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Beyond Nature

Are we naturally good or naturally bad? On this great minds have argued for centuries. Hobbes believed that we have naturally “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” We are bad, but governments and police can help limit the harm we do. Rousseau to the contrary believed that naturally we are good. It is society and its institutions that make us bad.

The argument continues today among the neo-Darwinians. Some believe that natural selection and the struggle for survival make us, genetically, hawks not doves. As M. T. Ghiselin puts it,

“Scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.” By contrast, naturalist Frans de Waal in a series of delightful books about primates, including his favourite, the bonobos, shows that they can be empathic, caring, even altruistic. So by nature are we.

T. E. Hulme called this the fundamental divide between Romantics and Classicists throughout history. Romantics believed that “man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance.” Classicists believed the opposite, that “Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him.”

In Judaism, according to the sages, this was the argument between the angels when God consulted them as to whether or not He should create humans. The angels were the “us” in “Let us make man ...” The angels of *chessed* and *tzedek* said “Let him be created because humans do acts of kindness and righteousness.” The angels of *shalom* and *emet* said, “Let him not be created because he tells lies and fights wars.” What did God do? He created humans anyway and had faith that we would gradually become better and less destructive. That in secular terms is what Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker argues in *The Better Angels of our Nature*. Taken as a whole and with obvious exceptions we have become less violent over time.

The Torah suggests we are both good and bad, and evolutionary psychology tells us why. We are

born to compete and co-operate. Life is a competitive struggle for scarce resources. So we fight and kill. But we survive only within groups. Without habits of co-operation and trust, we would have no groups and we would not survive. That is part of what the Torah means when it says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” So we are both aggressive and altruistic: aggressive to strangers, altruistic toward members of our group.

But the Torah is far too profound to leave it at the level of the old joke of the rabbi who, hearing both sides of a domestic argument, tells the husband, “You are right,” and the wife “You are right,” and when his disciple says, “They can’t both be right,” replies, “You are also right.” The Torah states the problem, but it also supplies a non-obvious answer. This is the clue that helps us decode a very subtle argument running through last week’s parsha and this.

The basic structure of the story that begins with creation and ends with Noah is that in the beginning God created a universe of order. He then created human beings who created a universe of chaos: “the land was filled with violence.” So God, as it were, deleted creation by bringing a flood, returning the earth to as it was at the very beginning when “the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters.” He then began again with Noah and his family as the new Adam and Eve and their children.

Genesis 8-9 is thus a kind of second version of Genesis 1-3, but with two differences. In both accounts a key word appears seven times, but it is

a different word. In Genesis 1 the word is “good.” In Genesis 9 it is “covenant.”

The second is that in both, reference is made to the fact that humans are in the image of God, but the two sentences have different implications. In Genesis 1 we are told that “God created humanity in His own image, in the image of God He created them, male and female He created them.” In Genesis 9 we read, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made mankind” (Gen. 9: 6).

The difference is striking. Genesis 1 tells me that “I” am in the image of God. Genesis 9 tells me that “You,” my potential victim, are in the image of God. Genesis 1 tells us about human *power*. We are able, says the Torah, to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air.” Genesis 9 tells us about *the moral limits of power*. We *can* kill but we *may* not. We have the power, but not the permission.

Reading the story closely, it seems that God created humans in the faith that they would *naturally* choose the right and the good. They would not need to eat the fruit of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” because instinct would lead them to behave as they should. Calculation, reflection, decision – all the things we associate with knowledge – would not be necessary. They would act as God wanted them to act, because they had been created in His image.

It did not turn out that way. Adam and Eve sinned, Cain committed murder, and within a few generations the world was reduced to chaos. That is when we read that “The Lord saw how great the

wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that *every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time*. The Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart.” Everything else in the universe was *tov*, “good.” But humans are not naturally good. That is the problem. The answer, according to the Torah, is *covenant*.

Covenant introduces the idea of a moral law. A moral law is not the same as a scientific law. Scientific laws are observed regularities in nature: drop an object and it will fall. A moral law is a rule of conduct: do not rob or steal or deceive. Scientific laws *describe*, whereas moral laws *prescribe*.

