

## **Are we good or bad? Nature of humanity**

YK morning 2022

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Early 20<sup>th</sup> century author, Carolyn Wells wrote: Once upon a time, there lived an elderly millionaire who had four nephews. Desiring to make one of these his heir, he tested their cleverness.

He gave to each a one-hundred-dollar bill, with the request that they hide the bills for a year in the city of New York. If any of them succeeded in finding the hidden bill at the end of the year then the nephew would get a share in the inheritance.

The year being over, the four nephews brought their reports. The first, deeply chagrined, told how he had put his bill in the strongest and surest safety deposit vault, but, alas, clever thieves had broken in and stolen it. The second had put his bill in charge of a tried and true friend. But the friend had proved untrustworthy and had spent the money. The third had hidden his bill in a crevice in the floor of his room, but a mouse had nibbled it to bits to build her nest. The fourth nephew calmly produced his hundred-dollar bill, as crisp and fresh as when it had been given him.

"And where did you hide it?" asked his uncle.

"Too easy!" he grinned. "I stuck it in a hotel Bible."<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever opened up a Bible in a hotel room? More importantly, has the presence of a Bible in any way curtailed one's behavior? Hmmmm...I think not. If the presence of the Holy Scriptures doesn't inspire good behavior, than what does? Is it guilt, shame, a mama's glare? More to the point, is humanity virtuous or are we bad? Left to our own devices, do we choose to do good or evil?

In Christianity, one is taught that all people are born under the stain of evil, i.e., original sin. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "original sin, in Christian doctrine, the condition or state of sin into which each human being is born...Traditionally, the origin has been ascribed to the sin of the first man, Adam, who disobeyed God in eating the forbidden fruit (of knowledge of good and evil) and, in consequence, transmitted his sin and guilt by heredity to his descendants."<sup>2</sup>

If all inherit this original sin according to Christianity, then what does one do about it? The antidote for Christians is belief in Jesus and baptism. But what about us Jews? Do we believe in original sin or that we are born to be good or evil? Well, Moses Maimonides, our famous Jewish theologian in the Middle Ages, readily answers this question. He writes in the Mishneh Torah, "A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools among the gentiles and the

majority of the undeveloped among Israel that, at the time of man's creation, God decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly], he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him toward either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses."<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides' teaching is an excellent one for the High Holy Days and throughout the year because he reminds us that we make the choice to do good or evil over and over again. This is very much in alignment with Jewish teachings over the millennia. We never say that the devil made me do it but rather it's the opposite. Our tradition advocates for personal responsibility no matter our parentage, upbringing, or life circumstances.

More specifically, in Judaism, we are taught that everyone has two inclinations a *yetzer ha tov*, an inclination to do good, and *yetzer hara*, an inclination to do evil. Every single one of us has both, no one is exempt. A baby only a few days old is neither good nor bad but has two inclinations just like you and me. It's what we do with it. Fascinatingly, there is a Talmudic teaching that states: the greater the man, the greater his *yetzer hara*, *evil inclination*.<sup>4</sup> This is why celebrities, politicians, athletes, and people of great wealth can be tempted to do things that are wrong because their egos are large and there are ample opportunities to get away with things.

Human beings are complicated and there's a great Midrash, rabbinical interpretation, about the angels of God arguing about whether human beings should be created or not. "Rabbi Simon said, 'when the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, 'Let him be created,' while others urged, 'Let him not be created.' Thus it is written, Love and Truth fought together... Love said, 'Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love'; Truth said, 'Let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood'; Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds'; Peace said, 'Let him not be created, because he is full of strife.' What did God do? He took truth and cast it to the ground. Said the ministering angels before the Holy One..."Sovereign of the universe! What do you despise your seal? Let truth arise from the earth!"

God literally has to set the truth aside in order to create human beings but goes even further. The Midrash continues, "Rabbis said in the name of Rabbi Hanina...as it is written, "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good. (Gen. 1:31) i.e., and behold Adam was good. R Huna the Elder of Sepphoris said, 'While the ministering angels were disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be he, created him. Said God to them: "What can you avail? Man has already been made!"'<sup>5</sup>

It's a great moment even as the angels are disputing whether we should be created, God just does it. It's as though I as the wife ask my husband what color he would like us to paint the bedroom. He responds, "beige." I answer, "Oops! Too late, I already painted it purple!" He grumbles under his breath, "Happy wife, happy life." From the very beginning, there's uncertainty about our nature and whether we should come into existence. God, however, takes a leap of faith and we come into being, the complicated living creatures that we are. Even fifteen hundred years ago, our ancestors wrestled with human nature, just like we do today. And so, I ask you, do you believe people are prone to be good or do you believe we can just as easily be evil?

