

Parashat Shemot: Why Be Good?

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

Shemot 2:2	
וַתֵּהָרָא אִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא וַתְּצַפְּנֵהוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה יָרָחִים:	The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.

1. Moshe's Name Was *Tov* ("Good")

Bavli Sotah 12a	
<p>"וַתֵּרָא אוֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא". תַּנְיָא, רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר: "טוֹב" שְׁמוֹ. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אָמַר: "טוֹבִיָּה" שְׁמוֹ. רַבִּי נְחֵמְיָה אָמַר: הֵגוֹן לְנִבְיָאוֹת. אַחֲרִים אָמְרִים: נֹלַד כְּשֶׁהוּא מְהוּל. וְחֻכְמִים אָמְרִים: בְּשָׁעָה שְׁנוּלֵד מִשָּׂה, נִתְמַלֵּא הַבֵּית כּוֹלּוֹ אֹר. כְּתִיב הָכָא: "וַתֵּרָא אוֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא", וְכִתִּיב הֵתָם: "וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹר כִּי טוֹב".</p>	<p>"And the woman conceived, and bore a son; and when she saw him that he was a goodly [tov] child, she hid him three months" (Exodus 2:2). It is taught in a <i>baraita</i> that Rabbi Meir says: "Tov" is his, Moses', real name, as it was given to him by his parents when he was born. Rabbi Yehuda says: His name was Toviya. Rabbi Nehemya says: They said he was good because they saw that he was fit for prophecy. Others say: They said he was good because he was born when he was already circumcised. And the Rabbis say: At the time when Moses was born, the entire house was filled with light, as it is written here: "And when she saw him that he was a goodly [tov] child," and it is written there: "And God saw the light, that it was good [tov]" (Genesis 1:4).</p>

Bavli Menahot 53b	
<p>יָבֵא טוֹב וְיִקְבֹּל טוֹב מִטוֹב לְטוֹבִים. יָבֵא טוֹב – זֶה מִשָּׂה, דְּכִתְיִב: "וַתֵּרָא אוֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא". וְיִקְבֹּל טוֹב – זֶה תּוֹרָה, דְּכִתְיִב: "כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נִתַּתִּי לָכֶם". מִטוֹב – זֶה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, דְּכִתְיִב: "טוֹב ה' לָכֹל". לְטוֹבִים – אֵלּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, דְּכִתְיִב: "הִטִּיבָה ה' לְטוֹבִים".</p>	<p>Rabbi Ezra stated another, similar homily: Let the good one come and receive the good from the Good for the good ones. He explained: Let the good one come; this good is Moses, as it is written about him: "And when she saw him that he was a goodly child" (Exodus 2:2). And receive the good; this good is the Torah, as it is written about the Torah: "For I give you a good doctrine; do not forsake my Torah" (Proverbs 4:2). From the Good; this is referring to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written: "The Lord is good to all" (Psalms 145:9). For the good ones; these good ones are the Jews, as it is written with regard to them: "Do good, Lord, to the good ones" (Psalms 125:4).</p>

