

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d said to Noach, 'the end of all flesh has come before me, for the land is full of criminal activity' (Beraishis 6:13). Rashi tells us that "all flesh" was wiped out because whenever there is illicit behavior (such as adultery) and idol worship (see Rashi on 6:11), a plague comes that kills the good with the bad. This implies that it was these sins that brought about the flood. Yet, in his next comment, Rashi tells us that it was the criminal activity (such as theft) that sealed their fate.

Recently, a suggestion has been made explaining how the decree was only sealed based on the abundance of theft if there were other sins occurring that would have incurred a similar punishment anyway. Normally, G-d will inflict punishment on a person's possessions in the hopes that it will bring about an awareness that a change in behavior is needed. If the necessary changes are not instituted, then G-d punishes the person directly. In this situation, since theft was so widespread, it was not the guilty party's possessions that would have been affected, as they really belonged someone else. Therefore, G-d had no choice but to bypass the first step and go right to the direct punishment. Even though this approach might seem "cute," upon further review it doesn't seem to hold water (pardon the pun).

For starters, while theft was certainly described as being widespread, it would be difficult to say that everything anyone had was stolen, and absolutely nothing was rightfully owned. Did no one work for a living? Was every field cultivated by squatters so that no produce reached the hands of the property owners? Rampant theft doesn't mean that every item in anyone and everyone's possession was stolen, so G-d could have punished the sinners by smiting what was legally owned without having to bypass this stage of punishment.

Ah, but then the wrong message might be received, as people would start to see that what they had stolen was always left intact while what was really theirs would become damaged. Could G-d really imply that He prefers that people have stolen property? If anything, He should specifically hit the stolen items and leave what is legally owned alone! Which brings us to the next issue:

Once it was stolen, why would G-d refrain from smiting it? Chances are the original owner has given up any hope of getting his stolen property back, so wouldn't be adversely affected by its destruction. And, if the original owner was a thief himself, why would G-d protect his stuff, wherever it ended up?

Additionally, if G-d would have otherwise attacked possessions rather than destroying the entire world, is it likely that He would wipe everybody out in order to avoid damaging ill-gotten gains? Does it make sense to refrain from destroying what was stolen by killing the rightful owner (along with the thief)? Besides, isn't there at least one step in-between? If G-d really couldn't attack stolen possessions, He could punish the thief's body without killing him! Why skip straight to total and complete annihilation?

Most importantly, Rashi's quote from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 108a), that the decree was only sealed because of the rampant theft, has a very specific message: Stealing is very, very bad. So bad, that even though there were other really terrible things going on (idol worship and adultery), the sin that perturbed G-d most was taking things that didn't belong to them. According to the above-mentioned approach, we can't learn that from here, as it really was the other sins that evoked G-d's wrath. The only problem was that G-d couldn't punish them via their possessions due to a technical problem (as they weren't really their possessions), so He had to wipe them out completely. That's obviously not what the Talmud is trying to convey; the Talmud is clearly teaching us the severity of the sin of stealing, a lesson irrelevant if the problem was due to a technicality.

Which brings us back to the original issue of Rashi citing multiple reasons why G-d brought the flood, yet indicating that it was really the rampant theft that sealed the decree. The fact that there were numerous sins does not prevent one of them being the final straw that brought about the decree, if they were cumulative. The problem only arises because Rashi says that the other sins were enough to warrant the decree, even if there was no theft. However, as the commentators explain, this is not really a contradiction either. The following is a compendium of their basic approaches.

Even if the world deserved to be destroyed because of its other sins, G-d does not issue decrees immediately. How long He waits before doing so is

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dependant on numerous factors, including providing the chance for repentance (so that the punishment need not be incurred) and how adversely others will be affected by pushing it off. Disregarding the boundaries of what belongs to whom, whether it be through outright theft or otherwise, is so problematic that G-d couldn't push off the decree any longer. This is precisely how the Talmud proves that stealing is so bad, for despite all the other sins, their fate was sealed because of it, not them.

Additionally, Rashi was pointing out that once the decree was made (due to the rampant theft), the form and extent of the decree was mandated by the sins of adultery and idol worship. Usually, when a decree is made, it is made only against those whose level of sin has reached the point demanding punishment. Here, however, all were affected, and even those who hadn't sinned as often or as severely were included in the decree. Not just affected by it, but included in it, as the world was so morally depraved that it had to be completely destroyed. The level of destruction was determined by the other sins, even if the decree was only made because of the corruption.