When a natural event does not accord with the current state of science, when it “breaks” the law, that is a sign that there is something wrong with the law. That is why Newton’s laws were replaced by those of Einstein. But when a human being breaks the law, when people rob or steal or deceive, the fault is not in the law but in the deed. So we must keep the law and condemn, and sometimes punish, the deed. Scientific laws allow us to predict. Moral laws help us to decide. Scientific laws apply to entities without freewill. Moral laws presuppose freewill. That is what makes humans qualitatively different from other forms of life.

So, according to the Torah, a new era began centred not on the idea of natural goodness but on the concept of covenant, that is, moral law. Civilization began in the move from what the Greeks called *physis*, nature, to *nomos*, law. That is what makes the concept of being “in the image

of God” so different in Genesis 1 and Genesis 9. Genesis 1 is about nature and biology. We are in the image of God in the sense that we can think, speak, plan, choose and dominate. Genesis 9 is about law. Other people are also in God’s image. Therefore we must respect them by banning murder and instituting justice. With this simple move, morality was born.

What is the Torah telling us about morality?

First, that it is *universal*. The Torah places God’s covenant with Noah and through him all humanity *prior* to his particular covenant with Abraham, then later with his descendants at Mount Sinai. *Our universal humanity precedes our religious differences*. This is a truth we deeply need in the twenty-first century when so much violence has been given religious justification. Genesis tells us that our enemies are human too.

All societies have had some form of morality but usually they concern only relations within the group. Hostility to strangers is almost universal in both the animal and human kingdoms. Between strangers, power rules. As the Athenians said to the Melians, “The strong do what they want, while the weak do what they must.”

The idea that *even the people not like us have rights*, and that we should “love the stranger,” would have been considered utterly strange by most people at most times. It took the recognition that there is one God sovereign over all humanity (“Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us?” Malachi 2: 10) to create the momentous breakthrough to the idea that there are moral universals, among them the sanctity of life, the pursuit of justice and the rule of law.

Second, God himself recognises that we are not naturally good. After the Flood, He said: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, even though the inclination of their minds is evil from childhood on.” The antidote to the *yetzer* (in rabbinic Hebrew, *yetzer hara*) the inclination to evil, is covenant.

This has a neuroscientific basis. We have a prefrontal cortex, evolved to allow humans to think and act reflectively, considering the consequences of their deeds. But this is slower and weaker than the amygdala (what Jewish mystics called the *nefesh habehamit*, the animal soul) which, even before we have had time to think, produces the fight-or-flight reactions without which humans before civilization would not have survived.

The problem is that these rapid reactions can be destructive. Often they lead to violence: not only the violence between species (predator and prey) that is part of nature, but also to the more gratuitous violence that is a feature of the life of most social animals. It is not that we only do evil. Empathy and compassion are as natural to us as are fear and aggression. The problem is that fear lies just beneath the surface of human interaction, and it can overwhelm all else.

Daniel Goleman calls this an *amygdala hijack*. “Emotions make us pay attention right now – this is urgent – and give us an immediate action plan without having to think twice. The emotional component evolved very early: Do I eat it, or does it eat me?” Impulsive action is often destructive because it is undertaken without thought of consequences. That is why Maimonides argued

that many of the laws of the Torah constitute a training in virtue by making us think before we act.¹

So the Torah tells us that naturally we are neither good nor bad but have the capacity for both. We have a natural inclination to empathy and sympathy, but we have an even stronger instinct for fear that leads to violence. That is why, in the move from Adam to Noah, the Torah shifts from nature to covenant, from *tov* to *brit*, from power to the moral limits of power. Genes are not enough. We also need the moral law.

