

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"l

Covenant & Conversation

Are we naturally good or naturally bad? On this, great minds have argued for a very long time indeed. Hobbes believed that we have naturally “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in Death.”¹ We are bad, but governments and police can help limit the harm we do. Rousseau to the contrary believed that naturally we are good. It is society and its institutions that make us bad.²

The argument continues today among the neo-Darwinians. Some believe that natural selection and the struggle for survival make us, genetically, hawks rather than doves. As Michael T. Ghiselin puts it, “Scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.”³ By contrast, naturalist Frans de Waal in a series of delightful books about primates, including his favourite, the bonobos, shows that they can be empathic, caring, even altruistic⁴ and so, by nature, are we.

E. Hulme called this the fundamental divide between Romantics and Classicists throughout history. Romantics believed that “man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance.”⁵ Classicists believed the opposite, that “Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent

¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

² See Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (*Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*), 1754.

³ Ghiselin, *The Economy of Nature and the Evolution of Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 247.

⁴ See Frans de Waal’s discoveries in, for example, *Good-Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Harvard University Press, 1996); *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton University Press, 2006); *Chimpanzee Politics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (Broadway Books, 2009); *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (W. W. Norton, 2013); *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (W. W. Norton, 2016).

⁵ T. E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism,” in T. E. Hulme: *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69.

can be got out of him.”⁶

In Judaism, according to the Sages, this was the argument between the angels when God consulted them as to whether or not He should create humans. The angels were the “us” in “Let us make mankind.” (Gen. 1:26) A Midrash tells us that the angels of chessed and tzedek said “Let him be created because humans do acts of kindness and righteousness.” The angels of shalom and emet said, “Let him not be created because he tells lies and fights wars.” What did God do? He created humans anyway and had faith that we would gradually become better and less destructive.⁷ That, in secular terms, is what Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker argues too.⁸ Taken as a whole and with obvious exceptions we have become less violent over time.

The Torah suggests we are both destructive and constructive, and evolutionary psychology tells us why. We are born to compete and co-operate. On the one hand, life is a competitive struggle for scarce resources – so we fight and kill. On the other hand, we survive only by forming groups. Without habits of co-operation, altruism and trust, we would have no groups and we would not survive. That is part of what the Torah means when it says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18) So we are both aggressive and altruistic: aggressive to strangers, altruistic toward members of our group.

But the Torah is far too profound to leave it at the level of the old joke of the Rabbi who, hearing both sides of a domestic argument, tells the husband, “You are right,” and the wife “You are right,” and when his disciple says, “They can’t both be right,” replies, “You are also right.” The Torah states the problem, but it also supplies a non-obvious answer. This is the clue that helps us decode a very subtle argument running through last week’s parsha and this one.

The basic structure of the story that begins with Creation and ends with Noah is this: First God created a universe of order. He then created human beings who created a universe of chaos: “the land was filled with violence.” So God, as it were, deleted creation by bringing a Flood, returning the earth to as it was at the very beginning when “the earth was formless and

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷ See Bereishit Rabbah 8:5.

⁸ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, New York: Viking, 2011.

empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters.” (Gen. 1:2) He then began again with Noah and his family as the new Adam and Eve and their children.

Genesis 8-9 is thus a kind of second version of Genesis 1-3, with two significant distinctions. The first is that in both accounts a key word appears seven times, but it is a different word. In Genesis 1 the word is “good.” In Genesis 9 it is “covenant.” The second is that in both cases, reference is made to the fact that humans are in the image of God, but the two sentences have different implications. In Genesis 1 we are told that “God created humanity in His own image, in the image of God He created them, male and female He created them.” (Gen. 1:27) In Genesis 9 we read, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made humanity” (Gen. 9:6).

The difference is striking. Genesis 1 tells me that “I” am in the image of God. Genesis 9 tells me that “You,” my potential victim, are in the image of God. Genesis 1 tells us about human power. We are able, says the Torah, to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air.” Genesis 9 tells us about the moral limits of power. We can kill but we may not. We have the power, but not the permission.

Reading the story closely, it seems that God created humans in the faith that they would naturally choose the right and the good. They would not need to eat the fruit of “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,” because instinct would lead them to behave as they should. Calculation, reflection, decision – all the things we associate with knowledge – would not be necessary. They would act as God wanted them to act, because they had been created in His image.