The bottom line is that the world could not continue the way things had developed, and needed a new beginning. Nevertheless, the decree that dictated when that change would occur was only made when people stopped respecting the property rights of others.

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### **RABBI LEVI COOPER**

## **Compromise or Decide**

**T**he Mishna rules that on bread we recite a blessing that concludes with the words ". . . The One who brings forth bread from the earth" (M. Berachot 6:1). Our sages consider the exact language of this benediction and the discussion turns on a seemingly insignificant prefix (B. Berachot 38a-b): Should we say "hamotzi" or "motzi?"

The Talmud adduces scriptural support for each possibility, concluding that all opinions recognize "motzi" as a valid formula while one opinion adds that "hamotzi" is also justifiable.

Following this discussion, the Talmud relates how the sages praised a certain scholar before the famed Rabbi Zeira. Recounting the scholar's praises,

they related that this scholar was a great person and proficient in the field of blessings. Hearing this tribute, Rabbi Zeira instructed: "When he next comes to you, bring him to me."

Sure enough, this scholar paid a visit to Rabbi Zeira, who proffered him bread. Eagerly, he waited to hear the blessing that this expert would utter. The guest complied, using the word "motzi."

Rabbi Zeira was disappointed: Indeed, "motzi" was an accepted valid formula, but its use did not indicate expertise or greatness. Had the scholar employed the "hamotzi" text he would have displayed that this version is also acceptable, teaching an invaluable lesson.

The Talmud comes to the defense of the benediction expert: He sought a position that did require an adjudication of the dispute and hence used a term that was not subject to disagreement.

We have numerous examples in our tradition of normative compromises that are aimed at avoiding a rejection of one position in favor of another. Later in our tractate, one scholar admonishes a colleague for using a synagogue prayer text that did not accord with all opinions: "You black earthenware vessel! Why do you need to get involved with the dispute?! You would have done better to use a formulation that is accepted by all" (B. Berachot 50a).

Moreover, in another bread-related debate, the Talmud extols one who manages to act in accordance with all opinions (B. Berachot 39b). Our sages consider a case where a person is about to eat large pieces of bread as well as a smaller loaf, querying whether it is preferable to make the bread blessing over a large slice or over an entire loaf. In other words: When deciding precedence for blessings, is largeness a superior feature or wholeness? The Talmud adds that a G-d-fearing person should accommodate both opinions by placing the slice under the loaf and holding them together while reciting the blessing.

The passage continues relating that when this suggestion was recounted before Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak, he asked the speaker for his name. The speaker replied, "Shalman." Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak was quick to homiletically explain the moniker: "You are shalom (peace, harmony) and your teaching is harmonious, for you have established peace amongst the disciples." Thus Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak lauded a proposition that satisfied both opinions and cured any rift between disciples of the two schools.

These passages make Rabbi Zeira's disdain for the benediction specialist puzzling. Rabbi Zeira, it would appear, is giving voice to an alternative model where greatness is measured by resoluteness and self-confidence in the decision-making process. Though the course of the expert was safe, it did not reflect greatness. An eminent scholar need not aim to satisfy all opinions; distinction is reflected in the courage to

assess divergent paths and choose between them. Selecting the appropriate language for a blessing, while discarding other options, therefore, reflects true scholarship. Indeed, in a different context, the sages tell us that from the language of a blessing recited we can ascertain the erudition of the reciter (B. Berachot 50a).

With this in mind, we can appreciate the words of one commentator (Maharsha, 16th-17th centuries, Poland): A person who stringently rejects any meat that is doubtfully kosher is indeed a G-d-fearing person, for he avoids any possible pitfalls. Such a scrupulous person surely merits reward in the world-to-come, despite not being able to eat the meat in this world. Another person, who through diligent study and application establishes that the meat is in fact kosher, merits not only the world-to-come, but is fortunate in this world in that he can enjoy the meat.

This may be the thrust of another rabbinic statement in our tractate: "The one who derives benefit from his own labor" - referring to the scholar who carefully determines the law - "is greater than the one who fears Heaven" - referring to the righteous person who cautiously avoids such decision-making by trying to satisfy all opinions (B. Berachot 8a).