1. Hilkhhot Temurah 4:13.



Rashbi and the Rainbow

After the deluge Noah emerges from his craft. The world had been punished by the wrath of God. And now God speaks:

And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, "And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you. And with every living creature that is with you, of the bird, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all

that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. And I will establish my covenant with you; nor shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; nor shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for everlasting generations. I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud. And I will remember my covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant, which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth." (Genesis 9:8-17)

Man is given the rainbow, a breathtaking display of nature, as a sign that God will never again ravage the earth by water as a punishment for man's sins.

SINGLED OUT

The Midrash notes that the word *dorot*, "generations," is written defectively. The explanation offered is that certain generations will need this sign, while others will not. These superior generations possess righteousness, or righteous men, rendering the symbol of God controlling His wrath superfluous. Among the generations thus singled out was the generation of Rashbi (acronym of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai); in the subsequent Midrashim it becomes apparent that the righteous to whom the text refers is Rashbi himself.

Elijah of blessed memory and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi were sitting and studying together, when they came to a ruling of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai . Said one: "Here is the author of the ruling; let us go and question him about it." So Elijah of blessed memory went to him, "Who is with you?" he asked. "The greatest of his generation, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi," he answered. "Has the rainbow appeared in his days?" he inquired, "if it has, he is not worthy of being received by me."

Rabbi Hezekiah related in Rabbi Jeremiah's name: "Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai had but to say, 'O field, O field, be filled with gold dinars,' and it was filled." Rabbi Hezekiah related in Rabbi Jeremiah's name: "Thus did Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai say: 'If Abraham is willing, he can effectively

intercede for [all generations] from his days until mine, while I can intercede for [all generations] from my time until the advent of Messiah. While if he is not willing, let Ahijah the Shilonite unite with me, and we can intercede for all from the days of Abraham until those of Messiah." Rabbi Hezekiah said in Rabbi Jeremiah's name: "Thus did Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai say: 'The world possesses not less than thirty men as righteous as Abraham. If there are thirty, my son and I are two of them; if ten, my son and I are two of them; if five, my son and I are two of them; if two, they are my son and I; if there is but one, it is I.'" (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 35:2)

Despite the perhaps unparalleled greatness of Rashbi, we are somewhat taken aback by these declarations, of his own piety and greatness. This statement is not an isolated "slip of the tongue". We find numerous statements in the Talmud, where Rashbi makes similar statements.

Hezekiah further stated in the name of Rabbi Jeremiah who said it in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai , "I am able to exempt the whole world from judgment from the day that I was born until now, and were Eliezer, my son, to be with me [we could exempt it] from the day of the creation of the world to the present time, and were Yotam the son of Uzziah with us, [we could exempt it]

from the creation of the world to its final end."

Hezekiah further stated in the name of Rabbi Jeremiah who said it in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai , "I have seen the sons of heaven and they are but few. If there be a thousand, I and my son are among them; if a hundred, I and my son are among them; and if only two, they are I and my son." (Sukkah 45b)

Again, we find supreme self-confidence, bordering on arrogance. It seems strange that the merit of such a man would obviate the appearance of the rainbow in his generation.

ANTI-ROMAN

This idiosyncratic statement may also be found in one of the most famous passages regarding Rashbi. An understanding of that passage holds a key for the entire topic.

For Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yossi, and Rabbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehuda, a son of proselytes, was sitting near them. Rabbi Yehuda commenced [the discussion] by observing, "How fine are the works of this people! They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths." Rabbi Yossi was silent. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai answered and said, "All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves;

bridges, to levy tolls for them." Now, Yehuda the son of proselytes went and related their talk, which reached the government. They decreed: "Yehuda, who exalted [us], shall be exalted, Yossi, who was silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris, Shimon, who censured, let him be executed." (Shabbat 33b)

The passage begins with the description of the deep-seated enmity which Rashbi held for the Romans. In the wake of the Hadrianic persecutions this is certainly understandable. Though this approach would seem valid on a personal level, surely the response of Rashbi transcends personal feelings and calculations.

The Talmud recounts how the other sages had made their peace with the Roman occupation, and had even come to appreciate the Roman contribution to the physical infrastructure of Judea. Rashbi, on the other hand, refused to be seduced by the beauty of the Roman edifice.

