

PARASHAS NOACH

The Roots of Evil

What would it take for the entire world to be condemned to destruction? What heinous sins would society have to commit for Hashem to decide to wipe it out and start over again? We do not have to look far for the answer. In this week's Torah portion, the world is inundated by the Great Flood, its cities, its institutions, its people, even its animals, all swept away. Only the hand-picked passengers on Noah's ark were allowed to survive. What brought this on?

The Torah gives a lurid account of the level of depravity to which society had fallen, widespread idolatry, promiscuity and adultery so pervasive that even the animal kingdom was perverted, the total collapse of moral standards, the degeneracy and the shamelessness. And yet, the Torah tells us, the final decree of annihilation was triggered by pecuniary crimes - "*vatimalei haaretz chamas*," and the land was filled with robbery. Why was the crime of robbery considered worse than all the other horrendous crimes of society? After all, robbery is not a capital crime, while some of the others are indeed punishable by death. Why then was robbery the fuse that ignited the explosion called the Great Flood?

To further complicate matters, the Midrash that the robbery so prevalent in society was of a quite peculiar nature. Legally, a robber is not required to return stolen goods worth less than a small coin called a *prutah*. Such small sums are considered unworthy of litigation, and the victim undoubtedly writes it off. The people in antediluvian society would, therefore, steal from each other numerous times but always no more than the most minuscule sums. Over a long period of time, however, they were able to secure the property of their victims in a legal manner. But let us stop and think for a moment. This was no brazen robbery, no flaunting of the established authorities! Why should just this form of robbery be considered the worst possible offense, sufficient cause for the total inundation of society? How did this genteel, almost white-collar form of theft surpass idolatry and adultery in pure evil?

The answer goes to the heart of the Torah perspective on the relationship between sin and evil. Hashem does not consider people as individuals or society as a whole to be evil simply because they committed a sin, even a very serious sin. Hashem recognizes that people are but flesh and blood and that sometimes it is exceedingly

difficult to control the impulse to transgress, to step over the line. Sinners are not necessarily evil and incorrigible.

The powerful attraction of sin does not, of course, exonerate the sinner. It does not absolve him from having to take responsibility for his actions and suffer the consequences. After all, he was given free will, and it is his moral obligation to exercise it when faced with temptation. But if he fails, if he is still not beyond hope. When the momentary weakness passes and he faces the enormity of his transgression, he can still feel shame and remorse. He can still find room in his heart for repentance.

But what if the sinner contrives loopholes and stratagems to give his sins a patina of legality? Such a person is truly evil and incorrigible. He pats himself on the back for his strict adherence to the law, even as he thrusts his hand into another man's pocket. This person acts not on impulse but with loathsome preparation and premeditation. What chance is there that such a man will have a change of heart, that he will repent? Not very likely. And therefore, Hashem recognized the corruption of society as permanent and irreversible. It was time to wash it away.

A ship was sinking, and land was just a faint line on the horizon. The dust-encrusted life rafts were unfortunately all leaky, but the passengers ran to grab them anyway.

One wise man ignored the rafts and prepared to plunge into the water.

"Don't you want a raft?" asked the captain. "I can get you one."

"No," said the wise man. "If I know that I must swim with all my might I have a chance of surviving. But if I mistakenly think I have a raft under me, I am surely doomed."

In our own lives, we may sometimes find ourselves rationalizing our transgressions and shortcomings, maneuvering to find a path through the minefields of our moral dilemmas. We must recognize these tendencies as danger signals, as warnings that we are turning down a path that leads to corruption. We should take advantage of these moments to reevaluate ourselves, to transcend the frailties of the human condition and choose goodness for its own sake. At these very moments, when we stand on the brink of ruination, the right choice can elevate and enrich us for the rest of our lives.