

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Noah Part II G-d's Favorable Post-Diluvian Disposition

1. A Key Question

Shortly after the Flood, upon finding Noah's sacrifices (representing his faithful dedication) very pleasing, G-d resolved, "Never again will I doom the earth because of man...nor will I ever again destroy every living being as I have done" (Gen. 8:21, NJPS). What exactly prompted His change of heart? The explanation He apparently gives in the midst of that verse 21 statement, "because the devisings of man's heart are evil from his youth," appears to be paradoxical. It is virtually identical – with similar key words – to the consideration that led Him to His decision to destroy mankind in the first place. At that previous point the Torah stated, "Hashem saw that man's wickedness on earth was great, and that every plan devised by his heart was just evil all the day long...So Hashem said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created'" (6:5, 7). How can the same consideration be the reason to bring the Flood as well as be the reason to never again bring such a Flood?

The Hebrew formulations of the relevant clauses highlight the correspondence: וְכָל יִצְרָר מִהַשְּׁבַת לְבוֹ רַק רָע (6:5) and כִּי יִצְרָר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעֻרָיו (8:21). Both statements describe the promptings of man's heart as tilting toward evil, the first adding that it is so all the day long while the second focuses on the fact that it is so from his youth. Indeed, these two verses containing G-d's two diametrically opposed resolutions appear to comprise a unit, marking an envelope-like structure for the Flood narrative and directing the reader to take them together.

Addressing this matter, M.D. Cassuto commented that the clause "because the devisings of his heart are evil from his youth" (8:21) explains only what immediately preceded it in that verse, namely, that G-d will not again curse the earth because of man (beyond what He did as punishment to Adam, in Gen. 3:17-19). The end of that verse "and I will not again

smite every living creature as I did" is a separate statement, not linked to the previous clause that speaks of the devisings of man's heart. G-d's new policy is not based on man's tendency to evil but other considerations. However, even Cassuto recognized that this interpretation is strained.

S.D. Luzzato presumes that G-d's description of man's evil thoughts as beginning in "his youth" means that it is a disposition that sets in as he matures and is not so from birth. This points to the possibility of correction. G-d's focus is now on that potential. Nahum Sarna expanded on this notion as follows:

As compared with 6:5, the language is considerably modified and is no longer all-inclusive. The statement is not a judgment but an observation that a proclivity for evil is woven into the fabric of human nature. The key phrase is "from his youth," not from birth or conception, implying that the tendency to evil may be curbed and redirected through the discipline of laws. Hence, the next section deals with the imposition of laws upon post-diluvian humanity. (JPS Commentary on Gen. 8:21)

However, although the wording is slightly different, that is the manner in which the Torah "quotes" itself. The two statements do parallel each other and seem to be referring to the same general concept. If the second is more focused on "a proclivity for evil woven into the fabric of human nature," it may merely be because at that point, before the renewed mankind is born and sins, it is more appropriate to talk about a proclivity. In any event, the thrust of the phrase "from his youth" is toward inclusiveness and is part of the description of man's basic nature, that is, man's nature is so "already from his youth"; it is not much different from 6:5 and does not enter the realm of the nature-nurture issue.

Some authorities espouse a principle of language

usage concerning the word כִּי (because) that was popularized by Ibn Ezra and which he attributed to Rabbi Moses Hacoen ibn Giqatila and Rabbi Marinos (also called Yonah ibn Janah), leading followers of the grammarian Yehudah Hayyuj, but not applied by any of them to our verse. It is that כִּי does not necessarily mean “because” but may mean “although” or “despite.” Accordingly, some have translated the כִּי that begins the clause of כִּי יֵצֵר לִבְהָאָדָם רָע מִנְּעֻרָיו as meaning “despite the fact that,” thus removing the contradiction.* But an aspect of the question remains: How is it that G-d chose to ignore a consideration that played such a key role in His decision to bring the Flood? Moreover, if the statement does not contribute to G-d’s favorable decision it is difficult to justify mention of such a discordant note within His optimistic proclamations.

Perhaps the explanation is as follows: Hashem’s new policy toward humankind and the world is articulated immediately after the statement that “Hashem smelled the pleasing fragrance” of Noah’s sacrifices (8:21a). Having successfully concluded the colossal project of saving creation, Noah proved himself to be a new factor in Hashem’s governorship of the world. His offering the sacrifices that Hashem smelled and found to be pleasing symbolizes that Hashem found Noah’s dedication to Him to be thoroughly pleasing. Noah’s sincerity and wholehearted commitment was a new factor in the equation. The כִּי הִנִּיחָהּ coinage of that clause – unattested in literature prior to this context – appears to be a play on Noah’s name, reflecting his extraordinary spiritual stature.