In this context it is worthy to mention a fascinating law. A shohet (ritual slaughterer) who mistakenly declares meat to be kosher is sacked for misleading his customers and supplying them with non-kosher meat (Shulhan Aruch YD 1:2). What about a shohet who mistakenly pronounces kosher meat as unfit? This shohet, too, is removed from his post as his mistakes may one day go in the other direction with serious implications (Rivash, 14th century, Spain-Algiers). This ruling appears to be harsh, for the shohet has not made anyone eat prohibited food; he has merely been too fastidious in his work. In light of our discussion, we can add that an overly conscientious demeanor is clearly not always the preferred route.

Thus our sages present two paradigms, each with its own merits. Seeking a normative course of action that satisfies more than one position is a valiant attempt at avoiding mistaken practice. Such a course indicates a sincere concern for the law and Divine will, as the compromiser seeks to guarantee proper fulfillment of obligations.

The tendency to meticulously fulfill all opinions simultaneously may reveal fear of Heaven; it does not, however, bespeak greatness. Choosing between two valid and compelling alternatives requires a certain fortitude and strength of character.

The Talmud acknowledges and endorses both models, recognizing the relative advantages of each mode of conduct: The compromiser stands out in his fear of Heaven, while the decisor displays normative courage. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper teaches at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the *Jerusalem Post* and *Up Front Magazine*. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud,

*Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**W**hy was the first Jew Abraham and not Adam, Abraham and not Noah? I've dealt with this question before, having suggested that the uniqueness of Abraham resides in the fact that he created three generations faithful to ethical monotheism, a feat accomplished neither by Adam nor by Noah. In this commentary I would like to make another suggestion; I would like to look at these three outstanding biblical personalities from the perspective of their attitudes towards their wives.

Adam and Eve transgress G-ds command and eat of the forbidden fruit of knowledge of good and evil. G-d first confronts Adam, the individual to whom he initially gave the command forbidding the eating of the fruit: "Is it then that from the tree which I commanded you not to eat of it, you ate?" Apparently, what G-d expected to hear from Adam was a contrite confession, following which everything would have been forgiven and all the human descendants would still be happily residing in the Garden of Eden. Instead, Adam is full of recriminations, against G-d but especially against Eve, his wife "And the man said, 'The woman whom You gave to me, she gave me from the tree and I ate'" (Genesis 3:11, 12). Not only is there no confession from Adam or any attempt at protecting his wife; what this first man does is escaping from responsibility by placing all the blame on his wife's shoulders. He sees his wife as being a mere means to his end.

Chapter 5 of the book of Genesis catalogs the ten generations between Adam and Noah "And Shet lived 105 years and he begat (literally bore, gave birth to) Enosh...and Enosh lived 90 years and he begat Canaan" (Genesis 5:6, 9). And so the verses continue, He lived and he begat, ...but where are the women in this whole process of Begatting? Did the men have children by themselves?! And when the Bible does mention the two wives of Lemekh, Adah and Zilah, the Midrash cited by Rashi explains their name derivative as expressing their respective functions: Adah was the baby machine while Zilah was the trophy wife. This hardly expresses a husband-wife partnership and soul mate relationship.

And now we come to Noah. Our Torah portion opens with an introduction "These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generation; Noah walked with G-d. And Noah begat three sons: Shem, Ham and Yafet" (Genesis 6:8-10). However, here again Noah alone does the Begatting, with no mention of a Mrs. Noah (It is the Midrash who does identify his wife as having been Naamah, the sister of Tuval Cain - Genesis 4:22). G-d apparently picks up on Noahs habitual disregard of his wife "And

G-d said to Noah: 'you and your house (a noun used talmudically to refer to ones wife but generally referring to ones household or family) shall come into the ark ...from all the pure animals take for yourself seven of a kind a man and a woman" (Genesis 7:1, 2). Animals are generally referred to in the Bible as male and female not as a man and his wife. G-d is apparently demonstrating to Noah that just as in the animal world, the human world comes in pairs, husbands with their wives. Noah doesn't get the point. "Noah and his sons and his wife and the wives of his sons" come into the ark (Genesis 7:7). And once again the Bible emphasizes "on that very day Noah and Shem, Ham and Yafet the sons of Noah and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons came with them into the ark" (Genesis 7:13). G-d tries one final time: "and G-d said to Noah, 'Go out of the ark you and your wife, your sons and sons' wives' (Genesis 8:15). But even this time, Noah remains impervious to G-ds Him "And Noah and his sons, his wife and his sons wives exited from the ark" (Genesis 8:18)

