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THE LIMITS OF PERFECTION

There is one episode of the late, great television series "The Twilight Zone" that I saw as a child that has stayed with me throughout the years.

A gangster dies. When he arrives at the heavenly gates he is surprised to be welcomed by an elegant man in a white suit. The man greets him cordially and ushers him into his "new home."

The gangster is stunned to find himself in beautiful luxurious surroundings. There is exquisite art on the wall, tasteful furniture in the rooms, and a bevy of beautiful women lined up to serve him.

No sooner does he sit down than a waiter brings him a glass of champagne. Before he realizes that he is hungry, dinner is served. Even the television changes channels without his assistance. Every whim, every desire, every thought, is brought to fruition before he asks. He basks contentedly in the luxury.

As the days pass he becomes bored and frustrated. There is literally nothing for him to do, nothing he *can* do. There is no stimulation, no challenge. He cannot even get himself a glass of water. It is brought to him in a crystal goblet on a silver tray even before he realizes he is thirsty.

As time goes by he becomes more restless and unhappy. He yearns for some excitement, some challenge, some way to act, to do something - anything - before it is done for him.

Desperate, he asks to speak to the man in charge, the one who greeted him at the gate.

The gangster tells him, "It's very beautiful here and I appreciate the luxury, but I am bored and unchallenged. I feel completely useless. I need stimulation. I want to do things for myself. I don't want to be served any more. If you don't mind, I would like go to the other place."

"The other place?" asks the man. "What do you mean?"

"Well," says the gangster, "if it is OK with you, I would like to go to hell."

The man at the gate laughs uproariously. He goes on and on. He can't stop himself. Finally he gets a grip and says to the gangster: "You want to go to the 'other place?' You want to go to hell? Where do you think you are?"

One of the goals of Jewish living is *Tikun Olam* - the perfecting of the world. We strive to impress this Jewish value upon our children, our community, and ourselves.

One of the goals of life is to leave this world a better place than we found it.

We also believe that God is perfect and that God created the world.. So why didn't a perfect God create a perfect world? We must conclude that the world's imperfection must be part of God's plan. God did not hand everything to us neat, clean, and on a silver platter. God wanted us to become God's partners in perfecting the world.

Even in the paradise of Eden, in the days of Adam and Eve, Creation did not take care of itself. The Book of Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve were put in the Garden of Eden לעבדה ולשמרה to till and tend the soil. From the beginning human beings were God's partner in nurturing Creation. It is our duty is to help complete that which God

began.

However, the pain and suffering in the world, the war, poverty, sickness and disease, the racism, sexism, and paucity of human rights relentlessly overwhelm our human efforts to do good and be good. It is not fair that we, mere mortals, have been handed such a huge task. I think that it is fair to suggest that most of us believe that God, as Senior Partner, should be doing more than God is. God should be taking greater responsibility for cleaning up the mess. After all, God had a hand in making it!

According to traditional Jewish thought, God eventually will. *Tikun Olam*, the Perfection of the World, is, in reality, a super human task and it requires a super human personality to make it happen. One day a *Mashiach*, a Messiah, God's chosen and anointed one, will lead the forces of goodness and Godliness against the forces of evil and despair, and establish a new order of earthly peace and harmony.

לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה

“Nation will no longer lift up sword against nation nor will we learn war anymore.” (Is. 2:4) The lion shall lie down with the lamb, and none shall be afraid.

This dream of a divine and almost supernatural solution to fixing a malfunctioning world has given many Jews and Christians the hope and courage to persevere in the face of adversity. They have the knowledge and faith that the existential condition of humanity is not doomed to its current state, but rather one day humanity will be divinely redeemed and God's love and law will govern the land.

But what will such a 'perfect' world look like? As you might expect, Jewish

tradition offers several rather than one conclusive answer.

Some say that the World to Come will be much like this one, except that people will live in peace. Others see the World to Come as one in which humans will neither eat nor drink nor work, but spend their days studying Torah.

But one thing almost all Jewish theories of the afterlife have in common is that human beings will not be idle. The World to Come, as envisioned by our sages, is not one gigantic Club Med vacation. Human beings will still have obligations, tasks, and goals to strive towards, and give our “eternal” lives “eternal” purpose.

Our humanity requires us be active, physically and intellectually. None of us would be happy to live in a “perfect world,” if “perfect” meant that life would be homogeneous, uneventful, and invariably predictable. Life would be boring and meaningless if there were no victories to savor or challenges to overcome, no goals to achieve, no accomplishments to celebrate, no hills, and no valleys. As was suggested by the Twilight Zone episode I shared with you, a world without challenge, aspiration, possibility, and even failure, would be hell on earth.

But I want to take this a step further. Messianic expectations aside, I not only think that perfection is undesirable, I don't even think that it is possible. I believe that God always intends there to be elements of uncertainty in the world. God never wanted us to understand everything around us, everything that happens to us, or to be able to predict with absolute certainty the outcome of every action. Indeed, uncertainty is built into the the universe that God created.

This is contrary to what most of us think. We want guarantees and absolutes. We

believe that with enough study, investigation, and experimentation, human beings will always be able to arrive at an absolute “Truth.”

Our generation has great faith in science. Science is a discipline in which we believe we can find absolutes. Two + two will always equal four, and light will always travel at 186,000 miles a second.

But even scientists admit that current scientific knowledge is, and may always be, incomplete and imperfect.

Last year many of you may have seen a movie about the eminent physicist Steven Hawking called “The Theory of Everything.” The title comes from Hawking’s and others’ search for a complete, consistent, unified, and perfect explanation of how the universe was created and functions. A major stumbling block scientists have encountered, comes from a discipline known as quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics attempts to explain how particles function on the subatomic level.