He and his son went and hid themselves in the Bet Hamidrash, [and] his wife brought him bread and a mug of water and they dined. [But] when the decree became more severe he said to his son, "Women are of unstable temperament: she may be put to the torture and expose us." So they went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob-tree and a water well were created for them. They would strip their garments and sit up to their necks in sand. The whole day they studied; when it was time for

prayers they robed, covered themselves, prayed, and then put off their garments again, so that they should not wear out. Thus they dwelt twelve years in the cave. (Shabbat 33b)

Now, in the face of the Roman threat, Rashbi retreats to a cave, together with his son Rabbi Eliezer. The two study day and night for twelve years, in a manner which reminds us of the Garden of Eden: the tree, the stream, the nakedness all being symbols of the purity and beauty of man at his apex, prior to that first act of infamy. The two studied and ascended from level to level in knowledge and fear of God.

LEAVING THE CAVE

After some time, Elijah stands at the door of the cave and invites them to leave:

Then Elijah came and stood at the entrance to the cave and exclaimed, "Who will inform the son of Yochai that the emperor is dead and his decree annulled?" So they emerged. Seeing a man plowing and sowing, they exclaimed, "They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal!" Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. (Shabbat 33b)

Leaving their cave proved quite difficult for Rashbi and Rebbe Eliezer. Obviously, seeing people not completely righteous, not totally immersed in Torah, was traumatic for Rashbi and consequently, for the entire world.

Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, "have you emerged to destroy My world: Return to your cave!" (Shabbat 33b)

God wished to protect the world from this great man. Upon contemplation, the decision to return them to the cave seems strange: the years in the cave are apparently what caused this distorted worldview. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to send them anywhere *but* back to the cave.

However, upon leaving the cave for the second time one year later, something interesting happens: Rashbi is indeed healed, while his son Rabbi Eliezer continues hurling fire. Only at the end is the son healed as well.

So they returned and dwelt there twelve months, saying, "The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna (purgatory) is [limited to] twelve months." A Heavenly Echo then came forth and said, "Go forth from your cave!" Thus they exited: wherever Rabbi Eliezer wounded, Rabbi Shimon healed. Said he to him, "My son! You and I are sufficient for the world." On the eve of the Shabbat before sunset they saw an old man holding two bundles of myrtle and running at twilight. "What are these for?" they asked him. "They are in honor of the Shabbat," he replied. "But one should suffice you." [He responded:] "One is for *Remember* and one for *Observe*." Said [Rashbi] to his son, "See how precious are the

commandments to Israel." His mind was tranquilized. (Shabbat 33b)

Obviously, returning to the cave had some type of calming affect and served as the impetus of Rashbi's "rehabilitation." In retrospect, the initial problem was not that he had spent too long in the cave, but not long enough.

STUDENTS OF HILLEL

In order to understand this idea we need to see another passage, which tells us about another set of great rabbis, the students of Hillel.

Our rabbis have taught: "Hillel the Elder had eighty disciples, thirty of whom were worthy of the Divine Spirit resting upon them, as [it did upon] Moses our Master, thirty of whom were worthy that the sun should stand still for them [as it did for] Joshua the son of Nun, [and the remaining] twenty were ordinary. The greatest of them was Yonatan ben Uzziel, the smallest of them was Yochanan ben Zakkai.

They said of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishnah, Gemara, Halachah, Aggadah, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences a minori ad majus, analogies, calendrical computations gematrias, the speech of the Ministering Angels, the speech of spirits, and the speech of palm-trees, fullers' parables and fox fables, great

matters or small matters ... in order to fulfill what is said, 'That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance, and that I may fill their treasuries.' And if the smallest of them was so great, how much more so was the greatest? They said of Yonatan ben Uzziel that when he used to sit and occupy himself with the study of the Torah, every bird that flew above him was immediately burnt." (Sukkah 28a)

The least of Hillel's students possessed a dazzling array of knowledge, the scope of which is difficult to imagine. After describing Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai's intellectual prowess and knowledge, we can only wonder about the exalted level of his superior colleague, Rav Yonatan ben Uzziel, the intensity of whose Torah personality caused passing birds to be consumed by fire.

