

The Nature of Man

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Parshat Noach, 5764

Is the human being inherently good or inherently evil? Is the world inherently good or bad?

Parshat Noach would seem to suggest that the world WAS inherently evil – so G_d destroyed it and created a new, better world. Is the world really better than it was?

- With the constant threat of Nuclear Holocaust over our heads?
- With terrorism threatening to destroy the fabric of civilisation?
- With anti-Semitism on the rise again?
- After Hitler and Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and Arafat?
- After the anti-Semitic nature of the United Nations?

Do we believe, does the Torah honestly believe, that man is, at his core, inherently GOOD? Or is man – at his core – so BAD, so evil, that nothing short of Divine ‘salvation’ can save him?

This is one of the oldest debates in religious philosophy, and centers around the events of Parshat Noach. But it really centers around ONE WORD in Parshat Noach – a word too often mistranslated and misunderstood.

I'd like to study two verses with you, and understand their profound meaning for us, and especially in our times.

וַיִּרְא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרְץ וְכָל יִצְר מַחְשְׁבֹת לְבוֹ רָק רָע כָּל הַיּוֹם: (בר' ו:ה)

King James translation: (& Soncino)

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

The Jerusalem Bible (Koren) translates the key phrase as: *all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* – but essentially it means the same thing.

As the Hertz commentary explains: *the desires; the whole bent of his thoughts* – was evil!

Based on this translation, the scenario of the Flood is basically this:

- G_d discovers that man is, at the core of his being, essentially evil. His impulses, his drives, his very inclination – יצר - are evil, with no hope, and therefore no reason to continue.
- G_d “regrets” having created “evil” man, and must destroy him, starting afresh from Noach.

It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that Noach – the צדיק תמים – who sets mankind upon a new journey – would infuse man with goodness. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that after the flood – a new type of human being would emerge – one inherently good!

Yet immediately upon exiting the ark the Torah states:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל לְבוֹ לֹא אֶסֶף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו וְלֹא אֶסֶף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל חַי כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי: (בר' ח: כא)

King James Bible (& Soncino):

...the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

Hertz Commentary:

Imagination: The Evil Inclination in man, *yetzer hara*, which too often gains the mastery over the Good Inclination, *Yetzer tov*.

From his youth – from the dawn of his knowledge of good and evil.

In other words: G_d brought the flood upon mankind – because man was discovered to be inherently evil in his essence. His יצר was evil! He had to be destroyed.

After the flood, G_d promised never to bring another such calamity upon the earth again. Why? Because the inclination of man's heart –was STILL EVIL, so destroying it again would SERVE NO PURPOSE!!

In other words – The flood didn't work the first time – so why do it again!?

This interpretation has served as the Source of the Christian theology that the human being is born in damnation:

In the words of Rav S. R. Hirsch:

“It is unfortunate that this word is so often translated by ‘instinct, inclination, impulse’, as if there was a force in man that drives him to evil. From that, there then formed that hopeless view of life on which a great ‘religious’ society rests, that dogma of the power of evil in which Man is supposed to be born, and out of which he can only be saved by a certain belief.”

But we certainly do not accept such a belief. We believe in CHOICE, the power within man to do good or evil.

So how do we understand this profound phrase: כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו ?

Furthermore, on a purely textual level, does it really make sense for G_d to proclaim that the reason He will NEVER AGAIN bring a flood is precisely the same reason He brought the flood in the first place? **Is G_d here admitting to failure?**

Explains Rav Hirsch: The key lies in the translation of one word: יצר!

יצר doesn't mean to **FORCE** (or inclination). On the contrary - it means to **FORM**!!

הִנֵּה כַחֲמֵר בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר כִּן אַתֶּם בְּיַד יְשׁוּרָאֵל (ירמ' יח)

...as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand O House of Israel (Jer. 18)

וַיֹּצֵר אָמַר לְיוֹצְרוֹ לֹא הִבִּין (ישע' כט: טז)

Shall the *work* say of *him who made it*, He did not make me! (Is. 29:16)

Explains Rav Hirsch: **מחשבות** – the heart is **מחשב** – a weaver! Weaving the material that is given to it! The raw materials of life – including all the possibilities of both good and evil – lie in its hands! The task of the soul, or the heart, is to weave them together (**מעשה חושב**) – to form thoughts into shapes and deeds, **צורות**. So that **יצר מחשבות לבו** means the “formations of our weaving soul”

כל יצר מחשבת לבו – this is not AN inclination of evil – it is the EVIL that is the result of the ALL the FORMATIONS OF THE HEART – the decisions of evil, the FORMATIONS of evil!

In other words – it is precisely because man exercised the FREEDOM OF WILL of his soul and formed a world of evil – that he was to be punished and held accountable.

It is precisely the opposite meaning of the one hinted at by the King James translation! This is not a description of the **absence** of FREEDOM OF WILL from the human heart. It is an acknowledgement that the FREEDOM OF WILL of the human heart is precisely what makes us ACCOUNTABLE before G_d!

What happened AFTER the flood? This accountability took on a new dimension!!

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל לְבוֹ לֹא אֶסְףּ לְקַלְל עוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעֲרָיו וְלֹא אֶסְףּ עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל חַי כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי: (בר' ח: כא)

As Hirsch translates the phrase:

- **לֹא אֶסְףּ לְקַלְל עוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם** - G_d said unto his Heart: I will not again curse the ground any more for the sake of Man – I WILL NOT DO MAN'S JOB!!
- **כִּי - עֵינֵינוּ** - EVEN IF - even if the formations of the human heart again become evil!
- **לֹא אֶסְףּ עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל חַי** - I will not smite every living thing as I have done.

Why? Not because G_d had failed. This is not an indictment of man. It is a **challenge** to man.

EVEN IF humanity were to degenerate back into that abyss – I will not PUNISH the world again, because **THAT IS MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY!**

שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בְּאִדָּם דָּמוֹ יִשָּׂפַךְ כִּי בְצַלְמִי אֶלֶּהִים עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם: (בר' ט: ו)

Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed - for in the image of God he made man.

G_d will forever hold mankind accountable for his actions – precisely because he is created with

G_dliness!

Story of Noach is that moment in history when G_d passed on responsibility for the future survival of civilization into the hands of MAN.

The world is yours, says the Almighty:

- You can turn it into a Garden of Eden – or you can destroy it under the floodwaters of your own making!
- You can harness the energy of the atom – or destroy civilization with the power of the atom.
- You can unlock the secret mysteries of life in order to save life – or destroy it. The choice is yours!
- You can appease evil, allow it fester like a cancer, until it overcomes civilization – or you can fight it with every fibre of your soul, and hold mankind accountable - **שָׁפַךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָּךְ**

How many times has evil been allowed to flourish under the false pretence that it is G_d's responsibility to eradicate evil, waiting for some revival of the Great Flood! But the message of the Flood, if anything, is just the opposite!

That rainbow in the sky – the symbol of G_d's oath – is a blessing and a curse!

- It's a symbol that evil still exists in the world, and therefore the Halacha tells us not to gaze upon it.
- But it is also a blessing – a symbol that **G_d has ENTRUSTED US with the world, and he believes in us!** He knows that in the end we will do that which is necessary to create a better world! And so we recite a blessing over the rainbow!
- The heart and soul – free to do both good and evil - **G_d created.**
- A world FREE of evil, a world of freedom, a world of goodness and kindness – that is the world **G_d is waiting for US create!**