It is only in the case of Abraham that the bible describes his wife as an independent personage with a unique individual character "And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abraham was Sarai and throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah we see two individuals working together as a team. As the Midrash so aptly interprets the Biblical reference to the "Soul they made in Haran"(Genesis 12:5), "Abraham converted the males and Sarah converted the females" (Rashi Ad Loc). G-d tells Abraham, "Everything that Sarah says to you, you must listen to her voice" (Genesis 21:12), and for the 38 years that Abraham lived after Sarah's death - a period when he remained strong and virile, marries another woman (Keturah, Hadar) and has sons and daughters with her - he is never visited by G-d and the act of consequence he accomplishes is choosing Eliezer to seek a suitable wife for Isaac. Apparently it was Sarah who was the greater prophet of the two, as our Sages suggest. Perhaps it is because of the developed Husband-Wife relationship expressed by Abraham and Sarah, that it is Abraham - and not Adam or Noah - who is considered the first Jew.

Last year I was invited to Melbourne Australia to speak at the Yahrzeit of Rav Hayim Gutnick, one of the most important scholars and spokesman for Australian Jewry. One of the most moving experiences of my life was the viewing of a video of the speech Rav Gutnick gave on the 30th day following his wife's demise. After extolling her virtues he said to the large crowd gathered to honor her memory,

"I don't know why but during the last period of my wife's illness I never told her how much I loved her. I had many opportunity's to do so, but the words "I love you" never escaped my lips and this omission doesn't allow me to rest - because now it is too late. If you who

assembled here today truly wish to pay proper tribute to the memory of your Rebbetzin then when you come home let each of you say to his/her spouse I Love You before its too late". © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he parsha of Noach is a frightening one for it illustrates to us the possibility of human life, as we know it, to self-destruct. One need only think of the madmen controlling North Korea and Iran to realize that the apocalypse is not a figure of theory or imagination. Noah's world is destroyed before his very eyes. G-d's promise regarding floods and ice ages not recurring in such a cataclysmic fashion is, according to the rabbis, limited to only the destruction of the world by water. It does not address other forms of potential disaster.

Noach's world was one of greed, oppression, financial and physical corruption and unbridled sexual excess and licentiousness. Well, tragically and unfortunately, our world also resembles such a state of human affairs. Noach is apparently unable to cope with his world. He builds his protective ark and rides out the storm. But understandably he is traumatized by the event. Though he lives to see the world rebuilt, he is never able to forget the destruction that he witnessed.

Noach, so to speak, does not move on from the events of the flood. All of his previous years of effort in building the ark and obeying G-d's commandment are seemingly wasted because of his inability to capitalize on his miraculous survival. Though he survives, he is also a victim of that flood. This explains, in a way, his strange decision to plant a vineyard, harvest the grapes and then himself become drunk on the resultant wine. Rashi already comments on the foolishness of his decision to do so. But it is his inability to move past the trauma that drives him to behave thusly and like many another human being he drowns his inner sorrows in alcohol and wine.

The test of life always is the ability to move on with life and not be destroyed by the traumatic events that we witness and experience. The rabbis of the Mishna compliment our father Avraham on his ability to do so ten times in his lifetime. Wallowing in drink to soothe past troubles has never been a Jewish characteristic. Perhaps that is why Jews begin their ancestry with Avraham and not with Noach.

Our generations have witnessed awful events and tragedies. The resilience of the Jewish people in rising from those events and experiences has been the hallmark of our survival throughout the ages. This resilience is based upon a pride in our special mission of being a unique people - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Without this ingredient of pride, self-worth, and holiness of mission we would never have been

able to survive and prosper as we have done over the ages.