It did not turn out that way. Adam and Eve sinned, Cain committed murder, and within a few generations the world was reduced to chaos. That is when we read that “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart.” (Gen. 6:6) Everything else in the universe was tov, “good.” But humans are not naturally good. That is the problem. The answer, according to the Torah, is covenant.

Covenant introduces the idea of a moral law. A moral law is not the same as a scientific law. Scientific laws are observed regularities in nature: drop an object and it will fall. A moral law is a rule of conduct: do not rob or steal or deceive. Scientific laws describe, whereas moral laws prescribe.

When a natural event does not accord with the current state of science, when it “breaks” the law, that is a sign that there is something wrong with the law. That is why Newton’s laws were replaced by those of

Einstein. But when a human being breaks the law, when people rob or steal or deceive, the fault is not in the law but in the deed. So we must keep the law and condemn, and sometimes punish, the deed. Scientific laws allow us to predict. Moral laws help us to decide. Scientific laws apply to entities without freewill. Moral laws presuppose freewill. That is what makes humans qualitatively different from other forms of life.

So, according to the Torah, a new era began, centred not on the idea of natural goodness but on the concept of covenant, that is, moral law. Civilisation began in the move from what the Greeks called physis, nature, to nomos, law. That is what makes the concept of being “in the image of God” completely different in Genesis 1 and Genesis 9. Genesis 1 is about nature and biology. We are in the image of God in the sense that we can think, speak, plan, choose and dominate. Genesis 9 is about law. Other people are also in God’s image. Therefore we must respect them by banning murder and instituting justice. With this simple move, morality was born.

What is the Torah telling us about morality?

First, that it is universal. The Torah places God’s covenant with Noah and through him all humanity prior to His particular covenant with Abraham, and His later covenant with Abraham’s descendants at Mount Sinai. Our universal humanity precedes our religious differences. This is a truth we deeply need in the twenty-first century when so much violence has been given religious justification. Genesis tells us that our enemies are human too.

This may well be the single most important contribution of monotheism to civilisation. All societies, ancient and modern, have had some form of morality but usually they concern only relations within the group. Hostility to strangers is almost universal in both the animal and human kingdoms. Between strangers, power rules. As the Athenians said to the Melians, “The strong do what they want, while the weak do what they must.”⁹

The idea that even the people not like us have rights, and that we should “love the stranger” (Deut. 10:19), would have been considered utterly strange by most people at most times. It took the recognition that there is one God sovereign over all humanity (“Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us?”; Mal. 2:10) to create the momentous breakthrough to the idea that there are moral universals, among them the sanctity of life, the pursuit of justice, and the rule of law.

Second, God Himself recognises that we are not naturally good. After the Flood, He says: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, even though the inclination of their minds is evil from childhood on.” (Gen. 8:21) The antidote to the yetzer, the inclination to evil, is covenant.

⁹ Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War 5.89.

We now know the neuroscience behind this. Our brains contain a prefrontal cortex that evolved to allow humans to think and act reflectively, considering the consequences of their deeds. But this is slower and weaker than the amygdala (what Jewish mystics called the nefesh habehamit, the animal soul) which produces, even before we have had time to think, the fight-or-flight reactions without which humans before civilisation would simply not have survived.

The problem is that these rapid reactions can be deeply destructive. Often they lead to violence: not only the violence between species (predator and prey) that is part of nature, but also to the more gratuitous violence that is a feature of the life of most social animals. It is not that we only do evil. Empathy and compassion are as natural to us as are fear and aggression. The problem is that fear lies just beneath the surface of human interaction, and it can overwhelm all our other instincts.

Daniel Goleman calls this an amygdala hijack. "Emotions make us pay attention right now – this is urgent – and give us an immediate action plan without having to think twice. The emotional component evolved very early: Do I eat it, or does it eat me?"¹⁰ Impulsive action is often destructive because it is undertaken without thought of consequences. That is why Maimonides argued that many of the laws of the Torah constitute a training in virtue by making us think before we act.¹¹

So the Torah tells us that naturally we are neither good nor bad, but we have the capacity for both. We have a natural inclination to empathy and sympathy, but we have an even stronger instinct for fear which can lead to violence. That is why, in the move from Adam to Noah, the Torah shifts from nature to covenant, from tov to brit, from power to the moral limits of power. Genes are not enough. We also need the moral law. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l © 5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, so that they shall not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7). What is the connection between Adam's existential state of aloneness and the tragic social isolation which results from the Tower of Babel, when one universal language is replaced by seventy languages, leading to bedlam, confusion and dispersion?