I read an interesting book this year called, Humankind, a Hopeful History by Rutger Bregman. Bregman argues that humanity is better than we give ourselves credit for. He points out in crises and natural disasters people go out of their way to help a neighbor or a stranger. He draws off of examples from hurricane Katrina, Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, and even in war time bombings to argue that, "There is a persistent myth that by their very nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic. It's what Dutch biologist Frans de Wall likes to call *vener* theory: the notion that civilization is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the merest provocation. In actuality, the opposite is true. It's when crisis hits- when the bombs fall or the floodwaters rise-that we humans become our best selves."<sup>6</sup>

Why do people so readily believe that humanity is so bad? One is how our news cycles work. Stories on disasters, violence, attacks, and crime gets people's attention and so there is going to be more coverage about these kinds of things. Bregman states that what makes news, news, is the exceptional stories that captivates people's attention. When things are going well, the headlines rarely point out that the quality of people's lives have increased, that planes are quite a safe means of travel, or that breast cancer is on the decline. You aren't going to see a headline of how a person saved his neighbor but you will hear if that person robs his neighbor.

Bregman points out that humans are susceptible to the doom and gloom because we have a negativity bias.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps biologically we are going to get more excited by a snake that could kill us versus eating more vegetables for a longer life. There's also the availability bias. "If we can easily recall examples of a given thing, we assume that thing is relatively common."<sup>8</sup> And so, we will believe that our child is at risk of being kidnapped or the plane has a good likelihood of crashing only because any account sticks in our memory. And so, as I have advocated before, we should at times turn off the news, social media, and more.

How many of you read Lord of the Flies by William Golding? A plane goes down leaving British school boys marooned on an island in the Pacific. While at first they work together, it shortly descends into a free for all where they devolve into beasts. Weeks later, three of the children are dead and one of the boys, Ralph weeps about the loss of innocence.<sup>9</sup> This book

written in 1951 was to demonstrate how even children without the constraints of society can quickly become murderous self-absorbed beings. While it never happened, this book became a self-reinforcing story about the dreadful nature of humans. Bregman points out that the author himself was a man plagued by alcoholism and depression and who once wrote, "I have always understood the Nazis," Golding confessed, 'because I am of that sort by nature.'<sup>10</sup>

Wondering how would boys really act if they were shipwrecked on an island got Bregman investigating until he came across a fascinating story from 1965. Six boys from Tongo were on a fishing trip and suddenly got caught up in a storm. They drifted for eight days without food or water. They shared the collected rainwater and tried catching fish. Their boat crashed on a deserted island. Instead of competing with each other, though, the boys organized themselves to create a garden, hollowed out a tree trunk for rainwater, made a chicken pen, and even a makeshift gym. They worked in teams and ended their days with song and prayer. When one of the boys fell off a cliff and broke his leg, the other boys rescued him and set his leg using sticks. It was Sept 11, 1966, fifteen months later, they were rescued. Not only had the boy's leg perfectly healed but the health of the rest of boys was in good condition. They became live long friends. You can do an internet search on Tongan Castaways. It's too bad Golding didn't write an updated novel based on this true story.<sup>11</sup>

Underlining whether our nature tends towards the good or evil, Bregman compares the differing ideas of seventeenth century English philosopher Hobbes and eighteenth century French philosopher Rousseau. He writes, "In one corner is Hobbes: the pessimist who would have us believe in the wickedness of human nature. The man who asserted that civil society alone could save us from our baser instincts. In the other corner, Rousseau; the man who declared that in our heart of hearts we're all good."<sup>12</sup> Bregman contends that Rousseau believed that humanity was kinder and more compassionate before the days of civilization.<sup>13</sup>

I don't really abide by the dichotomy that Bregman asserts and I find that he over romanticizes prehistoric man and his morals. For the fun of it, I wrote to Dr. Jared Diamond, author of Guns, Germs, and Steel, an excellent anthropological work about why different people progressed at differing rates around the globe. He wrote me that, "As for the belief that civilization played a corrupting role in the nature of human beings, you should see how women are treated in traditional societies in New Guinea and elsewhere. Commonly, they are sold in marriage without their consent."

