

Parshas Noach

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1. Man's Ability to See Straight

The Torah states, **“G'd said to Noach, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery/stealing through them; and behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth.’** Ramban explains that the Torah cites the sin of “stealing” as the cause for the world to be destroyed (rather than the perverted behavior of the generation) because “It was the most obvious and revealed sin among the others which were committed in private.” The Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that the fate of the generation was sealed because of “robbery.” Why was this so? It is because the prohibition of “robbery” is a *“mitzvah muskeles,”* rational and logical one that does not require a prophet to communicate or explain its wrongness.” Since the rational mind is able to fully comprehend this *mitzvah muskeles (logical commandment)* it brought about the ultimate prosecution against that generation.

We find that the Gemara in numerous locations states, “Why does the Torah need to state a verse when the concept being communicated through it is logical?” The fact that man is naturally endowed with intelligence – thus giving him a sense of right and wrong – is the reason he is culpable for transgressing these areas. If the rational mind understands that something is wrong, even if one is not aware of any explicit prohibition, he is held liable because it is considered a *mitzvah muskeles (logical commandment)*.

King Solomon writes in Koheles (Ecclesiastes), “G'd made man ‘straight,’ *Adam yashar*; however, he sought out many intrigues.” G'd created man naturally to be “straight”/rational and to process existence in a rational context. However, because of his own interests and conflicts, he deviated. A *mitzvah muskeles (logical commandment)* has relevance to a person who is “yashar” (straight/rational) because he has the natural capacity to sense right and wrong. However, if one becomes corrupted and conflicted then he does not appreciate the value of the *mitzvah muskeles (logical commandment)* or its wrongness. The most blatant example of this was Sodom and Amorrhah. The individuals in these communities had warped and irrational minds and had no relevance to “yashar.” They were totally corrupted and immersed in hedonism to the point that they exchanged “right” for “wrong” and “wrong” for “right.” The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that in Sodom the victim was considered the culpable party.

King David writes in Tehillim, *“Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesamchei leiv* - The dictates of the Torah are yesharim (straight/rational); they bring joy to the heart.” Seemingly from the words of King David there is a correlation between the “straightness/rationality” of the Torah and the rejoicing of one's heart. What is the relationship between the two?

As King Solomon writes - G'd created man to be naturally yashar (straight). This is the essence of man. If one allows himself to maintain his natural essence (yashar), then the dictates of the Torah, which are “straight/logical,” will bring joy to that individual because of the innate appreciation for what is truly correct and proper. However if the individual has deviated and thus allowed his essence to be corrupted then he will not sense joy in his heart when he does actions which are innately “yashar” – such as mitzvos. In fact this individual considers the dictates of the Torah as a burden and sometimes even a

dread – rather than a joy. Rambam writes in the Laws of Deos (chapter 2:1) that just as there are physical ailments, so too there are spiritual ailments. Just as there is a physical illness that causes one to taste something sweet as bitter and bitter as sweet, so too there are those whose spirituality is ailing. These individuals crave and desire corrupt behavior and despise the proper path. They do not rejoice in mitzvos but rather they cannot tolerate them.

It is interesting to note that King Solomon refers to the individual as “adam” rather than “ishe.” The Gemara tells us, based on a verse in Yechezkel, that the appellation that applies to the Jewish people and not the nations of the world is “adam.” Before the Sinai event all humanity was classified as “adam.” However, after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish people are the only ones to be classified as “adam” because they are the only people who have relevance to spiritual advancement and growth. Thus, the Jew at Sinai whose dimension of spirituality assumed the level of “adam,” has relevance to the individual who is discussed by King Solomon in Koheles- “adam yashar.”

Before Sinai, all humanity had relevance to the classification of “adam” and thus had a potential of being “yashar” – as G’d had initially created all of mankind. All mankind had relevance to grasping and adhering to a *mitzvah muskeles* (logical commandment). Thus, the generation of the Great Flood was held culpable and liable for “stealing” because they had the innate ability to appreciate the *mitzvah muskeles* (logical commandment) yet they did not.

2. Torah- The Illuminator

The Torah states at the time of the Sinai event, **“The Jewish people stood under the Mountain.”** The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that when G’d gave the Torah to the Jewish people He placed the Mountain over their heads like a barrel. He gave them an ultimatum, “If you accept the Torah then it will be good; however, if you do not then you will be buried under the Mountain.” The Midrash Tanchuma in the Portion of Noach asks, “If the Jewish people had already unequivocally accepted the Torah with the declaration of ‘*Naaseh V’nishma* – we will do and we will listen,’ then why did G’d need to give them an ultimatum by holding the Mountain over their heads?” The Midrash answers that the declaration of ‘*Naaseh V’nishma*,’ was only regarding the written law. However regarding the oral law, which is unlimited and thus requires a lifetime of delving, dedication, and deprivation in order to acquire it, the Jewish people were not willing to accept it. Thus, G’d needed to place the Mountain over their heads.