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

2. Good Versus Goodly

Ramban on Shemot 2:2	
<p>וַתֵּרָא אֹתוֹ כִּי טוֹב הוּא וַתְּצַפְּנֵהוּ יְדוּעַ כִּי כָל הַנָּשִׁים אוֹהֲבוֹת אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם, יָפִים וְשְׂאִינִם יָפִים, וְכָלֵנָה תְּצַפְּנֵנָה אוֹתָן בְּכָל יְכָלָתָן, וְאִין צָרָה לְטַעֲנָה כִּי טוֹב הוּא. אֲבָל פְּרוֹשׁ הַטּוֹבָה הַזֹּאת, שֶׁרָאֲתָה בּוֹ טוֹב מִחֲדָשׁ וְחִשְׁבָּה כִּי יֵאָרֵעַ בּוֹ נֶס וְיִנָּצַל, וְלִכְּנֹן נִתְּנָה אֶל לְבָהּ וְחִשְׁבָּה מַחְשְׁבוֹת בְּעֵינֶיהָ, וְכִאֲשֶׁר רָאֲתָה שֶׁלֹּא יִכָּלֶה עוֹד לְהַצְפִּינוּ חִשְׁבָּה שֶׁיִּנָּצַל בְּתַחבּוּלָה אַחֲרֵת וְעָשְׂתָה לוֹ תֵּבַת גִּמָּא וְאַחֲתוֹ נִצְבֶּת מִרְחוֹק שֶׁלֹּא יִכִּירוּ בָּהּ, לְדַעַת מֶה יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ וְכָל זֶה סִיּוּעַ לְדַבְּרֵי רַבּוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁדָּרְשׁוּ כִּי טוֹב הוּא, שֶׁנִּתְמַלֵּא כָּל הַבַּיִת אוֹרָה (סוֹטָה יב), וְלִמָּה שֶׁאֲמָרוּ שֶׁהִיְתָה מְרִים מִתְנַבֵּאת עֲתִידָה אִמִּי שֶׁתֵּלֵד בֵּן שְׂמוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל (שם):</p>	<p>When she saw that he was goodly, she hid him. It is a known fact that all mothers love their children, goodly or ungoodly, and all of them would hide them [from harm] with all their might. There is thus no need for Scripture to explain <i>that he was goodly</i>. But the meaning of this goodness is that she saw in him some unique quality which, in her opinion, foreshadowed that a miracle would happen to him and he would be saved. Therefore, she applied herself and thought of ways to save him. When she saw that she could hide him no longer, she thought of saving him by another device. She made him an ark of bulrushes [and put him among the reeds at the side of the river], and his sister placed herself at a distance — so that the Egyptians would not recognize her — <i>to know what would be done to him</i>. All this is support for the words of our Rabbis who expounded, “<i>That he was goodly</i>, namely, that the whole house became filled with light,” and for what the Rabbis have said, i.e., that Miriam prophesied, “Mother is destined to bear a son who will deliver Israel.”</p>

Seforno on Shemot 2:2	
<p>כִּי טוֹב הוּא. יָפֶה, כָּמוֹ "כִּי טוֹבֵת הָנָה" (בראשית ו:ב). רָאֲתָהּ יָפֶה יוֹתֵר מִמָּה שֶׁהָיָה מְרָגֵל, וְחִשְׁבָּה שֶׁזֶה הָיָה לְתַכְלִית מְכוֹן מֵאֵת יוֹצְרוֹ, כִּי אִמָּנָם יָפִי הַתְּבִנִּית יוֹרָה עַל טוֹב מִזֵּג הַחֲמֹר וְשִׁלְמוֹת הַכֹּחַ הַמְצִיָּר.</p>	<p>The word טוב may be understood as meaning the same as “handsome, beautiful,” the same meaning as in Genesis 6,2 הָנָה כִּי טוֹבוֹת הָנָה, “that they were beautiful.” The word describes something unusually handsome or beautiful. Yocheved thought that this was an omen, a sign from the Creator, telling her that a beautiful exterior encloses an equally beautiful personality.</p>

3. Why Be Good?

Nick Hornby, <i>How To Be Good</i> , pages 223-224	
<p>You'd think that my choice of profession would in itself be enough to absolve me from all worries on that score; you'd think that even a bad doctor on a bad day would feel better than a good drug dealer on a good day, but I suspect that this might not be true. I suspect that drug dealers have days when everything clicks, and it's all buzz buzz buzz, and they chalk off their jobs one by one, and they return home with a sense of accomplishment.</p>	
Philip Roth, <i>When She Was Good</i> , page 271	
<p>And was that not bound to happen? Eventually, must not the truth prevail? Oh, it had not been in vain then that she had sacrificed and struggled! Oh yes, of course! If you know you are in the right, if you do not weaken or falter, if despite everything thrown up against you, despite every hardship, every pain, you oppose what you know in your heart is wrong; if you harden yourself against the opinions of others, if you are willing to endure the loneliness of pursuing what is good in a world indifferent to good; if you struggle with every fiber of your body, even as others scorn you, hate you and fear you; if you push on and on and on, no matter how great the agony, how terrible the strain—then one day the truth will finally be known—</p>	
Big Question: In our current historical moment, why be good?	