

Eretz Acheret

About Israel and Judaism



The Finishing Touch

By Assaf Inbari | 17/09/2009

Deciding that a project is complete is a very important creative decision, one from which there is no turning back. That's it, it's out of your hands: That's the book you wrote, and you aren't going to change a single word any more. That's the song you recorded, and you aren't going to change a single note. To complete a project means to say goodbye to it, to lose it, to lose control over it. And that's what God did on the seventh day

A person sits for two years, or five years, or ten, and writes a book. One day, he decides that the book is finished. How does he do that? After all, there is always room for improvement, and if the tenth draft is better than the ninth, why make do with the tenth? It is endless. How does one put an end to it?

How does an artist decide that his painting is finished? With which brushstroke does he decide that it is the last? How does a composer decide that a symphony is finished? After which reflection over the melody, harmony, structure, or orchestration does he decide that that was the last reflection?

“And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.” God of the first chapter of the Bible is a creator who looks at his work and decides that it is finished. This decision, this acceptance of the completion – that is Sabbath.

The acceptance that something is complete is the most important creative decision of all, the one from which there is no turning back. That's it, it's out of your hands: That's the book you wrote, and you aren't going to change a single word any more. That's the song you recorded, and you aren't going to

change a single note. To put a project to bed means to say goodbye to it, to lose it, to lose control over it. That's what God did on the seventh day.

The Sabbath of the story of creation is not the Sabbath of the book of Exodus. In Exodus, the Sabbath is a commandment given to the Jewish people, whereas in the story of the creation, there is no Jewish people yet, and no giving of the Torah or commandments; there is only a creator looking at his work and deciding that it is finished.

In fact, the Sabbath of Exodus is diametrically opposed to the essence of the Sabbath of the story of creation. According to the fourth commandment, we must rest on the Sabbath because God himself rested on the Sabbath: "He rested on the seventh day – wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy" (Exodus 20:10). This perception of God, as one who needs to rest from his work is inconsistent with the story of creation, which underscores the effortless ease with which God created the world, with words. And God said: Let there be light. And there was light; let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven, and there were. The world was created with words, without effort. God did not exert himself, did not grow tired, and consequently, did not "rest" on the seventh day. Actually, it was on the seventh day that He did the hardest thing of all: He decided He was finished.

This contrast, between the description of the Sabbath in the book of Genesis as the final completion of an effortless creative project and its description in the book of Exodus as rest from a grueling task was not overlooked by the sages. "And He rested on the seventh day"?! R. Levi interpreted this in the name of R. Yosei Bar Nehurei: "And He let his world be on the seventh day (Genesis Rabbah, 10:9). Indeed a brilliant solution: God did not rest from his creative work, He let it be, decided that it was complete. But the very need of this brilliant Midrash reveals the unease evoked by the simple reading of the passage. The more brilliant the Midrash, the more farfetched it is – and it is as a farfetched Midrash that it courageously reveals the theological confusion that the fourth commandment evinces when it rewrites the story of creation.

Let us return now to the description of Sabbath in the story of creation.

"And God saw all that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. And the heaven and the earth were finished in all their vast array. And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work. And God blessed the seventh day, and made it holy; because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done."

"And God saw all that He had made": At the end of the days of creation, God saw his creation as a whole. "This is analogous to an architect," writes Abraham Ibn Ezra, "who not only planned the construction of a great and glorious building, but also built it, and when the construction was completed, came to see if the entirety of the building was harmonious and worked as a single, overall unit.

In other words, God did not envision his creation as a whole in advance. The significance of the whole became clear to him only after the fact. Nabokov once noted that Gogol used to plan his books only after he had finished writing them.

A person sits for five years, writes a novel, and one day tells one of his friends: “Yesterday, I finally sent the *Bovary* manuscript to Cannes, shortened by about thirty pages, without counting the many lines that I cut here and there from the book. I deleted three long speeches by Homais, an entire description of the landscape, conversations among the members of the bourgeoisie during the ball... and so on. You see, my friend, I was really brave. Is the book better as a result? Of course the book as a whole has gained a greater momentum.”

It was only after five years of writing that Flaubert saw the book as a whole. And when he saw it, he immediately realized which pages needed to be deleted so that the book would “take on a greater momentum.” While writing the novel without seeing it in its entirety, he would ask himself what was missing; seeing the whole revealed to him those parts that were superfluous.