Other peoples have suffered destruction and even genocide. But they have never recovered from that trauma. Like Noach they could not restore themselves to their former position and greatness. Thus they became the true victims of the flood that engulfed them. In a strange way, the story of Noach repeats itself in all generations. It is Avraham's example that we are bidden to follow. To build and produce and be forward looking is the Jewish response to the waters of the floods that constantly threaten to engulf us. © 2006 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

#### RABBI ZVI MILLER

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**A**fter the floodwaters receded from the earth, only Noah and the creatures that were in the ark remained alive. When they left the ark to resume their lives upon the earth HaShem blessed them (Bereishis 9:1), "And HaShem blessed Noah and his children, and He said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'"

However, when HaShem created the world, He blessed mankind with this same blessing, i.e., "to be fruitful and multiply." If so, why did the Torah repeat the blessing after the flood?

If a critical structural flaw is found in a building, it must be razed and rebuilt anew. Only a complete rebuilding will remove the flaw-insuring that the building will stand straight and strong for many years.

Likewise, the deep moral corruption found in mankind before the flood rendered an uncorrectable flaw in the very essence of creation. Therefore, the remedy for the defect required a complete rebuilding, i.e., renewal of the world.

Accordingly, life after the flood was not merely a continuation of existence as it was before the flood. Rather, life after the flood was a recreation and renewal of the world. Therefore, HaShem blessed the world, "be fruitful and multiply"-the appropriate blessing for the beginning of life.

Through Mussar study and practice, we focus on rectifying our lesser traits. Each session of Mussar refines our character and purifies our soul. The effect of Mussar is not just a temporary modification of human behavior. Rather, the powerful remedy of Mussar penetrates deeply within us-transforming and recreating our beings.

In light of this King David said, "HaShem create a pure heart within me and renew my spirit." May our study of Mussar fill our hearts with purity and the joy of being "newly created." (Based on the commentary of

Da'as Torah of Rav Yerucham Levovitz) Implement: As you are studying Mussar-know that HaShem is recreating your heart and soul. © 2006 Rabbi Z. Miller & The Salant Foundation

#### RABBI AVI WEISS

### Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**his week's portion describes the famous story in Genesis of the great deluge that destroyed the earth. Why must the narrative tell us about the flood in such great detail? The Torah, very simply, could have told us that the world had turned to evil and that G-d had no other choice but to destroy all living things. Several answers come to mind.

When thinking about the deluge most of us conjure up an image of a G-d who is vengeful seeking to punish with great brutality the entire world. But the extent of the narrative indicates a very different message. Far from G-d being a G-d of retribution, the length of the descriptions teaches that G-d is a G-d of compassion who actually hesitated to destroy the world. Thus Nehama Leibowitz divides the section prior to the flood into six paragraphs. The tedious discussion of what G-d goes through before allowing the waters to come down reveals a G-d who waits until the last instant to eradicate the world - hoping against hope that humankind would repent. Indeed, on the morning of the flood, the Torah says, "and rain (not a flood) was upon the earth." (7:12) Rashi tells us that the great flood began as only rain because, even at the last moment, if humanity would have repented G-d would have turned the waters into a rain of blessing.

It is noteworthy that there is a similar phenomenon that takes place in the narrative describing Noah's exit from the ark. The detailed and deliberate style may indicate an uncertainty on the part of Noah. Having experienced "the deluge," Noah hesitated to start over, wondering and worrying why he should exit and start the world anew. After all, more destruction could be around the corner. Note that G-d commands Noah to leave the ark with his wife so that he could cohabit and continue to live as a family. Noah, however, exits with his sons, while his wife leaves with their daughters-in-law as they could not fathom living together as husband and wife and continuing the human race. (Genesis 8:16, 18)

One other thought. Maybe the flood narrative is extended to parallel the Genesis story, which is actually extremely similar to ours. Just as the world started with water, so too did water flood the earth. Just as G-d first created light, so too the only light in the world was in the ark itself. Just as the Torah details G-d's creation of animals, so too does the narrative detail Noah's taking the animals out of the ark. It is almost as if the world started all over again. Not coincidentally, after going forth from the ark G-d tells Noah that he should procreate, control the earth and be on a special diet.

(Genesis 9:1-3) Blessings of procreation, control and diet were also given to Adam. (Genesis 1:28-29)

Yet, there is one significant difference between the creation story of Adam and of Noach. In the beginning G-d creates alone. When Noach leaves the ark to start beginning the world again, Noach participates in creation by immediately planting a vineyard.