To answer our question, let us begin by

returning to the story of creation and God's declaration: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a help-opposite for him" (Gen.2:18). When Adam fails to find his 'help-opposite' among the animals, we are told: "The Lord God cast a deep sleep upon man and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place, and of the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, He made a woman, and brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:21-22).

Why is the birth of Eve surrounded with this poetic quality? Why does her creation differ radically from all other creatures?

The answer is that had Eve been created from the earth like the rest of the animals, Adam would have related to her as a two-legged creature. Even if she walked and talked, she would end up as one of the animals to name and control. Her unique 'birth' marks her unique role.

In an earlier verse, we read that "God created the human being in His image; in the image of God He created him, male and female created He them" (Gen. 1:27). "Male and female" suggests androgynous qualities, and on that verse, Rashi quotes a midrashic interpretation that God originally created the human with two "faces," Siamese twins as it were, so that when He put Adam into a deep sleep, it was not just to remove a rib but to separate the female side from the male side.

God divided the creature into two so that each half would seek completion in the other. Had Eve not emerged from Adam's own flesh to begin with, they could never have become one flesh again.

Awakening, Adam said of Eve, "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (2:23). His search was over, and what was true for Adam is true for humankind. In the next verse, God announced the second basic principle in life: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (2:24). "Leave" does not mean reject; but it does mean that one must be mature and independent in order to enter into a relationship of mutuality with one's mate. (How many divorces can be traced to crippling parent-child relationships!)

One of the goals of a human being is to become one flesh with another human being, and this, the truest of partnerships, can only be achieved with someone who is really part of yourself, only with someone to whom you cleave intellectually and emotionally. If a relationship suffers from a lack of concern and commitment, then sexuality suffers as well. The Torah wants us to know that for humans, sexual relations are not merely a function of procreative needs, but rather an expression of mutuality on a profound level. Hence, in contrast to the animal kingdom, humans are not controlled by periods of heat; sexuality is ever-present. Thus, Nahmanides speaks of one flesh in allegoric terms: through a transcendent

¹⁰ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 13ff.

¹¹ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Temurah 4:13.

sexual act conceived in marriage, the two become one. Rashi interprets the verse, "You shall become one flesh" to mean that in the newborn child, mother and father literally become one flesh. In the child, part of us lives on even after we die.

The entire sequence ends with the startling statement, "And they were both naked, and they were not ashamed" (2:25). Given the Torah's strict standards of modesty, how are we to understand a description which seems to contradict traditional Jewish values?

I would suggest a more symbolic explanation: Nakedness without shame means that two people must have the ability to face each other and reveal their souls without external pretense. Frequently, we play games, pretending to be what we're not, putting on a front. The Hebrew word 'begeg' (garment) comes from the same root as 'bagod' – to betray. With garments I can betray; wearing my role as I hide my true self. The Torah wants husband and wife to remove garments which conceal truth, so that they are free to express fears and frustrations, not afraid to cry and scream in each other's presence without feeling the "shame of nakedness." This is the ideal 'ezer kenegdo.'

The first global catastrophe, the flood, struck when the world rejected the ideal relationship between man and woman. Rape, pillage, and unbridled lust became the norm. Only one family on earth – Noah's – remained righteous. Now, with the Tower of Babel, whatever values Noah attempted to transmit to future generations were forgotten.

What exactly happened when one language became seventy is difficult to understand. Yet, metaphorically, one language means people understand each other. With their 'ezer-kenegdos,' existential and social loneliness is kept at bay as they become one in love and in progeny.

The Tower of Babel represents a new stage of depravity, not sexual, but social. People wanted to create a great name by building great towers, not for the sake of Heaven, but for the sake of materialism; the new god became splendid achievements with mortar and brick. As they reached greater physical heights, they forgot the human, inter-personal value of a friend, a wife, a life's partner. According to the Midrash, when a person fell off the Tower, work continued, but if a brick crashed to the ground, people mourned.

Thus the total breakdown of language fits the crime of people who may be physically alive, but whose tongues and hearts are locked – people who are no longer communicating with each other. It was no longer possible for two people to become one flesh and one bone, to stand naked without shame, to become 'ezer-kenegdos.' Existential loneliness engulfed the world and intercommunication was forgotten. The powerful idea of one language became a vague memory.

