



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Self-Restraint and Self-Contraction

What was the sin of the Generation of the Flood? The verses repeat that they had “corrupted their way”, which the Rabbis tell us refers to idolatry and sexual sin. And yet this is not what had sealed their fate, for the verse states: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, because the land is filled with hamas – understood by the Rabbis as “robbery” – through them.” (6:13). “Said Rabbi Yochanan: Come and see how great is the sin of robbery. For the Generation of the Flood had transgressed everything, and yet their final decree was not sealed until they had engaged in robbery.” (Sanhedrin 108).

Why robbery? Robbery, or at least its driving force, is perhaps the most basic violation, the evil that leads to all other evils. How is this true? The act of forcefully taking something that belongs to someone else is about seeing something that you want, and acting to satisfy your desire in disregard of the other person who has a rightful claim to the object. This, I would argue, is at the core of almost all other evildoing. There is only one person in the world that matters, and that is me. As long as I don’t get caught, I am entitled to do anything I want to do to satisfy my desires, to serve my own interests. In short, it is about seeing everything outside of yourself as either an object of your desire or as an obstacle to your satisfying that desire.

Let us consider some of the sins leading up to the Flood. In the verse immediately preceding God’s decision to bring the flood we are told, “And the benei ha’elohim, sons of the greats, saw the daughters of man, that they were comely, and they took for themselves wives from all that they chose.” The women were objects of desire, these men who had power saw what they wanted and took it. What is rape and sexual abuse if not the turning of the other person into an object of your desire, to be taken without concern for the humanity of that other person? And what is adultery if not the treating of the other partner as merely an obstacle to the satisfying of your desires, an annoyance to be disregarded, to be lied to, to be dehumanized?

Going back further, we move from sexual sin to murder. Why did Cain kill Abel? The midrash tells us that it was about world domination.

What were they arguing about? They said: Come let us divide the world.... One said: The land on which you are standing is mine. The other replied: The clothes you are wearing are mine. One said: Take them off! The other said: Get off! In the course of this Cain rose up against Abel and killed him. (Breishit Rabba 22:16).

You have something I want, you are in my way, so I will kill you to get it. Now, according to the simple reading of the text, it was not a desire to own the world that motivated Cain, but jealousy of Abel as the favored of God. True, it is not always about property. Sometimes it is about honor, feeling good about yourself, not being made to feel unworthy. It still all boils down to the same thing. This other person is in my way, his very existence is a nuisance and an irritant to me. I am the only person who matters, ergo he must be killed. With such an attitude, Cain, in his killing of Abel, had actually achieved his goal – to live in a world where he was the only person who existed.

Ultimately this brings us back to the Creation story and first sin of humankind. In the Garden of Eden, Adam could have eaten from any tree he chose. Just one tree was off limits, was not his for the taking. The first sin, the primordial sin, was seeing, wanting, taking. “And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was desirable to the eyes... and she took from its fruit and she ate.”

In this case, we are not talking about making space for another person. This is about making space for God. If God is in the world, and God has demands, then we need to pull back to make space for God, to respect God’s presence. When we sin, to some degree we are treating

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God also as an object, as an obstacle to our self-gratification. When we sin, we push God out of the way, out of the world. "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I feared for I was naked, and I hid," says Adam to God. Until now, You were not in the garden with me. I was able to sin, because it was just me in the world and that which I wanted. Now that You are here, I must pull back.

Ultimately we are talking about tzimtzum. Not only about self-restraint, but about self-contraction. God created us in God's image. The first most obvious meaning of this is that we have the power to create, to control those things around us. And this is our first mandate "Subdue the earth and have dominion over it". To do such is to project ourselves into the world, just as God had done when God created the world. If this is all there is, however, then the world is nothing but us. No one else exists. I fill the world.

But creation was more than that. Part of creation was tzimtzum, God's contracting of Godself. Not only was this true before creation, in order to make space for creation to occur, but it was also a feature of the creation as well. When God came to create humans, God pulled back: "Let us create the human in our image." God made this a collaborative effort. And God created something that was not just an object. God created a person, a person who had will, who had free choice that even God could not, or would not, control. God created something in God's image; God created something very much like Godself.

When God created humans, God pulled back. When God created Eve, Adam pulled back. A part of Adam was removed from him, he was forced to shrink himself so that another person can exist. It is not coincidental that prior to the creation of Eve, Adam was commanded to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. This command introduced the mandate of tzimtzum, demanded that he be like God not just in creating and dominating, but also in contracting, in acknowledging those outside himself, in making space for God. It is following this that Eve is created, that he is able to pull back to make space for another person, for Eve. Paradoxically, this pulling back did not make him less, but more. "Thus shall a man leave his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife, and they will be as one flesh." When he cleaves to his wife as an equal, as "flesh of his flesh", as one equivalent to him, then it is not he who becomes one flesh, it is not the integrating of the other into oneself, but rather they who become one flesh. Having made space for the

other, they both become whole.

A world that is all about you can be a pretty boring place. The richness, beauty, and dynamism that are part of creation come when we value others for themselves, not just as objects to satisfy our desires. God created humans by exhibiting tzimtzum. We create humans when we stop seeing the other as a projection of ourselves and our desires. We create humans by making space for the personhood, the humanity of the other.

The ultimate sin is, indeed, stealing. It is seeing, desiring and taking. It is seeing all others as objects. The remedy starts with the fundamental recognition of the humanity of the other. And thus, when the world starts over, God gives commandments to Noach. The two most explicit commandments are the prohibition of murder and of eating from animals when the life force is still in the blood. It is to respect human life, the divine image of every person. People are not objects, and they cannot be treated as such. But not just people. Life must be so respected that even animals cannot be treated as objects. Our appetitive desires must be curbed in recognition of all life, even animal life.

We are thus set on a course that will hopefully lead to a better world, to a more just world. This starts with recognizing the humanity of those around us. And what about recognizing God's presence in the world? What about not pushing God out of our way, about the pulling back that is necessary because of what God has forbidden? The realization of this would have to wait until the next epoch of history, the choosing of Avraham whose mission it would be to spread God's name and to bring God into the world.

Shabbat Shalom!

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