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The Inclination of the Human Heart is Towards Evil

It has been noted¹ that in ancient times, people were more bothered by the philosophical challenge of “*rasha v'tov lo*” the prospering of the wicked. In modern times, we tend to be more bothered by the philosophical and religious problem of “*tzadik v'rah lo*” a righteous person who unjustly suffers. But, in Tanakh, we can also ask about the question of “*rasha v'rah lo*” - bad things happening to bad people. Why are some sins punished in an extremely harsh way, and others with much less severity. This question comes to the fore when contemplating the unprecedented and never-repeated destruction of the flood. What was so bad in the generation of the flood that could explain such severe and total destruction?

The answer to this question, lies in the final verses of last week's Torah reading. Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, the great Tanakh scholar, used to describe a phenomenon that he called the “*chulent* effect.” After hearing the Torah read on Shabbat morning, we go and have some *chulent*, fall asleep, and then forget what it is we heard in the Torah that morning. Each *parasha*, in our experience, begins a new story. But that isn't necessarily true. There are stories in the Torah that span *parshiot* and to understand them one must pay attention across two or more *parshiot*.

The story of Noah began, not with *Parashat Noah* this morning, but at the end of the 5th chapter of *Bereishit*, which we read last week. After the Torah introduces Noah, his genealogy, and his family, the corruption of humanity in his generation is described:

וַיְהִי כִּי-הִחֵל הָאָדָם לָרֵב עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּבָנוּת יִלְדוּ לָהֶם:
וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי-הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הָיָה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ:

“And it occurred as people multiplied across the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, that the *b'nai elohim*, looked and saw how good they were and took them to be their wives - whichever ones those with power selected.”

Who were the *b'nai elohim*? There are different interpretations. The way that makes the most sense to me - is the interpretation that Rashi adopts, wherein the *b'nai elohim* are a class of human beings with more power and influence over others. They use their power to take things. In this case - they take women.

This wickedness, what today might be called sexual abuse, elicits the first response from God in ten generations.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לֹא-יָדוֹן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם...

“And God said, ‘my Spirit will not abide in humanity forever’”

The verse is challenging to interpret. But it is clear that something about this sort of predatory behavior, provokes a reaction from God that nothing had in the ten prior generations.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.” These elites had power, and they used it in abusive and corrupt ways.

Rabbi David Silber once noted, the great sin of Tanakh, repeated again and again in various permutations, is “looking and taking.” That's what Adam and Eve did in the garden. They saw the tree and that it was good to

¹ I recall reading this observation in an essay by Rabbi Shalom Carmy. Sara Wolkenfeld tells me that she heard Professor Yaakov Elman make the same point when she was his student at Revel.

eat, and they took. And these elites, the first hierarchy ever described in the Bible, repeat that sin - they see “good women” and they take the one’s that they want.

The next act of seeing - is a seeing of judgement and evaluation:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאֶרֶץ וְכָל-יִצְרָל מַחְשַׁבֹת לְבָבוֹ נָקָה כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

“And God saw that human evil was exceedingly great on the land, and that the inclination and thoughts of the human heart was entirely evil at all times.”

God understands that a class of elites who see and take, is a replication of the sin of the Eden on a massive scale. And after seeing what has occurred, God regrets the creation of humanity.

In our *parasha*, the wickedness of Noah’s generation is again described, this time the additional element of outright violent theft is added:

“כִּי-מְלָאָה הָאֶרֶץ חַמָּס מִפְּנֵיהֶם”

“For the the land was filled with violent robbery”

Rabbi Yochanan, in Tractate Sanhedrin, notes how severe violent theft must be - since that sin alone seals the fate of the generation of the flood.

Violent theft is the apotheosis of the sin of Eden - seeing and taking. It institutes and perpetuates the rule of the powerful over those with less power. The only law, in a world of violent theft, is the law of the powerful where anyone who can takes whatever he wishes.

If boundaries between people are not respected. If personal integrity is overwhelmed by violence and oppression, to the degree it is forgotten that human beings have rights as individuals, regardless of whether they can defend their rights - then there may be little way to salvage human society.

After the terrible destruction of the flood has come and gone, God makes another observation and another promise:

לֹא אֶסְפָּר לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת-הָאָדָמָה בְּעֵבֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יִצְרָל לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעֻרָיו

“I will never again curse the land on account of humanity for the inclination of the human heart is towards evil from his youth.”

Does this verse mean that the land will never again be cursed on account of humanity since we are inevitably doomed to sin?

Or, maybe, this verse is a basis for mercy rooted in something about ourselves. This verse too repeats the claim that “*yetzer lev ha’adam ra*” - the inclination of the human heart is towards evil - but here that inclination is a source of mercy whereas before the flood it was presented as a condemnation. How can the inclination of the human heart - *yetzer lev ha’adam* - serve those two functions - an aggravating factor and a mitigating factor?

There is one additional word that modifies the *yetzer lev ha’adam* after the flood - *m’nurav* - from youth. Rashi understands that word in this way:

מִנְעֻרָיו. מִנְעֻרָיו כְּתִיב מִשְׁנֹנֵעַר לְצִאת מִמְעֵי אִמּוֹ נִתֵּן בּוֹ יִצְרָר הָרָע:

Rashi² says that the evil inclination enters into a person at the moment when a child is stirred up in the womb and is about to be born. Rashi connects the *yetzer* - this evil inclination - to birth and infancy. While we often think of infants as being cute and sweet - and they are - infants are, from a moral perspective, little more than giant balls of ego, seeking self-gratification and seeing the entire world as an extension of the infant's own ego and existing only to fulfill the desires of the infant. If you could translate a babies cries - it would be saying "Me!!!!!!!"

But, if the fundamental evil at the center of our hearts, is, at its core, an infantile prioritization of self-gratification, then the possibility exists of growing up. God promises to spare humanity in the future because of our capacity to grow up.

There's one more story at the end of Noah's life about "seeing." And a new villain. Ham acts like the *bnei elohim* who see and take advantage. He sees his father in a state of disgrace - naked and vulnerable. Ham, whether out of an indulgence of his own titillation or, perhaps, as an act of oedipal aggression, sees his father, naked and vulnerable, and calls to his brothers to look and gawk. There is another cycle of victimization.

But, this time, there is also a hero.

Shem, together with Yafet, know about their father's vulnerability and choose to protect. And in that act of protection. Shem's act of decency and modesty and standing up on behalf of the vulnerable...a new beginning is possible for humanity.

And that's what we'll read about next week when the Torah introduces us to Avraham and to Sarah and the community they create based on hessed, kindness, and on justice.

We all face moments when we are confronted by those who are vulnerable And we have a choice of whether or not we will respond like Ham and take advantage of that vulnerability, or whether will respond like Shem, and cover-up, protect, and restore dignity to those who are exposed and vulnerable. I don't know why some respond like Ham and some respond like Shem. But figuring that out is key to what it means to be a descendant of Avraham and Sarah. And I welcome your suggestions too, as to what can be done to make sure that we come forward to protect those who are vulnerable rather than take advantage of their position.

² Rabbi David Ebner taught me this understanding of Rashi in 1998 at Yeshivat Hamivtar.