And behold it was very good

“And behold it was very good”: The creator is surprised at the result. The Biblical expression “And behold” expresses surprise. Noah dispatches the dove from the ark, “When the dove returned to him in the evening, behold, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf” (Gen. 8:11). Abraham sits at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day, “When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing in front of him: (Gen. 18:2). Rebecca is expecting, and “When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb” (Gen. 25:24). Pharaoh's daughter opens the basket of reeds, “and behold, the baby was crying” (Exodus 2:6). Elijah flees from Jezebel into the wilderness, falls asleep under a broom tree “And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Arise and eat.’ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water” (1 Kings 19:5-6).

Consequently, God is surprised. Is He surprised that his creation has so wondrously fulfilled the original plan – or is He perhaps surprised at seeing that it has deviated from it? Is an artist good if he is able to foresee a detailed vision of the artistic work in his mind's eye, and then adhere to it and realize it in every detail – or is perhaps a good artist one who allows his work to surprise him? Marcel Duchamp worked for eight years on “The Large Glass,” and only when the piece cracked during shipment did he consider it finally completed.

And perhaps more than He was surprised by His work, God was surprised by Himself. Until He had created what He created, He didn't know that He was capable of it. Like a writer sitting down to write his first novel, like a composer sitting down to write his first symphony, he is unaware of his own capabilities, and until he sees the final product, he cannot believe that he actually accomplished it. This is what Resh Lakish, in the name of R. Elazar Ben

Azarya, was referring to when he took the verse (Jeremiah 32:17) “Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You,” and explained it thus: “From that time forward, nothing is too hard for you” (Genesis Rabbah 9:3). “From that time forward” – but not beforehand.

What did Joseph Heller feel when he finished writing “Catch 22?” “I was very surprised at my writing ability,” he would report some years later, “especially at my descriptive capability and richness of language. I found descriptions and words in the book that I didn't even know that I knew. It surprised me because when I speak, I don't know and don't use most of these words. My mastery of language surprised me.”

A work that precisely realizes its plan is a successful work, but not beyond expectation. It is as successful as its maker expected it would be. God is surprised by his creation because it exceeded his expectations. He “looked and surveyed everything He did and all His actions, to see if anything needed to be improved, and “behold” all were lovely and perfect,” writes R. Shmuel Ben Meir – Rashbam – the grandson of Rashi and brother of Rabbenu Tam – and it is interesting to compare this to what Martin Buber said about the manner in which he wrote his only novel, *Gog and Magog* [also known as *For the Sake of Heaven*]:

“From experience, I learned that books grow and ripen slowly, and that they especially develop when you don't tend them at all, and in the end, they reveal themselves to you, until there is nothing left, it would seem, other than to copy them. What ripened the book, after twenty and more years, was undoubtedly once again an ‘objective’ factor, that is, the beginning of World War II, the atmosphere of world crisis, the terrible balance of powers and the signs of false messianism from without and within. I received the decisive push when suddenly in a quasi-dream I saw the image of the false messenger, who figures in the first chapter in my book, a demon of sorts with the face of a Jewish Goebbels. I wrote rather quickly, as if I was indeed doing no more than copying. All the pictures emerged clearly before my eyes, the connections seemed to create themselves. It was only the language that I later found that I had to go over and correct.”

When an artist examines his work and is favorably surprised, how can he be sure that he will like it in the future as well? Should he trust his immediate enthusiasm, or should he, as Horace proposed, wait nine years before making it public, if at all? “I never reread what I've written,” says Jorge Luis Borges, “I'm far too afraid to feel ashamed of what I've done.” He was clearly not ashamed of his stories when he first wrote them; we may assume that each appeared very good to him when he submitted them for publication, just as the world was in the eyes of its creator at the beginning. R. Hama Bar Hanina understood the spirit of the artist when he compared God to a king who had just built a palace, “He saw it and it was pleasing to him. He said: Palace, palace, may you always find favor in my eyes when I see you just as you find favor in my eyes at this moment!” (Genesis Rabbah, 9:4).

Of course, only six chapters after the story of the creation, God already regrets what he has done: “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen. 6:7).

If not for the evil inclination

On the one hand, the artist would like his work to always remain outstanding in his eyes, on the other, he does not want to stagnate. He wants to grow throughout his life – and the more he matures as an artist, the less evolved his earlier works will appear. “If I could write all my work again,” said William Faulkner, “I am convinced that I would do it better, which is the healthiest condition for an artist. That's why he keeps on working, trying again; he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. Of course he won't, which is why this condition is healthy. Once he did it, once he matched the work to the image, the dream, nothing would remain but to cut his throat, jump off the other side of that pinnacle of perfection into suicide.”