The Tower of Babel ended an era in the history of mankind, and the social destruction it left behind

could only be fixed by Abraham. His message of a God of compassion who wishes to unite the world in love and morality is still waiting to be heard. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The ten generations described in the Torah, from Adam until Noach, produced only chaos and eventual destruction. There were a few individuals, such as Chanoch, who were moral and positive people. However, they had little, if any, influence on the general society in which they lived, and not even one person who would follow them and their moral behavior.

Our world, and all our societies are, to a great extent, copycat structures of those days. The general excuse for all immoral behavior from childhood is the expression "everyone is doing it". Somehow, this excuse, that everyone is doing it, removes responsibility from any individual who engages in any immoral activity. Thus, there develops a chain of almost never-ending failure, excuses, and willingness to accept bad behavior as a societal norm.

The ten generations that led up to the coming of the Great Flood sank into this morass of evil without realizing it. They were merely repeating the actions of the generations before them, and what they saw was everyone else behaving in a similar fashion. Evil and immoral behavior are very easily accepted in general and mass society. This notion explains Nazism in Germany and Stalinism in the Soviet Union. It also helps describe much of what is transpiring in Western society today.

The slow erosion of morality, good behavior and godly faith is a constant challenge to all societies, and if no one stands up against it, those societies are eventually doomed to their own self-destruction.

In the eyes of Jewish scholarship and tradition, Noach is found wanting, not so much for his own personal failings after the Flood, but, rather, for his inability to stand against the evil in his society. He builds an ark and warns against the impending disaster that is about to befall the human race. However, he is unable to identify evil for what it is, and to declare a viable alternative for human beings to adopt and follow. There is a feeling of hopelessness that seems to envelop him and his actions, and he fails in building a new world because of the belief that "everyone does it" is a sufficient excuse for bad behavior and human immorality.

It is because of this that Midrash and Jewish tradition generally view Noach and his righteousness with a fair degree of skepticism. His planting of the vineyard as his first project after emerging from the ark is an example of the acceptance of the idea that if everyone does it, then, somehow, it can be justified and even lauded. It is almost painful to read in the

Torah how Noach fails to remake the world after the Flood in a better image and a more positive vein.

The Torah illustrates for us that great people can have great failings, and that lost opportunities will always come back to haunt us and frustrate human progress. We are all the descendants of Noach, and his character traits exist within our personal DNA even millennia later. We will have to wait for the arrival of Abraham and Sarah to put us on a better and more upward trajectory of belief and behavior. ©2021 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Hot Springs of Tiberias

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"All the fountains of the deep opened" (*Bereishit* 7:1). This is how the Torah describes the beginning of the flood. However, at the conclusion of the flood the Torah states: "And the fountains of the deep closed" (8:2), omitting the word "all." Our Sages derive from this that not all the fountains of the deep were closed. Those which benefit humanity, such as the hot springs of Tiberias (*Chamei Teverya*), were left open (Rashi).

When Jewish law speaks of cooking, it is limited to cooking over a fire or any derivative thereof. This is true whether the subject is cooking on Shabbat, roasting the Paschal lamb, or cooking milk with meat.

Since the Torah prohibition of cooking on Shabbat is limited to cooking with fire, one is not liable for cooking with the hot springs of Teverya or the sun (Rashi on *Shabbat* 39a). If we could harness the sun's heat to cook on Shabbat, normative *halacha* might permit it (*Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchetah*, chapter 1, note 127).

Some say that if a non-Jew uses *Chamei Teverya* to cook food, it may still be eaten by a Jew. Since the heat source is not fire, the food is not considered to have been cooked by the non-Jew (and thus it is not forbidden on the grounds of *bishul akum*). Nevertheless, all agree that if non-kosher food is cooked in a pot using *Chamei Teverya* as the heat source, both the pot and the food become forbidden. Does this mean that the people of Teverya can save on their electric bills by using *Chamei Teverya* to *kasher* their kitchen items before Pesach? Not necessarily. Some maintain that if a pot absorbed the taste of prohibited food while on the fire, it can be rid of it only by fire, following the principle of "*Kebol'o kach polto*" ("An item 'spits out' absorbed food in the same way that it absorbed it"). If so, *Chamei Teverya* would not count for *kashering* purposes.