The creation with Noach as a partner may be almost a repairing of the first version, where G-d alone created. Being given something and taking part in its creation are two different things. Once involved, one feels a sense of responsibility. For this reason Noach stands a greater chance of succeeding than Adam. And while soon after Noach the earth suffers in the dramatic incident of the Tower of Babel, still the earth is not destroyed as it was in the deluge. Progress had been made and still more progress would be made once Abraham and Sarah come on the scene.

One may claim that Noach failed in his task of creation, for the only mention of Noach after the flood is his becoming drunk. But it is not so simple. After devastation it is not easy to begin again. In that sense, I would claim that Noach clearly succeeded. His creation was a resounding success even while it was done with complex feelings and emotions.

We similarly must understand the strength and commitment of those who went on after the Shoah to recreate as well. After witnessing destruction with their very eyes, so many assumed responsibility and rebuilt their lives in Israel and throughout the world. That is the type of creation that is truly everlasting. © 2006 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 ABBA WAGENSBERG**

## **Between the Lines**

**T**his week's Torah portion opens with the following statement: "Noah was an ISH (man) TZADDIK (righteous person) TAMIM (who was completely righteous)" (Genesis 6:9). The word ISH is a complement in its own right, and the additional descriptions heap honor upon honor on Noah. No other personality is described with so many consecutive praises in one verse!

The first verse in the Book of Psalms teaches: "Fortunate is the man (ISH) who has not gone in the counsel of the wicked, and has not stood in the path of sinners, and has not sat in the company of scoffers." The Midrash Socher Tov, in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, comments that the phrase "Fortunate is the man (ISH)," refers to Noah, since Noah is called ISH, as in our parsha.

Why is Noah described as "fortunate"? According to the Midrash, Noah was fortunate in that he

did not follow the ways of the three categories of people (wicked, sinners, scoffers) cited in Psalms. These three negative categories correspond to the three generations that arose in the world over the course of Noah's lifetime: the generation of Enosh (Adam's grandson, who initiated the practice of idolatry); the generation of the Flood (immersed in immoral behavior); and the generation of the dispersion (who built the Tower of Babel in order to wage war against G-d). It was Noah's good fortune that he did not go in the path of any of these three generations.

The Midrash teaches us that Noah spent his entire life surrounded by evil and wickedness, yet he managed to make himself into one of the most righteous people who ever lived. This is a remarkable feat. How is it possible for a person to maintain such a high level of spirituality while surrounded by an environment of depravity and corruption?

A passage from the Talmud will help us resolve this question. Ben Zoma says, "Who is a wise person? One who learns from everyone" (Avot 4:1). This is a strange statement. It seems reasonable for us to want to learn from righteous people-but what is wise about learning from the wicked?

The Berditchiver Rebbe remarks that righteous people are able to perceive positive qualities in even the most negative situations. From everything they encounter, they learn how to serve G-d better.

For example, if a righteous person were to witness someone passionately engaged in sinning, he would recognize and appreciate the tremendous motivating power of passion. However, instead of taking that power and using it to accomplish negative goals, the righteous person would redirect it for a meaningful purpose. The correct channeling of passion has the potential to change rote, sterile performance of G-d's mitzvot into mitzvah observance driven by enthusiasm and fire! (Kedushat Levi, end of Parshat Bereishit)

Noah epitomized this ability to channel negative forces toward a higher purpose. A hint to this idea is found in his name. The Torah tells us (Genesis 6:8) that Noah found chen (favor) in the eyes of G-d. The name NOAH (nun-chet), when reversed, spells CHEN (chet-nun)! Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d by mastering the art of reversal. He had the ability to redirect every energy from a negative goal to a positive one.

This is why a wise person learns from everyone. Instead of being corrupted by his evil generation, Noah used it as an opportunity for spiritual growth. He had the "best" teachers available! All Noah had to do was learn to take their ingenuity, arrogance, passion, jealousy and zeal, and use them in a productive, constructive way to get closer to G-d.