CHASSIDIC TALE

This passage has an interesting postscript, told in Chassidic circles:

Once a Chassidic Rebbe was learning the above passage with his son. The son had one question: If the least of the students possesses superior knowledge, and the greatest student has combustible passion, what is the exalted level of the Master? The son was probing his father, attempting to discern the essence of being a Rebbe. The Rebbe answered that Hillel the Elder was on such an exalted level that when a bird would fly above nothing would happen; it would remain unscathed. This is the sublime secret of being a teacher. Students are often filled with

passion. The secret of teaching is the ability to harness the passion, to control the fire.

When Rashbi leaves the cave the first time, he is still a student - full of passion, but still a student. The world is black and white in his eyes: either someone is directly, constantly involved in Torah, or they are wasting their lives and are unable to justify their existence. The voice from heaven effectively declares that Rashbi needs to learn more. He must undergo the metamorphosis from student to teacher, from secretive mystic to Tzaddik who will take responsibility for the world and be prepared to do all to save the world. He must learn how to harness the power. He must become like Hillel - when birds fly over his head, they will remain unharmed.

ARGUMENT WITH AN ANGEL

This metamorphosis is discernable in an amazing passage in the Zohar:

Once Rav Shimon bar Yochai went out and saw that the world was dark and cloudy and all the lights had been sealed. He said to his son Rebbe Eliezer, "Let us go and see, what God has planned for the world." They went and came to one angel that looked like a large mountain, with thirty large torches of fire in its mouth. Rav Shimon said: "What are you planning to do?" He said, "I came to destroy the world, because there are not thirty righteous people in this generation, for God had [thus] decreed to Abraham..." Rav Shimon said to him, "I order you ? go in front of God and

say to Him "Bar Yochai is in the world."

The angel went in front of God and said: "Master of the universe, it is known to you what Bar Yochai said to me." God said, "Go destroy the world and ignore Bar Yochai." When he (the angel) returned, Rav Shimon saw the angel, and said, "If you do not leave I will decree on you that you will not return to heaven, rather you will be in a place of Aza and Azael (Hell). Go to God and say to Him: 'If there are not thirty righteous, then twenty should suffice ... if not twenty then ten should suffice ... if not ten then two should be enough, and there is me and my son ... and if two is not good, then one should be enough, and that is me(!) as it says *A righteous man is the foundation of the world.*'" At that moment a voice rang out of heaven and said, "Fortunate is your portion Rav Shimon, for God decrees above, and you rescind below. Certainly about you the verse is written *The will of those who fear Him is done.*" (Zohar Addendum page 205 ? the proper place should be 105b)

Rashbi's response seems like the supreme arrogant statement: "*I order you ? go in front of God and say to Him 'Bar Yochai is in the world.'*" However, when we consider the previous passage in the Talmud, we can understand this statement, and begin to penetrate the greatness of Rashbi: When he left the cave the first time, he wanted to

destroy all evil. Inconsistency would not be tolerated. After 12 years in a cave, all that he knew was learning, perfection. Anyone not learning should perish. The power of Torah raged within his essence and then poured forth with a vengeance. There was only one problem: God did not concur with the Rashbi's actions.

God would not allow the world to be destroyed. "Go back to the cave," God said to him. "Learn one more lesson." When they left the cave the second time, an old man holding myrtle provides the lesson.

LIKE A RAINBOW

The world is not "black and white," rather it is composed of many hues and shades, like the rainbow. God taught Rashbi this phenomenal lesson: The world is awaiting redemption. Instead of the *tzaddik* taking a stance of superiority, which manifests itself with judgmental airs, he must take responsibility for his generation, and indeed the entire world.

When Rashbi confronts the angel of destruction, he tells the angel "*I order you ? go in front of God and say to Him 'Bar Yochai is in the world.'*" - the same Bar Yochai whom God would not allow to destroy the world even a small piece of the world. God does not desire to see the world destroyed. God desires the righteous to take responsibility for their fellow man, and help man and the world reach its potential.

