and it is not. While it can take on a certain intellectual form within conceptual thinking in an auxiliary sense, it remains before all an ethical experience. When the Midrash tells us that Abraham was the first human who “recognized his Creator,” the idea of “recognition” is rooted in the idea of recognizing good and as such is speaking first and foremost about an ethical experience and not a metaphysical experience. **Why is this so important?** Because--despite what the philosophers say--**reasoning is not something equally distributed amongst people, unlike the desire for moral recognition.**

Here we are much closer to Kant than Descartes. Regardless, I fear that Descartes said what he said with a wink. We would never catch such a great philosopher making such a mistake of logic, as it seems that he offers nonsense so incoherent that even my housekeeper would never say. “Common sense is the greatest shared thing in the world:” it’s simply untrue!

Audience: Could one quote Rousseau here, that reasoning is not alone...

Manitou: Perhaps better to quote Pascal who further emphasizes this.

In returning to our examination: if salvation comes through philosophical recognition, then most of the world would be cut off from it. And I have a charge, since this is my profession, to toil in these things, philosophy. It is not correct to say that this is an experience which can be universal. The philosophers are the aristocracy of thought. And we find in these statements, stated very clearly by the great early Greek philosophers, that the opportunity for salvation comes through knowledge, reserved for a select few. At the same time there were the Epicureans, the Stoics, and all the others systems. It must be understood that the status of one’s intellect is unique to each person. Stated more simply: if salvation comes through philosophical knowledge, I would say that not a single person would be saved, not even the great philosophers, since in the end the most important point for them is to ask questions, and they have no answers. It is like the great French philosopher by the name of Alain said: “the genius of philosophy is to make out of every apparent answer a true

question.” We see here a tragic perspective on human fate. If salvation comes through philosophical consciousness then we are all lost. Note that this is not about the emotional state of the world of philosophical thought, that as it is further and further indicted by modern civilization its tragic existentialism intensifies. What I am saying is that the serious philosopher is a tragic philosopher and that even when they are in a state of equanimity it is concealed within the drama of human tragedy: “I am the being which asks the question of my own purpose, knowing that it means nothing.” And at the very least: “as much as my being requires an answer to the question of my own purpose, I cannot accept with certainty the validity of my answer, because I am the one who gives it.” This is a different way to encounter the tragedy of philosophical thought.

We return to our examination: why is it important to uncover that the conclusion, the key to the idea of creation is first of all a moral experience before it is a metaphysical one? Which is to say, if these ideas truly drive salvation, they must be accessible to every person, they must truly be given to universalization. We will say this: everyone can be a child of Abraham, but not everyone can be a child of Plato, Descartes, Kant, Spinoza, Bergson or even Jean-Paul Sartre... you understand my meaning: there are... theories with inner contradictions within them. If the idea is to go towards the realization of salvation, and in the end the movement towards salvation can only be taken seriously if it is accessible to all, and this is found in the beginning of philosophical thought, then this is certainly the project of philosophy. Yet their answer is that it is reserved only for philosophers, and further, there are disagreements between the different schools of philosophy, and when the question of which philosophy is triumphant is asked, Descartes says his, Kant says his, Spinoza says his. You understand the centrality of the issue: what the philosopher says doesn't demonstrate reason--reasoning of how we can arrive at true knowledge--which is universal. While there is a type of reasoning which is like math and speaks a universal language, I am speaking here about philosophical reasoning, meaning reasoning which can contemplate the problem of humanity's purpose. When this reasoning contemplates occurrences, physical reality, it uses a universal language, the language of science. But this reasoning which asks itself about its hopes for the endpoint of human identity, that which is called “philosophical knowledge,” called for example in Spinoza's language “the intellectual love which comes through contemplation of the individual's desires” in the Stoicist or Spinozist perspective, is not the most accessible idea in the world. In contrast to these, moral consciousness is universal, the most accessible idea in the world. Meaning: regardless of my intellectual capabilities, on the level of the desire for good, every person is equal. When that desire is within the mind's grasp, everything possible can come to be.

This is the first examination, and in relation to this issue Kant is much closer to us than Descartes. But I will add that I suspect that Descartes purposefully said such utter nonsense in order for us to understand that he is really proposing the opposite. There are keys for the locks, no one can be apathetic as we read a book as great as *Discourse On The Method* and Descartes says something so nonsensical as “common sense is the greatest

shared thing in the world.” From where does he get this? He certainly knows it is not the case.

And so I want to say that this concept of creation comes about through the Hebrew consciousness in its root, as an ethical experience and not a metaphysical or philosophical experience. This is not the case secondarily, where a person’s moral awareness confirms the certainty of creation, a proof on the level of the mind. That is only secondary. We see this when we come to the concept of Shabbat: it’s as if the world in which we find ourselves asks us a question and we are free to answer it. It is the most basic question: “is there a God or no? Is the world created or no?” The world in which we find ourselves is made in a way that does not allow us to be given an answer. Yet nonetheless we answer, and this is already a judgment since through our answer we reveal who we are. This is to say that human identity is put to the test: “how do you see the world in which you live? Is it created or no?” And in return I reveal who I am as a moral consciousness. Here I arrive at the central investigation: the moral consciousness which responds that it knows that it is created is the consciousness which is committed to moral values. The moral consciousness which responds that it knows it is not created is a consciousness which at its root has rejected the moral problem. It will try to engage it from a different perspective, not as a moral problem.

