

An Imperfect Game in an Imperfect World

Parashat Pinchas, Numbers, Chapters 25-30 | July 21, 2022

Let us travel back to 2010, to a baseball game whose theological significance should be of interest to us. Peggy Noonan, in a wonderful column in the *Wall Street Journal*, described the scene:

Comerica Park in Detroit, the Tigers vs. the Cleveland Indians, and on the mound is Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga, 28. In his brief Major League career, he has not pitched a complete game, never mind a perfect one but here he is. He's retired 26 straight batters. It's two outs in the ninth with just one to go, one out between him and history. Indians shortstop Jason Donald is at the plate. Donald hits a grounder between first and second. Miguel Cabrera, the Tigers first baseman, fields it as Galarraga sprints to first. The pitcher takes the throw from Cabrera and steps on the base. Donald crosses it just a step later. Galarraga gets this look of joy. And the umpire blows it. He calls Donald safe. Everyone is shocked.

Thus, a perfect game was ruined. Or was it? Could it be that what occurred in the face of this imperfection was actually more perfect, and that this in turn tells us something profound about the nature of life?

In Numbers, chapter 28, we read of the diverse offerings that were brought on behalf of Israel and which changed depending on the moment in time. We have, in other words, the Temple rituals that reflect the cycles of the Jewish calendar. Let us focus carefully on the offering that is brought twice a day, every day, known as the “*korban tamid*,” or if you will, the “offering of constancy”:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying,

Command the children of Israel, and say

unto them, My offering of food offered unto the fire, of a sweet savor unto me, shall ye observe to offer unto me in its due season.

And thou shalt say unto them, This is the offering made by fire which ye shall bring unto the Lord; male lambs of the first year without blemish, two every day for a continual burnt offering.

The one lamb shalt thou offer in the morning, and the other lamb shalt thou offer at dusk;

And the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour for a meal offering, mingled with a fourth part of a hin of beaten oil. (Numbers 28:1-5)

One lamb in the morning and one before evening every day: that is the *tamid*. But the Torah goes on to tell us that on the Sabbath, another offering, known traditionally as the “*musaf*,” or “addition,” is added in honor of the day:

And on the sabbath day, two male lambs of the first year without blemish, and two tenth parts of an ephah of fine flour for a meal offering, mingled with oil, and the wine offering thereof. (Numbers 28:9)

If you do the math, you will note a fact pointed out by the great medieval Sephardic sage Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet: that the offering of the Sabbath is double that of the daily offering. Two lambs daily; on Shabbat, another two. This, as the great rabbi noted, links to a larger theme of doubling in honor of the Sabbath. Israel in the desert received twice as much manna every Friday in advance of the Sabbath. Jews remember this today every week by blessing several times over two loaves of bread.

The doubling in honor of the Sabbath, perhaps, is meant to highlight the munificence of God, for it is on the Sabbath that we recall creation and what was written in Genesis as the beginning of the seventh day arrived: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” The Sabbath, through the additional offering, marks the goodness of God and the goodness of what God made.

Yet, we know that the creation of God, this earthly existence, is not perfect, and that the human beings God made are capable of profound imperfection. We can see this from the sixth day of creation, when Genesis does not conclude with the usual mantra, “And God saw that it was good.” The reason is obvious: on the sixth day humanity was created, and the phrase is inappropriate, because we are free and, therefore, not necessarily good. But if humanity, the crowning of creation and its ultimate purpose, is not necessarily good, if sin is possible and even likely, if human life is therefore full of disappointment, how can creation conclude before the Sabbath with the statement that God saw all he had made, and it was very good?

The answer, perhaps, is that it is precisely the imperfection in man and creation that in the end allows for certain forms of goodness that would not otherwise exist; or as Yogi Berra once said, “If the world was perfect, it wouldn’t be.”

In a world without sin and failure, there would be no opportunity for repentance, grace, or forgiveness. In a world without the capacity for wrongdoing, there would be little heroism.