As explained by Kitty Ferguson in her book, “The Fire in the Equations: Science, Religion and the Search for God,”

“Early in the century scientists thought atoms were something like miniature solar systems with electrons orbiting the nucleus as predictably as planets orbit the sun...

[But] “As far as anyone has been able to discover, unlike a planet in a solar system, an electron never has a definite *position* AND a definite *momentum* at the same time. We may measure very precisely the position of a particle, but we cannot at the same time measure very precisely its momentum. Or we may choose to measure its momentum very precisely, but we cannot at the same time precisely measure its position. This is the **Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal** of quantum physics. No one

has been able to find a way around it. There probably is none.” (Fire in the Equations, 13 & 14.)

So even for scientists there are things which cannot be analyzed and understood completely, things which will remain unknowable. Ultimately, our knowledge of the universe is flawed, uncertain, incomplete, and imperfect.

I would further suggest that perfection is so unnatural that perfection, in and of itself, it is a flaw.

One of Broadway's most enduring musicals is *Les Miserables*. If you did not see it on Broadway, perhaps you saw the movie a couple of years ago. It is based on a nineteenth century novel by author Victor Hugo. *Les Miserable's* villain is a policeman, Inspector Javert. Inspector Javert believes that the law is supreme, and the law must be followed perfectly for justice to prevail.

This is what Hugo wrote about Javert's absolute devotion to the law, “Probity, sincerity, candor, conviction, the idea of duty, are things that, when in error, can turn hideous...Nothing could be more poignant and terrible than this face, which revealed what might be called all the evil of good.” (Signet paperback, 291)

Why did Javert personify for Hugo, “the evil of the good?” He was correct in his dedication to the law. It is law that helps keep society orderly and just. But Javert's absolute allegiance to the law left no room for mercy or compassion, which Jean Valjean, through *Teshuva*, had earned and so richly deserved.

Our tradition tells us that even God's relationship to us must, by design, be malleable for humanity to exist.

We learn this from the following *Midrash* about Abraham's argument with God about his plan to destroy the entire city of Sodom. Abraham says to God,

אם עולם אתה מבקש אין דין ואם דין אין עולם

“If you want a world, you cannot have absolute justice, because if you have absolute justice, the world will not be able to exist.”

In response to Abraham's arguments, God allowed Lot and his family to escape.

Nor, for that matter could the world exist if it were governed by absolute mercy. No one would fear committing any crime or doing any evil if people knew they would also be reprieved from punishment.

Our world could not exist if it were governed by either perfect justice or perfect mercy. Both of these two opposing considerations are a prerequisite for human existence. As God looks at us today, God's judgement of us vacillates between the poles of justice and mercy.

The universe is imperfect by design. It will never function in an absolutely orderly and predictable way. There will always be elements of uncertainty, things we cannot foresee nor control.

It's the same with life. Our lives will never be perfect. There will always be things we cannot foresee or control. But then again, if we could, we would soon become bored, frustrated, and useless. We wouldn't have much fun. Our days, weeks, and years would be too predictable, too redundant, and a curse, rather than a blessing.

So if God's world was never meant to be a perfect place, how are we to

understand the concept *Tikun Ha-Olam* - the perfection of the world ...if the world is not constructed in a way that makes it capable of being perfected?

Again, Messianic considerations aside, we must see *Tikun Ha-Olam*, the ultimate perfection of the world, only as a theoretical goal. Perfection is a target toward which we may aim, but it is also one that we will never reach. We best translate *Tikun Ha-Olam* not as *perfecting* the world, but rather as *improving* the world. Our obligation is to leave the world a kinder, happier, and fairer place than where we found it, not to make it perfect.

We must recognize and accept the tension that will always exist between an idealized and an actualized society, while at the same time never giving up the struggle to turn the former into the latter.

There is another lesson we may draw from our knowledge that God's world was never meant to be a perfect place: we human beings were never meant to be, and never will be, perfect creatures.

No matter how hard we try to change, to admit our faults, to correct our failings, and to redirect their lives, we will never fully succeed in our quest. We will always have faults, retain bad habits, ignore lessons we should have learned, and wound, hurt, and cause pain to others.

Try as we may to do *Teshuva* and change our lives for the better, we will continue to take two steps forward and one step back in our quest to become kinder and more loving human beings. Try as we may to not cause pain or harm, there will always be things we do or say that will cause pain and distress to others. Not because we want

to, but because we are human.

We stand before God today and pray to the *Ribono shel Olam* to accept our weaknesses and forgive our sins. This is a great *Chutzpah* unless we are also willing to grant acceptance and forgiveness to those whom have hurt us.

We must learn to recognize our neighbors' humanity, their frustration, and their pain. We must forgive them their foibles and offenses, even those they commit over and over again, even those things which bring us our greatest pain. We must reach out to our brothers and sisters, to all of God's children with full souls and full hearts in forgiveness, acceptance, and love.

And finally: if God's world was never meant to be a perfect place, and that those around us will never be perfect, it also means that we will never be perfect, as well. We will continue our bad habits, make the same mistakes, and hurt those we love. Despite our best efforts, we will fail to become the kind of human being we want to be, and fail to always be a blessing to others. Every year we will come back here again, asking forgiveness from those we have wronged and from the *Ribono shel Olam*.

As God forgives us, so must we forgive ourselves. Let us not judge ourselves too harshly when we don't achieve our goals or realize our dreams, when we just can't seem to get it right, or when we face failure.

We accept our humanity not in order to make excuses for ourselves, but to better enable us to pick ourselves up, brush off our embarrassment, assuage our shame and pride, and start all over again.

Because even if we will never be perfect, we can certainly be better tomorrow than we are today.