Putting aside judgements on prehistoric society as opposed to today, I do find the author's take on human nature to have credibility. He argues that we are social creatures and our ability to cooperate has helped us get through challenging times over the millennia. He pokes holes in some of the psychological studies that came out of the 1950's and 1960's that purported to demonstrate how we are predisposed to do evil. For example, the Stanford prison experiment in

1971, allegedly demonstrates how ordinary students could morph into sadists by being selected as guards over other prisoners. Using information from the author of the experiment, Zimbardo, Bregman shows that that student guards didn't become vicious on their own but rather were coached to act in the way that they did. And when some of them acted compassionately towards the prisoners, Zimbardo and his team acted with frustration towards them. In essence, Zimbardo influenced the experiment to get the results that he was looking for. In disputing the findings of not only the Stanford prisoner experiment, but also the Stanley Milgram's shock experiments, Bregman makes the argument that humanity may be better than we realized. Ultimately, he argues, that the belief that humanity is selfish and evil is a self-fulfilling prophecy. He writes, "We are what we believe. We find what we go looking for...If we believe most people can't be trusted, that's how we'll treat each other, to everyone's detriment."<sup>14</sup>

I find Rutger Bregman's take refreshing and demonstrably true in many of our day to day lives. If we believe our neighbor will betray us, that the person sitting next to us wants to take advantage of us, the seller will cheat us, and our friend will hurt us, we will act guarded, suspicious, and less likely to connect. Now, I am not saying to be naïve and fall for the latest email or messaging scam but I am saying that perhaps we can assume that the people we regularly come into contact with are good people. Meaning, they care, try to do what is right, and they want to be kind and helpful.

Do you ever look around and notice people nearby at a grocery store, restaurant, park, or synagogue? When I stop racing around and just observe others, I find people genuinely acting in caring and considerate ways. Yes, there can be that one boorish person but notice the rest of the people. The times when they let you go ahead of them because you have fewer things in your cart, helping someone reach a product on a high shelf, or making sure someone wobbly doesn't fall. Perhaps there is value to opening our hearts and assuming the best in those around us. Quite simply, if we believe that other people are genuinely good, we will act in a way that unconsciously brings out the best in them.

Judaism teaches that we all have two inclinations, an inclination to do good and an inclination to do bad. None of us are born to be evil. We can each make choices along the journey of our lives. As we strive to be the best that we can be, may we strive to view other people more favorably. May we be able to give others the benefit of the doubt and come to see that there are many good and kind people. Just look around the sanctuary or if you are home, peer out at your neighbors. How good it is that humankind was created. How lucky are we to be alive. And may we discover more goodness in our fellow human beings in the year ahead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oldfashionedamericanhumor.com/human-nature-jokes.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/original-sin>

### **3 Maimonides Mishneh Torah 5:2**

4 Succot 52a

5 Gen Rabba 8:5

Rabbi Simon said, When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, ‘Let him be created,’ while others urged, ‘Let him not be created.’ Thus it is written, Love and Truth fought together... Love said, ‘Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love’; Truth said, ‘Let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood’; Righteousness said, ‘Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds’; Peace said, ‘Let him not be created, because he is full of strife.’ What did God do? He took truth and cast it to the ground. Said the ministering angels before the Holy One...”Sovereign of the universe! What do you despise your seal? Let truth arise from the earth! ....

Rabbis said in the name of Rabbi Hanina that Me’od (very) identical with Adam as it is written, “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good. (Gen. 1:31) i.e. and behold Adam was good.

R Huna the Elder of Sepphoris said, While the ministering angels were disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be he, created him. Said He to them: “What can you avail? Man has already been made!”

### **6 Humankind, A Hopeful History pg. 4**

7 “ “ pg. 14

8 “ “ pg. 15

9 “ “ pg. 22-23

10 “ “ pg. 25

11 “ “ <https://people.com/human-interest/inside-real-life-lord-of-the-flies-survival-of-6-tongan-boys-54-years-ago/>

12 “ “ pg. 44

13 pg. 46

14 “ “ pg. 9