Another interesting tidbit: women may use *Chamei Teverya* for purification purposes, but it may

not be used for *netilat yadayim* (hand-washing before a meal). This is because hot water may be used for *netilat yadayim* only if the water started out cold and was later heated up. In contrast, water which was always hot (as is the case with *Chamei Teverya*) cannot be used for *netilat yadayim*. Some say that *Chamei Teverya* cannot be used for *netilat yadayim* because of its sulfur content, which makes it unfit to drink. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The picture of Noah's ark in children's books with a giraffe's head and neck hanging out of the ark speaks to a fundamental question. How did all the animals, birds and creeping things fit into the ark? (Genesis 6:19).

Ibn Ezra characteristically offers a literal observation. The cubit mentioned in the Torah with respect to building the ark was longer than what the Torah would later consider to be the length of a cubit. The ark, for Ibn Ezra, was massive. Hence, it could contain everything (Ibn Ezra, Genesis 6:16).

But Nachmanides disagrees. For him, the ark's ability to contain all the species that existed was in fact miraculous. To paraphrase Nachmanides, a miracle was performed, and the small space was able to contain everything (Nachmanides, Genesis 6:19).

Nachmanides then asks: If a miracle occurred, why didn't God ask Noah to build the ark even smaller – or why did He command Noah to build it at all? Here Nachmanides introduces a basic concept concerning miracles. Even when a miracle occurs, humankind must do its share. In the words of Nachmanides, "This is the way of all miracles in the Torah...for humankind to do what it can and for the rest to be left in the hands of God."

Nachmanides's position on miracles is fully realized when considering his opinion that Abraham, in Parashat Lech Lecha, sinned when he left the land of Israel without God's permission because of the famine. Abraham had no right to leave the land without explicit permission from God (Nachmanides, Genesis 12:10).

Yet it could be argued that Abraham, by acting to improve his situation, did not sin. He did what he had



to and did not rely on miracles to save himself and his family.

Bearing in mind Nachmanides's passion for Zion as found in the Noah story, a possible solution to the Abraham inconsistency lies in Israel as a unique category. Nachmanides wonders: If the whole world was destroyed, from where did the dove bring the olive branch? He answers quoting the Midrash – from Israel! While the whole world was destroyed, Israel was miraculously spared (Nachmanides, Genesis 8:11; Bereishit Rabbah 33:9).

For Nachmanides, when it comes to the land of Israel, we can rely on miracles. Abraham should therefore not have left; he should have kept hope that God would intervene – as the land of Israel escaped the deluge, so would Abraham and Sarah survive the famine.

When considering the courage of many Israelis living on the border who, despite bombardments from the enemy over the years, held their ground and refused to budge, Nachmanides's comments ring true. We're not to rely on miracles and must meet God partway. But, relative to the State of Israel, God watches even more closely, and miracles are more readily performed there. ©2021 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"From these the islands of the nations were separated in their lands, each according to its language, by their families, in their nations." (Beraishis 10:5) After the waters of the flood receded, Hashem told Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply and repopulate the world. They indeed produced numerous offspring, making up the seventy nations of the world. The children of Yefes, Noah's youngest son, are listed first. One of the areas they migrated to was the islands of the Aegean Sea (Yavan/Greece was one of his sons.) This posuk tells us that they were separated into their locales and each had its own language and dialect.

This seems to contradict the story later on, regarding the Dor Haflaga, the dispersed generation who attempted to build a tower in Bavel. There, the Torah tells us (11:1) "The whole earth was of one language and of unified words." When they discussed building this tower to fight against Hashem, He said, "They are one nation with one language," and whatever they set their minds to do they will achieve. Therefore, He decided to "confuse their language so they should not understand another's language."

Rashi tells us that one would ask for a brick, his fellow would hand him plaster, and in his anger, the first

would split open the other's head for not bringing him a brick. They all began to fight and the plans for the tower fell apart. If so, why does this earlier posuk tell us that their languages diverged?

Some commentaries do, in fact, explain that when our posuk referred to differing languages, it was referring to a later time, after Hashem confused and changed the language of the people. Then, as they spread throughout the various lands, they became separated by language. However, there's another way to explain what happened.

The Chiba Yeseira, by R' Yehuda Henkin, suggests a subtle difference here. The people could have understood all seventy languages, so changing the language would not have achieved much. He points out that this verse speaks of 'lashon,' a tongue or manner of speech, while the other one regarding Bavel discusses 'safah,' speech or communication.

In Tzeiphania 3:9, the Navi says that after the war of Gog and Magog, Hashem declares, "I will turn them all to be pure of speech, and they will call out in the name of Hashem, to serve Him of one accord." In other words, explains R' Henkin, safah is not a technical matter of the words used, but rather a meeting of the minds; a common understanding and goal which unifies people.

