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How to Grow Up and Why

When our eldest child Noam was 6 months old or so, a professional mentor of mine saw him and said, “Oh what a cute baby! It’s so great when they are at an age when it is still impossible to be angry at them.” I had no idea what she meant. Eleven years later I understand. An infant can try one’s patience and be exhausting, but it is misplaced to be angry at infants who cannot disappoint us with their behavior. Who is, and who is not, an appropriate target of anger is a theme of Parashat Noach.

Seemingly we find a contradiction in the Torah itself surrounding the flood and God’s response to human wickedness. Before the flood, the Torah recounts God’s thoughts in this way:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יֶזְרַח מַחְשַׁבְתּוֹ לָבוֹ נָק רָע כָּל-הַיּוֹם: וַיִּנְחַם ה' כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל-לְבוֹ:

After the account of the flood and the drying of the waters, when the ark is emptied and Noach offers korbanot on dry land, the Torah tells us of God’s response:

כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֶת-נִיחָם וַיֵּימָר ה' אֶל-לְבוֹ לֹא-אֶסְפֵּן לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת-הָאָדָמָה בְּעֵבוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לִבְּהָאָדָם רָע מִנְעֲרֵיו וְלֹא-אֶסְפֵּן עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת-כָּל-חַי כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי:

We are first told that God wishes to destroy the world because “the inclinations of human hearts are towards evil all day long” and after the undoing of creation and God’s granting a second chance to the world, we are told that the reason God will never again destroy the world through a flood is because “the inclination of a human heart is towards evil from youth.” The evil that exists in our hearts is the reason God destroys the world and the reason God pledges never to do so again.

I believe that contradictions that are this straightforward are meant to be noticed and are meant to draw our attention to something of great significance.

I shared last week how my teacher, Rabbi David Ebner, almost twenty years ago, taught me to appreciate the opinion recorded in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 70) that the forbidden “tree of knowledge” was a wheat stalk since, “a child does not know how to say ‘*abba*’ or ‘*imma*’ until he or she tastes wheat.” Rabbi Ebner explained that the Talmud is alluding to the psychological paradox wherein as we gain independence and autonomy as infants by eating solid foods, we also realize that we are dependent on other people - such as our parents - for our survival. I suggested last week that it was this paradox, and the failure to navigate a way through that paradox which inspired the primordial sin of eating from the tree of knowledge.

Rabbi Ebner, however, continued in his analysis of the spiritual origins of humanity and extended them into this an explanation of this week’s Torah portion and the contradiction that we noticed earlier.

Rashi explains God’s comment in the aftermath of the flood by writing:

מִנְעֲרֵיו מִנְעֲרֵיו כְּתִיב, מִשְׁנֵנֶר לְצִאת מִמְעֵי אִמּוֹ נִתְּנוּ בּוֹ יֶזְרַח הָרָע:

The evil inclination is from youth - which Rashi says “*ne’urav*” from youth intimates the word “*n’ar*” which is to stir. And so God is saying that the evil inclination exists in people from the moment when the fetus begins to stir so that it can leave its mother’s womb, at that moment the evil inclination is given to the child.

This perspective on infancy and childhood is at odds with a romantic conception of childhood that sees children as pure and innocent, but Rashi's perspective is consistent with the perspective of the famous childhood psychologist Selma Freiburg who wrote,

“The child begins life as a pleasure-seeking animal; his infantile personality is organized around his own appetites and his own body. In the course of his rearing the goal of exclusive pleasure seeking must be modified drastically, the fundamental urges must be subject to the dictates of conscience and society, urges must be capable of postponement and in some instances of renunciation completely.

The pervasive evil of the antediluvian world caused God to wipe it clean with a flood. After the flood, God acknowledges that the evil inclination is part and parcel of the human condition in our infancy and childhood. But God pledges never again to destroy the world through a flood since God understands that it is possible to grow up.

Judaism is a tool to help us grow up. Our relationship to God is meant to foster our ability to overcome the paradox of autonomy and independence on God that the first people were not able to navigate in prelapsarian Eden. And Torah and mitzvot guide our relationships with other people and the world around us in such a way that, slowly, we can grow up and overcome infant selfishness.

There are barriers to growing up. A contemporary ethos that sees selfishness as a virtue and that asserts that “greed is good” condemns us to remaining in moral infancy. Technological and cultural advancements which allow us to customize our mattress firmness, or the level of salsa hotness, select one of 43 varieties of mustard, or consume the media that confirms our prior opinions and biases, can all lead to a self-indulgence in which we expect the world to accommodate our comfort and our perspectives. There is nothing wrong with enjoying life and being comfortable, but someone who is never disappointed by his mustard may have difficulty dealing with disappointment from his family or community.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his short satirical work of religious ethics, *The Screwtape Letters* that an individual who attends many different houses of worship, a different church, for example each week, will become inured to the impact of religion to improve his soul. If he is a critic, evaluating the congregation or the sermon, at a moment when he should be a student, he will never learn. Evaluation and judgement and criticism can prevent being open to growth. From this perspective, shul hopping may be almost as fun as bar hopping, but could be much more spiritually harmful.

There is nothing wrong with being comfortable, but if we expect comfort as a matter of course and organize our life around finding it, we risk remaining in moral infancy. There is nothing wrong with being discerning or being critical. But if we are only discerning and critical, we can avoid the opportunity to learn and to grow.

Selma Freiberg's book, *The Magic Years*, is a fascinating and compelling description of the process by which a young child develops a conscience as she progresses from being a toddler to a child of three, four, or five years old. But in truth, the process of growing up takes a lifetime. The world endures because God has faith in our persistence.

Several weeks ago there was a massive rainbow that could be seen across the neighborhood, indeed across the region, in the final moments of Shabbat. I didn't get to see it because I was in shul for Mincha on one of the yom tov afternoons but several of my kids excitedly ran into shul to find the rainbow *berakhab* in the siddur, and then run out of shul again to recite it. They tried to convince me to leave shul so that I could see the rainbow too, but I decided to say Mincha instead.

In fact, there are multiple opinions in Judaism about the valence of rainbows. Are they positive? Rainbows are a beautiful phenomenon that reminds us of God's pledge never again to destroy the world by flood. Or, are rainbows negative? They are proof that only God's pledge prevents God from destroying a world that deserves another flood.

I would suggest that we should gaze at the beauty of rainbows, but not because rainbows are pretty and bright in a superficial or childlike manner. We should look at rainbows because we should be inspired by the faith that God has in our ability to grow up and we should then rededicate ourselves to overcoming the selfishness that settled within our hearts as each one of us was preparing to be born.