In this second passage, Rav Shimon takes responsibility for the world. Destruction is antithetical to this stance. The existence of even one *tzaddik* can save the world, provided the

tzaddik knows how to affect the world without burning it. Rashbi apparently felt that on the day of judgement, he would be able to use this logic to exonerate the world from all guilt.

When the power of his Torah is harnessed, the true *tzaddik* does not burn a thing, rather achieves a beautiful harmony with all of nature. All those shades of gray can and will become lighter through the work of the *tzaddik*. The world is not evil, merely awaiting elevation. The *tzaddik* can be that catalyst, and help the world achieve its potential. Such a world will be redeemed.

Rashbi did not need a rainbow up in the heavens to remind him of God's promise and his own mission; he saw a rainbow down on earth. Noah needed a rainbow. But some generations would possess great souls with the power to redeem the world, making the appearance of the rainbow completely unnecessary. Rashbi was such a man.



The Fruits of Indulgence

What exactly did the people of the Generation of the Flood (*Dor Hamabul*) do to deserve such a dreadful fate? The Torah is quite explicit on this point. "And the earth was degenerate before the

Lord, and the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis, 6:11). They were corrupt, degenerate, violent. They reached the outer limits of perversion, affecting even the animals and the land itself. We can well understand when society becomes so depraved and incorrigible, it is time to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh start.

But the Midrash tells us something entirely different (*Bereishis Rabbah* 32:2). The men of the Generation of the Flood used to take two wives. One was designated to bear children, the other to keep her husband company. The first was forced to live in seclusion, in a state of virtual widowhood while her husband was still alive. The second was given medications that would make her barren. She would sit beside her husband, heavily made up, and entertain him. This is inferred from the verse in *Iyov* (24:21), "He encourages the barren woman that does not give birth, but he gives no benefit to the widow." Rashi quotes this Midrash in *Bereishis* (4:19).

Now, we would certainly not argue that this sort of practice reflected the highest levels of spirituality. In fact, it was certainly an indication of a high level of self-indulgence. But was this such a terrible sin that virtually the entire human race had to be wiped out? Was this such an abysmal level of human corruption that the world had to be inundated and obliterated by the Flood?

The answer is that this Midrash is not providing a picture of antediluvian society in its final degenerate form. Rather, it is revealing to us the root cause of the precipitous decline of society. How does society fall so low that it is defined by pervasive degeneracy, theft and violence? By

making the unchecked pursuit of personal pleasure the ultimate value.

Eat, drink and be merry. Have a good time. Enjoy yourself. Live for today. Self-indulgence. Gratification. When these are the values of society, when the moral compass goes haywire, the road leads straight down. Today, people may limit themselves to made-up, barren pleasure wives, but tomorrow they will inevitably expand their horizons. Eventually, they will turn their greedy eyes to unexplored illicit indulgences and all sorts of other acts of perversion and immorality. It is only a matter of time before it happens. The two-wife system led to the "degenerate world filled with violence" that triggered the Flood.

Unfortunately, we have a vivid illustration of this process in our own times. Look at what has happened in the past few decades. As soon as the society opened the door to permissiveness and self-indulgence, it went into a sharp downward spiral. Morality has become a thing of the past. Family life is disintegrating. Respect for authority and civic responsibility are just about nonexistent. Drugs and alcohol take over at a very young age. All that matters is a good time. People measure the value of their lives by the number of pleasure buttons they have managed to push.

This insight allows us to understand a rather puzzling passage in the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 36:3). The Torah tells us (9:20) that after the Flood, "Noach, the man of the earth, profaned himself and planted a vineyard." The Sages observe that Noach, who had originally been described (6:9) as "a righteous and perfect man in

his generations," was now described as a lowly "man of the earth." In contrast, Moshe was originally described (2:19) as "an Egyptian man" and is eventually described (*Devarim* 33:2) as "a man of the Lord." Moshe went up, while Noach went down. And all because he planted a vineyard.