What Hashem did in Bavel was make people speak the same words but mean and feel very different things. Is that not what we're witnessing in our days, that people speak at cross-purposes and get angry and fight because others don't see things the same way they do? Indeed, we must be very close to the time of Gog and Magog when this will all be turned around 180 degrees, and we will all agree to serve Hashem, the true G-d.

The yeshiva of Slabodka, under the watchful eye of R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel z"l, known as "the Alter (elder) of Slabodka," was an incubator for some of the greatest Torah leaders of the next generation. The yeshiva's approach was focusing on "Gadlus HaAdam," the greatness of man, and thus the limitless potential we each possess.

One day in the Kollel, two fellows got into a heated argument over the topic they were learning. So engrossed were they, that in trying to make their points, they grabbed each other's beards!

The Alter stepped in and told them this was going too far. While one may wish to convince another of his position, the physical manifestation of it was neither proper nor respectful. ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

A New Understanding

Ts soon as Noah and his family were finally able to leave the Ark and live on dry land, Noah built an altar and brought sacrifices from each of the

“clean” animals and birds. The Torah then presents us with two unusual p’sukim that require our attention: “Hashem smelled the pleasing aroma, and Hashem said in His heart, ‘I will not continue to curse the ground again because of Man (Adam), since the imagery of Man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I continue to smite every living being, as I have done. Continuously, all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

The statement, “the imagery of Man’s heart is evil from his youth,” demands further explanation. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Hashem had “curtailed the fertile powers of the earth” to teach man the concept of punishment. The curse given to Adam for eating of the forbidden fruit made it difficult for Man to produce food from the ground. Hirsch tells us that Hashem lifted this curse after the flood, as if He were saying “after all, it would be of no use!” Hirsch points out the mistake of this approach, as the same words for relieving the curse were the same words that brought about the curse. The problem of the evil begins in the youth. The term “min’u’rav” from his youth, comes from the word “na’ar” which means a youth but also means to shake off. “Youth is called n’urim because it is the time in which the young really want to grow out of themselves. Neither good nor bad impressions cling very fast to them, human nature is still in its natural state with them, not yet cloaked with hypocrisy, easily shakes off both good and bad impressions.”

Rashi explains that evil begins after birth. This should not be confused with the Roman Catholic concept of Original Sin, the act of procreation being a part of the sin. Our Rabbis explain that the body in which our soul is placed has natural needs, and a child’s mind cannot comprehend that those needs must be controlled and limited. Only as a child grows must he learn to understand concepts like possession, rules, restraint. As Hirsch points out, “when the mind matures, and insight ripens to realize that what hitherto has been regarded as restraint and restriction, in reality leads to freedom and ensures the true freedom of the will of Man.” Only maturity can enable a person to understand this ideal. Even a civilization must mature to grasp the need for restrictions and limits. For that reason, Hashem’s decided at this time to hold only the individual responsible for his sin, but “mankind as a whole should not be wiped out totally because of sin.”

The Flood had a marked effect on the world both physically due to the excess water and more permanently due to other factors of which the Torah informs us. The physical world changed in a manner which altered man’s relationship both with the land and with animals. The Torah tells us only part of the story, somewhat hinting at what was and what now changed. Hashem promised Noach, “Continuously, all the days of

the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and night and day shall not cease.” Many midrashim stem from this sentence because of the last words “shall not cease”. In Bereishit Rabbah, the Midrash on the Book of Bereishit, Genesis, we are told that the entire time that the animals and Noach were on the ark, the sun and the moon as well as the stars and planets did not give off their light. The dove that searched for dry land did so by the light of the stone (tzohar) that Noach had placed on the ark to give light from within. The lack of light combined with the amount of water and nature of that water that flooded the earth, had an eternal effect on the structure of the earth.