May we all learn how to transform the power of every energy and drive into positive action in order to

become the best we can possibly be. © 2006 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

**RABBI ZEV LEFF**

## Outlooks & Insights

“**A**nd as for Me-Behold I am about to bring the floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which there is a breath of life under the heavens; everything that is in the earth shall expire.” (Genesis 6:17)

The prophet Isaiah (54:9) refers to the Flood as *mei Noach*-the waters of Noah-thereby implying that Noah bears at least partial responsibility for the Flood. Sferno suggests that Noah's failure lay in failing to teach his generation to know G-d and to walk in His ways. Had he taught them to know G-d, they would surely have repented.

We can explain this Sferno as follows. The Midrash comments on the phrase, "the path (*derech erez*) to the Tree of Life," that *derech erez* is *middos*, proper character traits. *Middos* are the paths that lead to the Tree of Life, the Torah. Hence, "Derech erez precedes Torah." First one refines his *middos*, and only then can the Torah dwell within him. The Torah cannot reside in one who does not possess good *middos*: "Where there is no *derech erez*, there is no Torah." (see *Rabbeinu Yona* to *Pirkei Avos* 3:22) Even though only Torah can bring one's *middos* to ultimate perfection, where there is no foundation of proper *middos*, the acquisition of Torah is impossible.

*Rabbeinu Yona's* categorical negation of the possibility of Torah residing in one who lacks good *middos* can be understood in two ways, both true. The first is that a person's lack of good *middos* makes ultimate retention of his Torah knowledge-no matter how great-impossible, because his lack of *middos* prevents the Torah from fully meshing with the essence of his soul. Hence when he leaves this world, the Torah will not accompany him, but be left behind with his other external physical components.

An alternative explanation is that even in this world the Torah will not remain with him. This idea can be illustrated with the following anecdote. Maimonides had a dispute with a philosopher whether instinct or training is the decisive factor in animal behavior. To prove the efficacy of training, the philosopher taught cats to stand erect, balance trays and serve as waiters. He dressed them for the part and conducted a banquet with the cats as the waiters. Maimonides countered his proof by releasing some mice at the banquet. The cats, forgetting all their training, let the trays and dishes crash to the ground as they rushed about on all fours in pursuit of the mice.

Human beings also have their baser instincts and desires that, without training, drag them onto all fours. A human being is distinct from the animals, however, by virtue of his ability to perfect his *middos* so

that they control his baser instincts. One who has not worked on perfecting his *middos* will, like the trained cat, be able to put on a show of Torah discipline for a time, but only so long as no "mice" are released in his path.

A Torah scholar, says Maimonides, is one who has mastered good character traits. Since he has perfected his character, his sins are by their very nature incidental, not symptomatic of basic character flaws. Therefore we are told that if we see a righteous person sin at night, we should assume that by the next day he has repented. Because the sin did not flow from an intrinsic character flaw, he certainly recognized the need to repent in the interim.

Rabbi Chaim Vital explains that *middos* were not enumerated in the Torah among the *Mitzvos* because they are the very foundation of all *Mitzvos* and the Torah itself. It is in his ability to emulate the perfect character traits attributed to G-d that man is in the image of G-d. One who lacks proper character is therefore deficient in the very essence of humanity.

The Alter from Kelm once remarked that Darwin was able to formulate his theory of evolution only because he had never seen a real human being. Thus he could view men as no more than smarter monkeys. "Had he seen my teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who developed his character traits to a degree of perfection that fully expressed the essence of the Divine Image, he never could have entertained the possibility that human beings evolved from monkeys," said the Alter.

Darwin's peers were surely socially respectable people, but with regard to true character development, they remained mere trained cats, whose instinctive desires could at any moment bring them down on all fours.

The sins of immorality and robbery of the generation of the Flood were merely symptoms of the underlying disease of deficient character development. Noah attacked the symptom, but failed to cure the disease. He did not teach them to know G-d through contemplation of His *middos* and to walk in His ways by correcting and developing their own character traits. Hence he was unsuccessful. His rebuke may occasionally have suppressed the symptoms, but they soon reappeared, since the underlying cause had not been treated. Without changing their underlying character, no true repentance was possible.

The Torah describes the generation of the Flood as "*rabbas ro'as ha'adam*." This can be translated to mean the evil they perpetrated was beyond the boundaries of *adam*-of human beings. They corrupted the very essence of their humanity, their *middos*. Hence, the Midrash says, they were punished measure for measure with the overflowing of the great deep. They destroyed their natural humanity, and therefore the natural order was abrogated and the

waters of the deep breached their boundaries and inundated the world. Likewise, the result of the Flood was literally to dissolve their human forms-an external manifestation of their inner spiritual decay.

