

Noah, 5781

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Beneath the plain text of the Torah, our Sages teach that the cardinal sin of Noah's generation pertained to sexual licentiousness (see Rosh Hashanna 12a). As the Torah alludes, this debauchery pervaded all members of society, and was reflected even in the behaviors of the animals themselves. While likely of a starkly different magnitude, the failure of Noah's society should prompt us to take a hard and honest look at the failures of our own society in this realm, and at the significant impact they have upon us, our children, and our grandchildren.

Western culture has a great deal to be proud of. Never has a secular society placed as great an emphasis on the value of human life, individual rights, and religious tolerance as this country and this culture. As Jews, we owe an unqualified debt of gratitude, and must never fall into the trap of needing to denigrate other cultures in order to artificially boost our own. At the same time, however, to cast a blind eye upon the many real dangers that come from unregulated freedom of speech and expression -- particularly in the exposure to sexuality -- would constitute nothing short of cruelty and negligence.

While basic human nature may not have changed much over the centuries, technology and media certainly have, resulting in unprecedented levels of exposure with unknown effects. These exposures pervade every aspect of society, from advertisements on traditionally reputable news sites to cheerleaders at professional sports games to normative modes of dress. Although we do not have reliable data on the specific effects of these exposures, I encounter people daily who appear to be suffering severe direct consequences in mental health, marital harmony, and basic life functioning related to these matters. Oftentimes, our immersion and habituation to the norms of a society may render us oblivious to how perniciously abnormal they actually are. The Torah, with its intense emphasis on modesty, contentment, and purity of vision, unequivocally reminds us that these norms are not neutral or natural, but rather the product of a very specific and contextual worldview that prioritizes lust over love, fantasy over reality, and pleasure over happiness.

All too often, I see how easily spiritual challenges can be confused with organic mental illness. It is far simpler to thoughtlessly label something a “chemical imbalance” and prescribe a medication, than to thoughtfully and carefully explore the underpinnings of a person's inner suffering. While it seems clear that medical mental illness is,

tragically, a reality that can exist independent of society, upbringing, or religion, that does not conversely imply that all emotional suffering is rooted in medical etiologies. Our values and our environment exert a tremendous impact upon our emotional wellness. It is well-established, for example, that the rates of eating disorders increased markedly after the popularization of television, as the link between appearance and self-worth was intensified. In a similar fashion, so much of modern marketing exploits the power of sexuality to tap into deep-seated insecurities and drives, convincing us that the size of our waist is more important than the size of our heart. Ads and websites are craftily designed by unscrupulous individuals who know exactly what they are doing to prey on and entrap others, like a chicken mindlessly pecking at a trail of birdseed that leads to a trap. The results of such ubiquitous exposures appear to be manifold, including depression, addiction, so-called "Shidduch Crises," and estrangement from one's parents, one's spouse, and oneself.

What is the solution? The honest answer is I'm not fully sure. But, as Parashat Noah reminds us, we must learn from the mistakes of history, and raising awareness is always the first step. Torah study must of course be increased. People who are already struggling in this area should not be stigmatized or humiliated, but rather, gently encouraged to seek help. And as a community, we must be extremely careful in the values we promote, the modalities of technology with relevant safeguards we choose to utilize and provide to our children, and the extent to which we thoughtlessly embrace contemporary culture. The unignorable reality of peer pressure -- "why can't I have it if he has it" -- makes it essential for Jewish schools to take an active role in these matters, implementing regulations that protect the lives and futures of all children. Beyond protecting our own community, such an endeavor has the ability to help an entire world that is being pummeled by these effects, with almost no one trying to do anything about it. When history books look back upon the unique challenges that first surfaced in this generation, may our collective community merit to be reckoned as a צדיק תמים בדורותיו.