The Midrash Tanchuma continues, “The oral law is difficult to study. It is with great difficulty that one drives away the darkness through its study. As it states in the Yeshaya, ‘The people walking in darkness saw a great light.’ This is referring to the Talmudic Sages who are proficient in the oral law. Because G’d has illuminated their eyes (*meir einaihem*) with the ability to see what is permitted and forbidden, what is pure and what is contaminated. At the end of time, those who love G’d (those who study and acquire the oral law) will radiate like the sun in its most powerful moment.”

Reb Meir (Baal Haness) was one of the most spiritually advanced Torah Sages of the Talmud. The Gemara in Tractate Eruvin seeks to reveal the true name of this individual. The Gemara states, “The real name of this person was not Reb Meir but rather it was Reb Nehorae.” The word “Nehorae” in Aramaic means the “illuminator”- (nehora –light). The Gemara explains, “If in fact his name was Reb Nehorae, why is he referred to as Reb Meir? Because he illuminated the eyes of Torah Sages (*meir einaihem*) [he elucidated for them the Torah law]... Why was he also referred to as Reb Nehorae?”

Because he illuminated the eyes of the Torah Sages with the law.” It is interesting to note that the Gemara uses the same terminology *meir einaihem* (illuminated their eyes) as the Midrash Tanchuma does regarding G’d’s illuminating the eyes of the Torah Sages who apply and dedicate themselves to understand the oral law.

Reb Meir’s impact upon his colleagues and students was more than giving them an understanding of the oral law. He caused them to “see”- to comprehend at a level where the Torah was seen and appreciated for what it was as a reality. When G’d illuminated the eyes of the Talmudic Sages to give them an understanding of the oral law, He caused them to comprehend it as if they were “seeing” its truth as a reality. This is the meaning of the verse in Yeshaya who states, “The people who walked in the dark saw a great light” rather than “they came upon a great understanding.” Seeing is a reality.

Reb Meir was a dimension of Torah Sage who had the ability to cause others to understand at a level that was the equivalent of “seeing” the truth of Torah as a reality. He is identified as the one who illuminated the eyes of the Torah Sages. The Gemara in Tractate Eruvin tells us that Judah the Prince (who had committed the oral law to writing and was the leading Torah Sage of his generation) attributed the fact that he was more advanced than his colleagues to his being a student of Reb Meir. The Gemara states, ‘Reb Yehudah HaNasee had said, “I am only as great as I am because I had seen Reb Meir from his back. However if I had seen his face from the front, I would be even greater.” This is a testament as to the unique spiritual dimension of Reb Meir. He was a beacon of light which caused others to “see” the law as reality.

We read in Pirkei Avos, “*Ein am haaretz chassid* – one who is ignorant of Torah cannot be a devoutly pious person.” Rabbeinu Yonah in his commentary infers from the statement of the Mishna that the one who is ignorant of Torah may not have the ability to be devoutly pious (chassid) but he may be a tzaddik (righteous). [Chassid is a classification that is more advanced than that of a tzaddik.] How is it possible to be righteous if one is ignorant of his obligation? Rabbeinu Yonah answers, that in order for one to be a tzaddik, he need only be instructed on what to do and not to do. However in order to attain the level of “chassid” one must be inspired. This can only come about when one experiences the essence of the Torah – which comes about through its study.

King David states in Tehillim, “Your words (Torah) are more precious than thousands of talents of gold and silver.” King David was not expressing himself in poetic terms, but rather, he experienced and appreciated the innate preciousness of Torah as a reality. We find a similar expression used by his son King Solomon who states in Proverbs, “It is (Torah) more precious than diamonds.”

The term that is used by Chazal to identify the Torah is “ohreisah.” In Aramaic this means “the illuminator.” As we find stated in the verse, “*Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* – the mitzvah is the fuel and the Torah is the light/illuminator.” The Torah is continuously referred to as something that enlightens and illuminates. If one engages in Torah study properly it gives one the ability to appreciate it as a reality and “see” its truth.