We will expand on this point a little. I ask you: **to what type of moral attributes does that which causes moral consciousness to know itself as a created thing belong?** In the language of the Rabbis, this primary attribute is that of **humility**. To know that there is a Creator means the recognition that I am not the being which creates its own being and that I receive my existence (and also explains a bit about how Hebrew thought operates phenomenologically, see different perspectives on our customs). This is what is called fear of heaven, the understanding that I have a Creator and I am free not to know that Creator. This is already its own challenge, but its answer doesn’t come from the mind. I can say to you, seeing this challenge as a philosophical guide, that not even one of the proofs of the Creator’s existence will convince the intellect of anyone who is not already convinced of it from a spiritual or moral standpoint. Essentially, these inquiries are based on a certain underlying assumption. This assumption is always moral or spiritual. It comes out very quickly that for the first generations of humanity this was all an act and that moral failings come from human reasoning which does not undergo the minimal effort required to know that I am created. “Created” means I exist only because I receive my existence. This is the foundation of ethics. We can see the lessons the Torah takes from this as it is the foundation of the Torah as law.

In other words, we should not think of Abraham as some brilliant Aristotalian. Rather, Abraham is the basis of moral consciousness. Secondarily, after confirming that our experience is that of a created being through moral understanding, then one can place this idea into the metaphysical or philosophical categories that one believes in. Abraham did

not teach metaphysics or arguments that sought to convince people that there was a God like a philosophical guide would. Abraham the philosopher does not exist.

Audience: ...

Manitou: What I want to say is that on the level of reasoning via the mind's faculties, we are all in the same boat: no one can provide an answer. If we say yes, we know that this is not the mind speaking but rather our belief. And so too regarding the opposite. In light of the difficulty of the intellect to make this determination, there is no answer. A true philosopher would say to you: "there are opinions that prove it and opinions that disprove it, how can we decide??" But this is not a rational determination. What can be determined is the experience as far as it is ethical. Meaning, from the start I combine--in general terms--ethics and religion, and say to you something tremendous, which may even be scandalous at first: **there can be no true moral consciousness unless a person recognizes the existence of the Creator. Everything else is mere mimicry of this.** This is the axiom that we are examining. Why? Because the foundation of ethics stems from the realization that I am created because we are speaking about the identification of my selfhood. What is the question that I really need to answer? The "self" as I know it is called to the problem of moral principles and to the realization of these principles in history, which is the problem of Messianism. **"Who am I," am I an eternal and absolute existence, or am I part of creation? The essence of the conclusion that I am created is the minimum for moral and intellectual improvement of my attributes since I know I am not "the" being. That which misleads me is any self understanding which causes me to think of myself as "the" being, but in truth I know that my existence depends on other things.** In philosophical terms: I am not "esse-ic," "esse" in Latin meaning "on my own," an existence that depends on itself only.

And I say right away that which Jewish experience encapsulates this? The experience of eating. We see that eating is the primary basis for the custom of praising the Creator. Birkat HaMazon is a more important mitzvah than prayer itself, as you are aware. We have proof of this: both men and women are obligated in Birkat HaMazon, whereas only men are obligated in communal tefillah. Therefore Birkat HaMazon is stronger than prayer, since it is from the Torah.

We practically experience this in a phenomenological sense because of the fact that we are created, "that what we ate is God's." My existence depends on someone other than myself. How do I experience this? I need to eat to survive. Practically, through eating, I experience that I have a Creator.

Audience: Why does this begin with Abraham? Adam did not have this moral consciousness?

Manitou: Concisely: of course, Adam understood himself as created, but he nullified it. This is what Abraham returned to us.

I'll go over this again: the experience of our worldview according to the intellect does not allow us to answer this question on an intellectual level. We must take this issue seriously: in terms of pure rationalistic or logical coherence, the proofs that the world is eternal or created are logically equivalent. That which decides is not the intellect but instead a certain sense of moral consciousness. For this reason I said to you that the spiritual/religious experience at its root is an ethical experience.

Audience: What bothers me is that if this moral awareness does not belong to some type of reasoning, then how does it come forward? You said it's not through the intellect, so it must be something else which...

Manitou: I will try to explain, but first of all do your best to put to the side our "education." Meaning, we were educated through the material that comes to us through general culture, from individual learning, familial learning, our temperament etc. Put all of these individual associations on the side because we are not dealing with the beginning of human history. Our viewpoint on the world in which we find ourselves already has all types of different interpretative understandings ascribed to it. The world is not laid bare to us due to this point; rather, we see it already through our thought patterns, and our education causes us to interpret these. This is to say, we have a temperament which stems from our education etc. which causes us when seeing a sunrise to actually see a proof of creation: "it's impossible that the world could be just a collection of impersonal forces" (I took this metaphor from Rousseau)! But on the other hand, when we see what happens in the "pristine forest", where the bigger spider eats the innocent worms, we ask "how can this world have been created by some Creator?" So within our perspective on the world, an equal number of arguments for and against exist, or taken philosophically, and it is a scientific conclusion, that our world is some type of lone actor. But on the other hand there are phenomena in our world which tell us the opposite, that it is not a lone actor, that there is a conductor. These two things seem true and so our reasoning cannot decide. Meaning: to pretend to give an answer to this question on an intellectual level is not really being serious. So what else is left? Reasoning which decides based on the specific experience I am identifying as an ethical one before it is an intellectual one. The consciousness of one who decides "therefore that the world was created" is already informed by their specific spiritual experience, and in the consciousness of one who decided that the world was not created it is already informed by their spiritual experience on the topic. What we must do is identify what type of characteristics each has.