What is so terrible about planting a vineyard? All right, it would have been better to plant some wheat or string beans to provide some basic levels of nourishment. Noach was probably off the mark in choosing to start with a vineyard. But how did Noach "profane himself"? Was planting a vineyard such a dreadful crime?

Indeed it was. By planting a vineyard before anything else, Noach showed that he had not fully learned the lesson of the Flood. He saw the end result of many long years of degeneracy - the perversion, the immorality, the violence - but he did not penetrate to the root causes. He failed to see the whole picture. He did not recognize that it had all begun with some supposedly harmless self-indulgence. He did not recognize that the vineyard, the self-indulgence of intoxicating wines, was the symbol for the downward spiral that led to the Flood.

If there was one thing he should not have done after such a Flood, it was to plant a vineyard.



Channeling Negative Into Positive

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah portion opens with the following statement: *"Noah was an ISH (man) TZADDIK (righteous person) TAMIM (who was completely righteous)"* (Genesis 6:9). The word *ISH* is a compliment in its own right, and the additional descriptions heap honor upon honor on Noah. No other personality is described with so many consecutive praises in one verse!

The first verse in the Book of Psalms teaches: *"Fortunate is the man (ISH) who has not gone in the counsel of the wicked, and has not stood in the path of sinners, and has not sat in the company of scoffers."* The Midrash Socher Tov, in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, comments that the phrase *"Fortunate is the man (ISH),"* refers to Noah, since Noah is called *ISH*, as in our parsha.

Why is Noah described as "fortunate"? According to the Midrash, Noah was fortunate in that he did not follow the ways of the three categories of people (wicked, sinners, scoffers) cited in Psalms. These three negative categories correspond to the three generations that arose in the world over the

course of Noah's lifetime: the generation of Enosh (Adam's grandson, who initiated the practice of idolatry); the generation of the Flood (immersed in immoral behavior); and the generation of the dispersion (who built the Tower of Babel in order to wage war against God). It was Noah's good fortune that he did not go in the path of any of these three generations.

The Midrash teaches us that Noah spent his entire life surrounded by evil and wickedness, yet he managed to make himself into one of the most righteous people who ever lived. This is a remarkable feat. How is it possible for a person to maintain such a high level of spirituality while surrounded by an environment of depravity and corruption?

A passage from the Talmud will help us resolve this question. Ben Zoma says, "Who is a wise person? One who learns from everyone" (Avot 4:1). This is a strange statement. It seems reasonable for us to want to learn from righteous people - but what is wise about learning from the wicked?

The Berditchiver Rebbe remarks that righteous people are able to perceive positive qualities in even the most negative situations. From everything they encounter, they learn how to serve God better.

For example, if a righteous person were to witness someone passionately engaged in sinning, he would recognize and appreciate the tremendous motivating power of passion. However, instead of taking that power and using it to accomplish negative goals, the righteous person would redirect it for a meaningful purpose.



Noach (Genesis 6:9-11:32) *advanced compendium*

The correct channeling of passion has the potential to change rote, sterile performance of God's mitzvot into mitzvah observance driven by enthusiasm and fire! (Kedushat Levi, end of Parshat Bereishit)

Noah epitomized this ability to channel negative forces toward a higher purpose. A hint to this idea is found in his name. The Torah tells us (Genesis 6:8) that Noah found *chen* (favor) in the eyes of God. The name *NOAH* (*nun-chet*), when reversed, spells *CHEN* (*chet-nun*)! Noah found favor in the eyes of God by mastering the art of reversal. He had the ability to redirect every energy from a negative goal to a positive one.

This is why a wise person learns from everyone. Instead of being corrupted by his evil generation, Noah used it as an opportunity for spiritual growth. He had the "best" teachers available! All Noah had to do was learn to take their ingenuity, arrogance, passion, jealousy and zeal, and use them in a productive, constructive way to get closer to God.

May we all learn how to transform the power of every energy and drive into positive action in order to become the best we can possibly be.

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