3. G’d’s Mercy Before the Great Flood and After

The Torah states, “**Hashem (YKVK) said, ‘My spirit shall not be involved with man forever because he is but flesh; his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.’**” It is interesting to note that the appellation for G’d used by the Torah to express the destruction of all flesh is “Hashem (YKVK)” which connotes the Midas HaRachamim (Attribute of Mercy). One would think that the Torah should have used the appellation of

“Elokim” which connotes Midas HaDin (Attribute of Justice).

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains, “That because of the degree to which man had failed, there will no longer be ‘absolute’ Mercy in the world...A state of absolute Mercy can bring about serious consequences. If there is no degree of retribution, which is the equivalent of absolute Mercy, man will become arrogant and behave in a manner that he chooses since there is no reaction to his actions. Thus, he will seek out all sorts of lusts and desires. As we find regarding the Golden Calf- when the Jews had left Egypt they had an abundance of gold/wealth that caused them to cast the Golden Calf. Consequently, absolute Mercy was removed from this existence. We find tzaddikim such as Yaakov our Patriarch, although he desired to sit in tranquility (after all of the tragedies that he had experienced in his life) was not able to do so. The strife and grief from Yosef had suddenly come upon him. Yaakov had thought for 22 years that Yosef had been killed. We find when devoutly righteous people experience peace and tranquility for a period of 30 days, they are concerned that they are being compensated for their good deeds in this world- thus forfeiting their share in the world to come. The basis for this concern is because absolute Mercy had come to an end at the time of the Generation of the Great Flood, even regarding tzaddikim, who since they are human have a hearts of “flesh.” Thus man is susceptible and vulnerable to the many pitfalls of life. The Attribute of Justice pursues the tzaddik in order to assure that he performs mitzvos in the most perfect/meticulous manner. The value of G’d’s interaction with the tzaddik vis-à-vis all humanity is that when they witness him (who is seemingly free of sin) experiencing Divine Justice, despite an almost perfect state, it will then be understood to what degree they will be held liable/culpable. In addition, the value of the tzaddik experiencing punishment in this world is that he should immediately receive his just reward in the world to come.”

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us that one should pray for the welfare of government because if there was no fear of government, man would swallow his fellow alive. When one knows that there is accountability for his actions, then he will see things rationally – and thus behave in a proper manner. However, if one does not see the consequences of his behavior, he will choose to behave as he pleases. This is the nature of the “heart of flesh.” The Mishna addresses those aspects of life that are governed and dictated by a code of law established by government; however, there are many areas of one’s life that do not fall under this jurisdiction. How does one see these areas with clarity – despite the fact that there is no accountability by government?

The Torah has relevance to every aspect of a Jew’s life. Thus, one understands that if he should deviate and transgress the areas that pertain to him, there will be accountability. The level of accountability of a tzaddik is greater than that of an ordinary individual. As the Gemara states, “G’d is exacting with the tzaddikim (for deviation) as much as a hair-breadth.” Elsewhere, Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh presents an example of this with the fate that befell Rebbi Akiva, who was one of the greatest Sages of the Talmud. Because he had experienced a moment of pride when lecturing to 600,000 people, he was put to death by the Romans in the most cruel manner. They had scathed the flesh off of his body, which brought his life to an end. G’d was exacting with him, although it was a nuance of deviation.

G’d is so exacting with the tzaddik in order to allow him to understand and appreciate his shortcomings (although they may be minute). It is through this level of judgment that the tzaddik is able to perfect himself in this world. If there was absolute Mercy, there would be no opportunity for the tzaddik to experience difficulties that would lead him to advance and perfect his spirituality. Chazal tell us that the reason the

matriarchs were barren was because G'd desires the prayer of tzaddikim (devoutly righteous). When one experiences difficulties in life, one prays with another level of intensity. When a tzaddik experiences difficulties as a result of the most minor deviation, he will appreciate that it is as a result of his imperfection/spiritual failing - which will cause him to introspect and intensify his service of G'd.

We say in the Avinu Malkeinu that "(G'd) should remember that we are only dust (*aafar anachnu*)..." This is to highlight the fact that we are only physical beings with "hearts of flesh" that are vulnerable to spiritual failing. Because there is no longer absolute Mercy we beseech G'd to have Mercy upon us because we have great limitation.