In Jewish tradition, when the world was created there were no changes in seasons. The world was a moderate temperature at all times, with no separate seasons for rain, cold and heat. Hirsch quotes Bereishit Rabbah in which Reb Yitzchak says that “before the Flood the fields had only to be cultivated every forty years, as eternal spring-time reigned, the seasons never changed, there was pleasant weather as between Pesach and Shavuot (Spring), the temperature was constant and moderate, and the continents were not split asunder so that there was easy communication throughout the world, one could walk from one end of the world to the other in a short span of time.” There are indications that this “perfect”, unchanging climate led to the “general slackness and degeneration” of the people. The change in the climate after the Flood led to a steadily decreasing life-expectancy. These findings have been verified by secular geologists who agree largely with the findings of Reb Yitzchak. Other scientists have argued that some cataclysm such as a large meteor strike altered the axis of the world by flooding the world with the melted ice from the poles, yet this does not hold true according to the Midrash, since the weather at the poles (when the earth was straight up on its axis) was also moderate and uncovered with ice. All agree that the slant of the earth is what accounts for our seasons today as the Northern Hemisphere of the earth faces closer to the sun in the summer (June through September) and further away in the winter (December through March). In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons during those months are reversed. In Gemara Baba Metzia (106b), our Rabbis point out that the Torah does not speak of four seasons but instead six. Rashi describes them as: zera, seedtime, v’katzir, harvest, v’kor, cold, v’chom, heat, v’kayitz, summer, v’choref, and winter. Each season lasted two months which went from the middle of one month through the next and up to the middle of the following month. For many parts of the world, this is a more accurate rendition of the year.

As these two p’sukim appear to be unrelated yet occur one after the other in the Torah, it is proper to

seek a connection between the two. Both deal with an acknowledgement by Hashem that Man needed to mature more before Hashem could judge society as a whole. Individuals, however, could be held responsible even though the entire society should not. But how was the individual who would be judged gain the insight that would require him to limit and restrict his needs for the benefit of society as a whole? What had been a constant for him up until the flood and had caused him a "general slackness and degeneration", now fluctuated from season to season. Rain came only in its season, cold in its season, warmth at its time. Man began to realize that his life was dependent on Hashem providing the proper weather for each season. Man began to understand how Hashem blessed the world through that constant, predictable change. Man could comprehend that he owed Hashem for these blessings and was then required to treat all of Hashem's creatures with the same love which he owed to Hashem. We are blessed to live in a world which can already understand Hashem's love for it. May we also learn to share that love with others, and treat them as Hashem would. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

The Straw That Broke

Parshat Noach relates the incident of the mabul, the flood that destroyed the world. Only Noach, his wife Naama, their family and a representation of 2 or 7 of each species of animal, survived.

The decision to destroy His creation was not easy for G-d. The level of sin had reached a level that He could no longer "tolerate".

There seems to have been 3 specific sins in which the generation of the flood "excelled": idol worship, promiscuity and theft.

It is easy to understand G-d's intolerance of idolatry and promiscuity. These sins are the antithesis of G-d's intention of a world of holiness. Why would G-d wish to sustain a world full of those who rebel against the very goals of creation?

And yet, it was theft that sealed their fate. Not armed robbery or burglary. Petty theft. The generation of the flood gave themselves license to take "just a bit" from others. Something that the merchant or neighbor wouldn't even notice or care about. Think in terms of just taking "one grape" or a few pennies from someone. Who will notice?

Was it really for this, above and beyond idol worship and promiscuity, that G-d decided to end humanity?

The answer lies in the basis for creation.

G-d is Holy and Pure and certainly desires us to emulate Him. If, however, that was His only purpose, He need not create a world of imperfect mortals. The heavenly angels and other celestial beings are devoid of sin and spend their time in praise of G-d. Such a

creation already predated mankind.

What G-d wanted was a world in which people could coexist and work together elevating the Earth below to the levels of the world above.

For that He fashioned a material world with humans, animals and the infrastructure to create an earthly Garden of Eden that could mirror the one above.

G-d understood that humans have weakness and might trespass His rules. When the transgressions were against Him, G-d was able to "look the other way" and give a chance for return. He is a loving and forgiving Father who understands.

When the sins turned towards other people, and in such a sneaky manner, there was no more room for patience and tolerance.

The world was created for us to get along, help and respect each other, not to look for ways in which to sneakily cheat our fellow human.

When people gave themselves license harm others, even in seemingly miniscule ways, the time had come for a "reboot" of creation.

Thus, "the straw that broke the camel's back" was the deficiency in our relationship with others much more even than our relationship to G-d.

Noach and his family were the new beginning. They were the chance to make this world a better place, both in terms of our connection to G-d and to the others around us.

Mankind was promised that the earth would never again be destroyed. And thank G-d, He has kept His part of the agreement.

It is upon us to honor our side with the commitment to try to make this world a place of holiness and kindness. Rather than taking from others let us look to see what we can give. ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