For Faulkner, the writer must not allow himself to feel gratified by his work. “It never is as good as it can be done. Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do.” In other words, you set standards for yourself that you know you can never meet. Faulkner smiles sadly and says, “Since none of my work has met my own standards, I must judge it on the basis of that one which caused me the most grief and anguish, as the mother loves the child who became the thief or murderer more than the one who became the priest.”

The novel that caused him the greatest grief was *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner said of the novel which brought him so much fame and glory: “It was still not complete, not until fifteen years after the book was published, when I wrote, as an appendix to another book, the final effort to get the story told and off my mind, so that I myself could have some peace from it. It's the book I feel tenderest towards. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again.”

T.S Eliot had clearly formed literary plans, but as he admitted, he never expected to fully realize them. “I don't feel that I've got to the point I am at,” he said, “and I don't think I ever will. But I would like to feel I was getting a little nearer to it each time.” And in a similar vein, Georges Simenon said, “When a novel is finished I have always the impression that I have not succeeded. I am not discouraged, but I see – I want to try again.”

The light, the sun, the moon, the animals and plant life – the first stages of the creation coming into existence were “good” in the eyes of God, no more. Each of them appeared good enough for him to continue confidently to the next step, but none of them appeared to him to be “very good,” that is, so good that to add any more would be to detract.

But what does “very good” mean? Is it an expression of hyperbole, or perhaps constraint? Does the artist see the work of his hands as something wonderful, outstanding, a paragon of perfection – or does he see it as something very good, no less and no more?

If “very good” means absolute perfection, the artist becomes paralyzed by perfection. “Hone and hone your pen,” wrote Bialik to a young poet, “but don't sharpen it too much, lest it break.” The aspired-to “very good” is the enemy of the possible “good,” and the sterile perfect is the enemy of the living thing.

Is there any moral significance to the words, “And He saw that it was good,” “And behold it was very good?” Is the “good” that God perceives in the act of creation good only in the sense of “praiseworthy,” “excellent,” “successful” and so on? Can “good” be completely separated from morality? Artists that espouse this type of separation are those that espouse “art for its art's sake.” For them, good is the opposite of inferior, not evil. Is God of the story of creation an esthete of this kind? He can be seen as such only if one reads the story of creation as disconnected from the rest of the Bible. But it is enough to turn one page, and there is “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” From this point forward, the “good” is moral good, the antithesis of evil, no longer the esthetic good, the opposite of the inferior.

And so, the moral significance of the words “And He saw it was good” is that He saw that He had done a good thing. You feel you have written a good book? Drawn a good picture? Good for whom? Whom will it benefit? That is one of the questions that make it so difficult to decide that something is indeed complete.

But don't be self-righteous. In every mission, there is a little bit of career. When on the Sabbath you stand facing a work that you have completed, acknowledge the impulses that produced it. It hurts to admit a yearning for honor, success, fame, money, but “Without the evil inclination, a man would not build a house, or marry a woman, or beget children, or engage in commerce” (Genesis Rabbah 9:7). Therefore, admit the evil impulses that have inspired you to create. Admit them, and thank them.

An artist needs a whip

“And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.” Did God allocate himself six days in advance to complete his work? Did He succeed in completing it only because He had committed to a deadline? Moreover, did He decide that it was finished only because He had reached the deadline?

The deadline was the secret of Simenon's prodigious output. When he sat down to write each of his two hundred novels, he allotted himself eleven days to do so. “It is in this character's skin I have to be,” he said explaining his work method. “And it's almost unbearable after five or six days. This is one of the reasons my novels are so short; after eleven days I can't – it's impossible. I have to – It's physical. I am too tired.”

For Simenon, the decision to finish his work by a certain deadline was one he made on his own. It is very difficult to fulfill this kind of self-imposed time limit; formidable self-discipline is required. It is much easier to meet a deadline set by the party commissioning the project – a newspaper or periodical – because

you can't get around that kind of deadline: Wednesday is Wednesday. This was the secret of Isaac Bashevis Singer's output. He wrote the chapters of his novels from one issue of the Yiddish newspaper *Forwards* to another. "An artist," he explained, "is like a horse – he needs a whip. I am accustomed to sending the material each week, something that has become second nature to me." He prided himself on the fact that he never missed a week throughout all those years, "Except for four weeks when I went on vacation. But then I worked hard for two weeks to prepare the material for after the vacation." It was because of his laziness that he subjected himself to an external dictate from the newspaper: It forced him to be diligent and prolific, whether he liked it or not. "I am a believer in discipline. I know that without it, I will procrastinate."