The completely righteous man who courageously stands alone and rejects the temptation of yielding to a corrupt society’s standards, who selflessly dedicates his life to righteousness and justice, and who promptly offers G-d his gratitude for what he receives, may influence G-d to deal with mankind in a different manner than He previously did. Man possesses free will albeit with a proclivity to do evil; that is how G-d created him, and it requires great effort on man’s part to rise above this proclivity. With a worthy human “partner” like Noah and with a fresh start to humanity that embodies several adjustments in G-d’s relationship with it and in the structure of society, G-d acknowledges that there is a better chance than previously to have a righteous world.

Thus, Noah’s excellence created incentive for G-d to

modify His relationship with man. He would now enter into a covenant with Noah and all living beings and be more supportive and more involved in human affairs, ensuring that human society receives and enforces certain basic laws. Under those circumstances there is hope that the world may move forward, perhaps slowly, toward G-d.

G-d’s promise that He will not again destroy mankind and that He will maintain the regularity of nature provides incentive to the righteous to work toward improving the world. With a guarantee that their accomplishments will not ultimately be in vain, the righteous are encouraged to more fully dedicate themselves toward an improved future.

Before the Flood, Noah’s excellence did not suffice to provide that glimmer of hope. The foundation of society did not accommodate such a new approach and G-d’s relationship with man from creation had been of a different order. He created man with enormous potential, provided for his needs, blessed him, and hoped that he would follow natural law (G-d’s basic law), supported by human conscience. Man should have complied, it was ungrateful of him not to and the gravest of consequences were in store for him because of the corruption he brought about. Unfortunately, man chose not to respond as G-d had hoped.

After Adam’s succumbing to temptation in the Garden of Eden we read about his first son killing his second son. There was no earthly institution that demanded accountability of man to supplement and reinforce the intangible accountability to G-d. Man had to live on a high moral plane without the benefit of a covenant with G-d and had to achieve spiritual success on his own. He failed. By the time of Noah, the situation was irreversible. (When Abraham prayed for Sodom, his request that G-d spare the city was limited to there being at least ten righteous men in it. Short of such a core he acknowledged the futility of sparing the evildoers.)

In the post-diluvian order, immediately after blessing man, G-d provided him a legal code. He made concessions to human nature but with major conditions, a “trade-off” of sorts, clearly to focus man on the truly essential. “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these. However, you must not eat flesh with its

life-blood in it. But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning...of every man for that of his fellow man! Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did G-d make man” (Gen. 9:3-6, NJPS). Sensitivity to the sanctity of all life must be ever-present, represented by the prohibitions of eating from *eber min haḥay* (a limb separated from a living creature) as well as of partaking of blood. Most important, the recognition of the supreme value of human life is made central, with an obligation for humans to enforce accountability.

A celebratory passage on the establishment of the Covenant concludes the Flood narrative (9:8-17). In it, G-d makes clear that the Covenant is the factor that keeps Him from ever again destroying life as He did with the Flood (vv. 11 and 15). From this point on, a major aspect of His involvement with human beings as depicted in Scripture is through covenantal relationships, subsequently with Abraham and finally, with Israel.

2. Further on the Above from Judaic Seminar’s E-mail Forum

i. Summary of Rabbi U. Weingarten’s Submission (JS v5 #3 and #6)

In addressing the question of how can the same consideration lead G-d to opposite conclusions (Gen 6:5 and 8:21), Rabbi Weingarten derives this lesson: “We need to exercise care before arriving at conclusions and deciding on a course of action,” since G-d Himself arrived at different conclusions based on the same consideration. Similarly, he derives this lesson from the golden calf episode: G-d cited the Israelites’ stubbornness as a reason to destroy them whereas Moses cited their stubbornness in his plea for G-d to forgive them.

ii. Rabbi Shamah’s Response (JS v5 #7)

[However] the Torah does not indicate that G-d was sorry he brought the Flood, that there was another point of view not fully taken into consideration. In the case of Moses’ prayer, he is pleading with G-d to be merciful, to conduct above and beyond the dictates of justice and reconsider his decision. Requesting mercy and acceding to such a request are very different than the lesson “Be patient in judgment.”

iii. From Rabbi Weingarten’s Subsequent Reply (JS v5 #9)

It seems to me that G-d’s commitment not to bring another flood to destroy the world does in fact indicate regret. “I will not curse the earth again on behalf of people...and I will not smite all living beings again as I have done” (Gen. 8:21) is a classic expression of regret.

This commitment is given unilaterally. Everything else – the commandment not to commit murder and to execute justice against the murderer – comes later (Gen. 9:5-6), and is not a condition to the commitment...nor is there a hint that the Divine promise not to bring a Flood depends on anything.

