

DESTRUCTION AND REBUILDING

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In his essay “*Churban U’Binyan*,” or “Destruction and Rebuilding,” Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel explores what ultimately makes humans different from other beings. He starts by citing a midrash in which God creates the human being and shows it off to the angels, and God says to the angels, “This creature’s wisdom is greater than yours.” Rav Finkel asks, how could that be so? **In what way are human beings better than angels?** He reflects on another midrashic tradition that talks about God in a very striking and surprising way, that at the dawn of time God did not create just the world we live in, but in fact, created many worlds. Many worlds that did not find favor in God’s eyes and were destroyed, until this world was created and pleased Him.

Mishlei, the book of Proverbs, says that God founded this world in wisdom. We can thereby deduce that those rough draft worlds that preceded this final draft were somehow part of the fundamental wisdom of what followed, and the creativity of finding favor in God’s eyes was also somehow spurred on by these earlier cycles of destruction.

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Angels, at least as they have been classically understood, cannot go through cycles of destruction and rebuilding. In fact, angels cannot cope with destruction at all. They are extensions of God’s will. They follow orders and to the extent they grow in wisdom, they do so inexorably day after day. **Human beings on the other hand, are created in the image of God.**

This aspect of being created in the image of God, and what makes us greater than the angels, is that we, like God, experience loss. We, like God, have the freedom to choose what we will do. We, like God, can destroy. Most importantly, we are spurred to creativity by moments of crisis.

This theme of crisis and destruction ushering in the next great chapter of human and Jewish history is seen over and over throughout the Bible and throughout history. Perhaps the most powerful example is the *mishkan*, God’s house, which was built out of the moment of the golden calf. It is only after the corrupt idea of worshipping God through an idol finds its place in the tragic annals of our history that we are able to figure out how to use gold to build a house for God.

Without the destruction, there would be no rebuilding, no creating. This is true in all kinds of ways. The great Chicago fire in the late 19th century ushered in a total architectural revolution, and the buildings that we have today are only possible because of some that were destroyed. **Covid-19 brought on a moment of destruction of all kinds of institutions and frameworks. Somehow this destruction must lead us to a rebuilding.**

There is so much uncertainty in this moment. There are many worlds that are being destroyed, whether it’s the people we tragically lost or the ways we have assumed our lives and our communities are supposed to look. We hope many of those will return, but hopefully we will not just go back to exactly the way things were. There is something about this moment of destruction that offers the possibility of reimagining who we might be as individuals and as a community.