It is the imperfection of the world that allows for certain embodiments of moral greatness to come to the fore. This, in turn, brings us to the next series of offerings, which are brought in celebration of *Rosh Chodesh*, the new moon, the beginning of the monthly cycle that is at the heart of the Jewish lunar calendar. The reappearance of the new moon in the darkness of night is taken by Jews as a symbol of renewal, and since biblical times, it has been marked as a joyous day. A number of offerings are brought to mark *Rosh Chodesh*, but surprisingly, the last of them is the following:

And one male goat for a chatat offering unto the Lord, it shall be offered beside the continual burnt offering and the drink offering thereof. (Numbers 28:15)

A *chatat*, or purification offering, is usually brought to atone for sin. Why would a marking of sin or impurity in the world honor the day of the new moon? Perhaps because at that moment, we are meant to reflect on the goodness that can emerge in the face of imperfection.

Let us ponder the aesthetic experiences of the onset of *Shabbat* on the one hand, and the new moon on the other. The Sabbath begins with the glorious sunset when we feel the goodness of God’s creation, but the light of the new moon is seen amidst profound darkness. The darkness is a reminder of the incredibly profound imperfections in existence; but the light of the new moon is seen more prominently precisely because of this very same darkness. Jews see in that small light a symbol of the profound capacity of human beings to serve as moral beacons in the face of imperfection. Thus, on the Sabbath, when our focus is on the goodness of creation, there is no *chatat* offering. But on *Rosh Chodesh*, the beginning of the month, the new moon, we celebrate something else: the fact that in an imperfect world, the Almighty relies on us to serve as His partners in the creation of further goodness. Or in Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s words, we mark at the moment of the new moon the imperfection of the world:

The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator...

Thus does the imperfect game in Detroit serve as a metaphor for our theme of goodness in the face of imperfection. When Armando Galarraga’s perfect game was ruined by the umpire, Jim Joyce, one could have imagined the anger that might have erupted. But Peggy Noonan described what happened next:

When Galarraga hears the call, he looks puzzled, surprised. But he’s

composed and calm, and he smiles, as if accepting fate. Others run to the ump and begin to yell, but Galarraga just walks back to the mound to finish the job. Which he does, grounding out the next batter. The game is over.

The umpire, Jim Joyce, 54, left the field and watches the videotape. He saw that he'd made a mistake and took immediate responsibility. He went straight to the clubhouse where he personally apologized to Galarraga...

Galarraga told reporters he felt worse for Joyce than he felt for himself. At first, reacting to the game in the clubhouse, he'd criticized Joyce. But after Joyce apologized, Galarraga said, "You don't see an umpire after the game come out and say 'Hey, let me tell you I'm sorry.'" He said, "He felt really bad." He noted Joyce had come straight over as soon as he knew he'd made the wrong call.

What was sweet and surprising was that all the principals in the story comported themselves as fully formed adults, with patience, grace and dignity. And in doing so, Galarraga and Joyce showed kids How to Do It.

A lot of adults don't teach kids this now, because the adults themselves don't know how to do it. There's a mentoring gap, an instruction gap in our country. We don't put forward a template because we don't know the template...

Galarraga and Joyce couldn't have known it when they went to work Wednesday, but they were going to show children in an unforgettable way that a victim of injustice can react with compassion, and a person who makes a mistake can admit and declare it.

An imperfect game allowed for the instantiation of greater moral perfection. Thus does an umpire's ruling that was less than good, allow for the exhibition of human behavior that is very good.

Noonan describes how on the next day, when the two teams played again,

Armando Galarraga got a standing ovation. In a small masterpiece of public relations, Detroit's own General Motors gave him a brand new red Corvette. Galarraga brought out the lineup card and gave it to the umpire—Jim Joyce, who had been offered the day off but chose to work.

Fans came with signs that said, "It was perfect."

At certain moments in the year, the Jewish calendar remind us of a creation by a wholly good God Who gave us an imperfect world, a world which in turn allows for acts of human goodness that are celebrated at every new moon.

Discussion Questions:

1. If the perfect God desired to create a world with imperfect humans, how should we understand the concept of *imatatio Dei*—the mandate for mankind to strive to be like the Almighty?
2. What are some concrete ways that Jewish rituals and practices inculcate the importance of patience, forgiveness, and dignity in the face of failure and imperfection?

Bible365Podcast.com

This pamphlet may contain Divrei Torah and may contain Sheimot - Please dispose of accordingly