God's double output on Friday – "God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds [...] And God created man – could be indicative of the energizing force of a deadline. "The work that was worthy of being carried out on the Sabbath, He doubled and performed on Friday," writes Maimonides, in agreement with Rashi.

In his book, "Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects" (Florence 1550), Giorgio Vasari wrote about Michelangelo's difficulties in completing the Sistine Chapel within what the pope considered a reasonable time. "Michelangelo sometimes complained that because of the pope's haste he was not able to complete it in his own way as he would have wished, since the Pope importunately demanded to know when he would finish. On one occasion, among others, Michelangelo replied that the work would be finished 'when it satisfies me in its artistic details.' 'And We,' remarked the Pope, "want you to satisfy Us in Our desire to see it done quickly.' Finally the Pope threatened that if Michelangelo did not finish quickly, he would have him thrown down from the scaffolding. And so Michelangelo, who feared and had reason to fear the Pope's temper, immediately finished what was left without wasting any time."

One imagines that the entire squabble could have been avoided if they had set a deadline.

Vasari also tells of Leonardo Da Vinci's difficulty in completing his painting of "The Last Supper" on the wall of the Dominican church in Milan. "It is said that the prior of the church entreated Leonardo with tiresome persistence to complete the work, since it seemed strange to him to see how Leonardo sometimes passed half a day at a time lost in thought, and he would have preferred Leonardo, just like the laborers hoeing in the garden, never to have laid down the brush." And what held Leonardo back? "He still had two heads to complete: that of Christ, for which he was unwilling to seek a model on earth and unable to presume that his imagination could conceive of the beauty and celestial grace required of divinity incarnate. The head of Judas, which caused him much thought, was also missing." Ultimately, he found a model for the head of Judas Iscariot, whereas the head of Christ, "for which he was unwilling to seek a model on earth," remained unfinished.

“While he was attending to this work,” continues Vasari, “Leonardo proposed to the duke that he should make a bronze horse of astonishing size to commemorate the image of the duke, his father. And Leonardo began the work and carried it out on such a scale that he could never complete it.” And here Vasari comments, “There are those who hold the opinion that Leonardo, as with some of his other works, began this project without any intention of completing it because its size was so great that casting it in one piece obviously involved incredible difficulties.”

He “began this project without any intention of completing it”: That was a frequent sin of Leonardo. He never dared to declare something completed. Even his portrait of the Mona Lisa, on which he worked for four years, he left unfinished.

This was also the sin of writers such as Kafka and Robert Musil. They hardly ever dared to follow a project through all the way to the end either. They did not have a Sabbath. Ten years after he began to write *The Man without Qualities*, Musil wrote, “I am improving the novel considerably, but it is directed at a world that does not yet exist and in a direction of a possible continuation that may not be realized.” The wording is tortuous, as excuses often are. Musil died leaving his novel unfinished.

“On the seventh day God finished the work He had been doing.” Not on the sixth day, but it was on the seventh day that God completed his work, because completion is an act on its own. It is not the rest that comes after the creation; it is the most difficult, frightening and painful part of creation. And this act requires from God not seconds or minutes, but rather an entire 24-hour period – one seventh of the time that He put into creating the world.

“I always rewrite each day up to the point where I stopped,” said Hemmingway. When it is all finished, naturally you go over it. You get another chance to correct and rewrite when someone else types it, and you see it clean in type. The last chance is in the proofs. You're grateful for these different chances.” Hemmingway put at least one seventh of his time into the finishing touches.

“And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” As R. Saadya Gaon noted, what we have here are verbs, actions. God did not rest on the seventh day; He blessed and made holy, and these verbs, says R. Saadya Gaon, correspond to the verbs “And He said,” “And He made, which are mentioned in the six previous days.

“Finishing a book,” said Truman Capote, “is just like you took a child out in the yard and shot it.”

And Harold Pinter said: “I always write three drafts, but you have to leave it eventually. There comes a point when you say: That's it, I can't do anything more.”

Assaf Inbari's book, Home, was recently published by Yedioth Books.