Rabbi Shamah added: “In the case of Moses’ prayer, he is pleading with G-d to be merciful...Requesting mercy and acceding to such a request are very different than the lesson ‘Be patient in judgment.’” I am not clear on where [he] disagrees with me in this matter...the same observation, taken from the standpoint of strict judgment or of mercy, can lead to opposite conclusions. Thus, “We need to exercise care before arriving at conclusions and deciding on a course of action.”

iv. Rabbi Shamah’s Further Reply (JS v5 #10)

When we are informed that G-d “smelled the pleasing fragrance” of Noah’s offering (Gen. 8:21) and decided to never again destroy all living flesh because of man, we are not being told that G-d regretted his earlier decision, that there had been another way to look at that very same situation and have refrained from destroying. Such a reading would impute fickleness to His decision-making process...and [accuse him of] having brought devastation because of impulsiveness, characteristic of the pagan gods, not of the One who is “merciful and patient” (Exod. 34:6) and about whom the prophet states, “He is not a man that He should change His mind [without cause]” (1 Sam. 15:29).

Previously, when G-d changed His mind, the terminology indicated regret: “And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth” (Gen.

6:6, NJPS). The Flood was appropriate for its context, now there is a new context. It evidently begins with the devotion of Noah, who turned out to be an extraordinarily great person, whose service to G-d was very pleasing to Him. Noah represents hope for a new beginning and a new future connected with a new approach to the G-d-man relationship, one that includes a Covenant and precludes another flood (see vv. 9:11, 15). Because of the new context it was appropriate to reinterpret the temptation to sin inherent in man. Rather than viewing it in the context of the world already having become evil, when it would inevitably lead to continued corruption, in the context of a new beginning launched by Noah, accompanied by G-d's commitment to be patient, it is viewed as a reason to be sympathetic to man. Attached is G-d's expanded blessings and new legislation.

Similarly, when G-d changed His mind upon Moses' plea for mercy, we do not have a paradigm from which to learn "be patient in judging." By definition, the situation following G-d's revealed intention to destroy the nation is different, not merely another perspective. Without the plea – which reflects the potential victim's new consciousness and is therefore a new factor in the relationship even if only proffered by the victim's representative and based on well-known realities – all the patience in the world and all the looking at the case from different angles would not have sufficed.

Endnote

* Following are several exegetical difficulties commentators attempted to resolve by translating *ki* as "although" or "despite," instead of "because."

1. (Exod. 13:17). When Pharaoh sent out the nation G-d did not lead it through the Route of the Philistine Land "because (*ki*) it was close." Ibn Ezra cited Rabbi Moses Hacoheh ibn Giqatila's explanation that it means "although." Ibn Ezra himself, however, considered such an interpretation unnecessary. He understood the clause to mean that G-d did not choose the Route of the Philistine Land precisely because it was close and would bring early exposure to war,

prompting the people to choose to return to Egypt.

אבן עזרא שמות (הפירוש הארוך) פרק י"ג פסוק י"ז

פי קרוב הוא. א"ר משה, אעפ"י שיהוא קרוב, וכמוהו לפי דעתו, פי עם קשה ערף הוא (שמות לד, ט), רפאה נפשי פי חטאתי לך (תה' מא, ה). פי רב ברזל לו (יהושע יז, יח). ולפי דעתי אין צורך, פי טעמו למה לא נחם אלקים דרך ארץ פלשתים בעבור שיהוא קרוב. והנה נחם דרך רחוקה שלא יראו מלקמה, ויאמרו... נתנה ראש ונשובה מצריתה (במדבר יד, ד).

2. (Ex. 34:9). Moses requested that G-d travel in the nation's midst and forgive their sins "because it is a stiff-necked nation." Ibn Ezra cited Rabbi Marinos (Yonah ibn Janah) who explained it as "although," since being a stubborn nation is not a reason to base a request for forgiveness upon. Ibn Ezra, however, views it as, "I acknowledge that it is a stubborn nation (thus indicating having taken an important step toward repentance), so please forgive it."

אבן עזרא שמות (הפירוש הארוך) פרק ל"ד פסוק ט

פי עם קשה ערף הוא - על דעת רבי מרינוס, אעפ"י ששם קשה ערף הוא, וכן רפאה נפשי פי חטאתי לך (תה' מא, ה) - אעפ"י שחטאתי לך. ולפי דעתי רפאני, פי אני מודה שחטאתי לך, ובעבור חטאי הקליתני. ופכה זה, אני מודה פי עם קשה ערף הוא ואתה תסלח:

אבן עזרא - הפירוש הקצר שמות פרק ל"ד פסוק ט

פי עם קשה ערף הוא - אעפ"י ששם קשה ערף הוא.

3. (Ps. 41:5). "Heal me because I sinned to you." Here, Ibn Ezra comments אעפ"י שחטאתי לך על דרך פי עם קשה ערף הוא, that the *ki* should be translated as "although" and states that the same goes for Exod. 34:9. This is contrary to the explanations he proffered for both those verses in his long commentary to Exod. 34:9. (His long commentary to Exodus is widely accepted as having been composed later than both his short commentary to Exodus and his commentary to Psalms.)

4. (Josh. 17:18). Joshua told the House of Joseph that they should dispossess the Canaanite "even though they have iron chariots and even though they are strong" (NJPS). Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Former Prophets is not extant.