

Six Kinds of Perfection

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

"Have I got the perfect guy for you!" Perfection is what we're after when we search for a marriage partner, a physician or a babysitter. Those who have lived long enough will tell us that the only place to seek perfection is in the quest to perfect oneself. But what is "perfection"? Does it have any objective meaning beyond "what I want" (or think I want)?

This week we conclude -- in the annual Torah reading cycle -- the book of Genesis, also called by our sages "the book of the righteous." Genesis is the story of a series of perfect individuals: Adam (made "in the image of G-d"), Noah (whom the Torah calls "a righteous man"), Abraham (described as "G-d's beloved"), Isaac (the "perfect offering"), Jacob (the ultimate "whole person") and Joseph ("the righteous"). What kind of perfection do these personalities exemplify?

Adam was the original model, the "handiwork of G-d." You can't get more perfect than that. So perfect was he, that he couldn't stand it, and went looking for imperfection -- for something to repair, something to achieve, something to *do*. Still, it's a good thing that we, as a race, started off perfect, if only so that we should understand where our yen for perfection comes from, and that we can, in fact, attain it.

Noah's was a by-the-book perfection. His entire generation was corrupt, but he "walked with G-d". He even tried to get them to improve their ways -- not because it mattered to him what became of them, but because G-d said that that was the right thing to do. He was given precise instructions on how to build the ark, what to put in it, when to go in, and when to get out. Which he did. His was a selfish perfection, the sole aim of which is to be perfect.

Abraham's perfection was the perfection of love. For Abraham, to eat a meal was to share it with every hungry wayfarer; to discover a truth was to teach it to the world. Outward reaching and all-embracing, Abraham's perfection had the self as its center, the entire world as its sphere.

Isaac found perfection in selflessness. Since every human activity or experience is imperfect; perfection lies in the endeavor to reunite with the divine "nothingness" that is one's source. When one is nothing, one is one with the ultimate All.

Jacob achieved perfection through harmony. Through the balance of love and awe, through the melding of assertiveness and self-effacement. He knew the secret of synthesis: that to love indiscriminately is to embrace also evil, but to recoil from engagement is to abandon much that is good; that to assert the self is to turn one's back on G-d, but to eradicate the self is to counteract the Divine purpose. Jacob's life was a tightrope stretched taut from Hebron to Charan to Egypt, belonging to neither yet a stranger to neither, integrating the best of each into the wholeness of his life.

Joseph's perfection was the perfection of challenge. Indeed, can a thing be perfect unless it has been tested, unless it has been stretched to its limits and beyond? Joseph's righteousness was not the righteousness of a meditating shepherd in a tranquil meadow, or a scholar secluded in the "tents of study." It was a righteousness that was taken to prisons and palaces of Egypt, to clash with commerce and politics, to lock horns with wealth and depravity -- and persevere.

Six people, six prototypes. Six ways to be perfect.

17 December | 11 Tevet

Vayechi

Shabbat Begins: 3:37 pm

Shabbat Ends: 4:47 pm