The mystical works explain that the colors of the rainbow are representations of G-d's middos (attributes). Thus, the rainbow is the symbol of G-d's promise not to bring another flood, for by reflecting on and emulating G-d's middos, we ensure that another flood will not be necessary.

Only after the Flood did G-d permit the consumption of meat. Sefer Halkrim explains that mankind, prior to the Flood, equated animal life with human life; man was, in their eyes, reduced to but a glorified and more developed animal. To counter this tragic mistake, G-d permitted mankind to eat meat. He thereby demonstrated that there is an essential qualitative difference between people and animals that gives us the right to kill them for food. That essential difference is inherent in man's ability to develop and emulate the middos of his Creator.

Unlike Noah, Abraham was able to influence the people of his generation precisely because he concentrated on teaching middos. He was thus able to remedy the disease and not just the symptoms. At the age of three, Abraham knew that there was a G-d, but not until 40, says Maimonides, could he be described as "knowing his Creator," i.e. as recognizing G-d through the comprehension of His middos and their emulation. Only then did Abraham begin to teach his generation. By teaching middos, he succeeded in breaking the idols. He convinced his contemporaries to abandon G-ds made in their image for the service of the true G-d. G-d explains His choice of Abraham as the progenitor of the Jewish people: "For I know that he will command his children and household after him that they will keep G-d's way, doing charity and justice." (Genesis 18:19). G-d knew that Abraham would direct his descendants in derech Hashem- the path of middos that leads to the Tree of Life, Torah. That is why we, Abraham's descendants, were worthy of eventually receiving the Torah. © 2006 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.com

#### **DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK**

## **What's Bothering Rashi**

**M**an was banished from the Garden of Eden after Adam's sin and was made to live in this world with all its temptations. The ten generations between Adam and Noah saw a decline in spirituality and in interpersonal behavior, until mankind reached a nadir in morality. The result was G-d's decree to bring the flood and destroy all living beings except for Noah, his family and the animals in the ark. The Torah tells us the reason for this holocaustal decree.

"And G-d saw the earth and behold it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth. And G-d said to Noah: The end of all flesh has come

before Me, the earth is filled with thievery because of them, and behold I will destroy them with the earth." (Genesis 6:12-14)

"The end of all flesh"-RASHI: "Wherever you find lewdness and idolatry, total upheaval comes to the world, killing the good and the bad alike."

"The earth is filled with thievery"-RASHI: "Their fate was sealed only because of robbery."

The first Rashi tells us that lewdness and idolatry were the sins for which mankind was destroyed.

The second Rashi tells us that although man and animal had crossed all red lines with their perverse sexual norms, nevertheless their fate was not sealed. The decision to destroy all living beings was not settled in G-d's mind until He realized the extent of their thievery.

The question should be apparent. Rashi seems to contradict himself. First he says that sexual promiscuity and idolatry were the sins for which they were punished! Then he says that thievery was the fatal sin for which their fate was sealed. Which is it?

Can you explain away the contradiction? Certainly this is not easy.

An Answer: To understand Rashi's reasoning we must be aware of a Midrash which says that when G-d punishes man, He does not start off by punishing the person himself. First He strikes at his material belongings, then if there is no repentance He punishes the person himself.

But this principle can only make sense when the person's material possessions were lawfully earned. If he had stolen other's property, then G-d's punishing his property would not deprive the person of anything that was really his. He would only be losing what he had stolen.

In such a case G-d would have no choice but to begin by punishing the person himself, since the first line of defense, his possessions, could not be meaningfully attacked.

This, then, is what Rashi means. The major sins were lewdness and idolatry and for them man was to be punished. But G-d would have begun punishing him by destroying his property first and only later destroying him-if he didn't repent.

However, since mankind had also sinned by stealing other people's property, his fate was sealed by the sin of thievery-meaning that now he would be immediately punished personally because of his sins of lewdness and idolatry. The usual first stage of punishment-attacking his possessions- wasn't an available option for G-d, since man's possessions were stolen from others and not rightfully his.

So Rashi says correctly "his fate was only sealed due to the sin of robbery." Meaning his fate of being immediately doomed to destruction was sealed.

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