4. G'd's Mercy in Creation

The Torah states that when Noach emerged from the Ark after the Great Flood, **"Then Noach built an altar to Hashem...and offered burnt-offerings...Hashem smelled the pleasing aroma and Hashem said in His heart, 'I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man, since the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again continue to smite every living being as I have done.'"**

Kli Yakar explains the verse, **"I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man.** – We see that there is a linkage between the sin of Adam and the curse which came upon the earth. After Adam ate of the Tree of Knowledge, G'd said, 'The earth (*adama*) shall be cursed because of you.' We also find that whenever man fails it is because of the *adama* (earth). Man's physical makeup is earthy/material and it is because of this he is inclined towards the material. Thus, all sin is rooted in the earthiness/unrefined makeup of man (*adama*)..."

The Torah tells us that on the third day of creation, G'd gave the order for vegetation to emerge. He said that there should be **"fruit trees yielding fruit."** However this dictate was not carried out exactly as G'd had commanded. The Torah tells us that what manifested itself was, **"trees yielding fruit."** G'd had intended that the tree should have a certain degree of edibility (as the fruit); however, the earth only yielded trees bearing edible fruit. The earth had sinned - it did not follow the Word of G'd. One would think that G'd, at that point, should have done away with existence and started the process of creation over again. However, He did not. He allowed the earth to continue to exist in a deficient state.

The Torah tells us that on the fourth day of creation, **"G'd made two great luminaries..."** However the same verse continues, **"...the greater luminary to dominate by day and the lesser luminary to dominate the night; and the stars."**

Rashi cites the Midrash that explains that the two luminaries were initially of equal size; however, the moon had asked G'd, "How could two entities share the same crown?" Because the moon had difficulty with this issue it was minimized – causing it to be the lesser luminary. The Gemara tells us in Tractate Shavuos that G'd created the stars to appease the moon that had been minimized. Initially stars were not part of the plan of creation; however, because of the failing of the moon they were brought into existence to assist it to illuminate the night. Once again, G'd could have brought existence to an end and recreate it in the manner which He intended. However, G'd allowed the world to continue in a deficient state. Why was this so?

The Torah tells us that G'd formed man (*adam*) from the earth (*adama*). Adam was created on the sixth day of creation. Thus, man was created from material that was spiritually deficient because of its initial deviation when it was told to give forth "fruit

trees yielding fruit.” One would think that G’d would have wanted man to be created from matter that was not deficient.

Initially (at the time of creation), Adam had an unusual level of clarity. As the Midrash states, “He was able to see from one end of the world to the other.” He had a unique dimension of spirituality. After the sin when he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, one would have thought that because of his innate understanding of right and wrong, he should have been destroyed by G’d for not following His dictate. G’d had mercy and did not destroy him; rather, he became a finite being - subject to death. G’d had mercy on Adam because He understood that Adam had a latent handicap – the matter from which he had been created was deficient and tainted. As Kli Yakar explains, the spiritual failings of man and his inclination towards the material emanate from the fact that he was formed from the earth –which is unrefined.

It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that the stars/constellations determine one’s mazal. The ancient astrologers were able to understand through the stars the present and the future. Ramchal, in his work Derech Hashem, explains that the function of the stars is to act as a conduit for spiritual forces/influences to be manifested into physical existence. Every aspect of existence is determined through this energy flow that is processed through the stars and manifested into physicality. As we had explained - initially stars were not intended to be part of creation/existence. They only came about because of the failing of the moon. Thus, man is not only handicapped because of the deficient matter from which he was formed; but also, the spiritual energy which brings about his existence is deficient because it is channeled through a mechanism which only came into existence through a failing. Thus existence, which was initiated in a deficient state, emanates from the Mercy of G’d.

When man fails, G’d will not destroy him because He mercifully provided a defense for man. The Attribute of Justice will not be applied to him to bring about his destruction because his initial makeup is tainted and deficient.

5. The Source of Conscience (from Bereishis)

The Torah tells us that after Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge, **“Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked; and they sewed together a fig leaf and made themselves aprons...”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain, “...they realized that they were naked...” to mean that Adam and Eve realized that they were stripped of the one mitzvah that they were given by G-d – namely not to eat of the Tree. Since they had transgressed, they were “naked” from that mitzvah.

The Torah continues, **“Hashem G-d called out to Adam and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I am naked, so I hid.”** This verse is referring to Adam’s shame due to his physical nakedness and not to the “nakedness” referred to in the previous verse. The cause of Adam’s sense of shame and his awareness of his naked state came about after he had eaten from the Tree. Before that, there was no shame.

What was the change that took place within Adam? Eating of the Tree of Knowledge caused confusion within Adam and introduced an element of evil into his being, which had been pure. One would think that after having relevance to evil, a person would have less shame by physical nakedness. Adam should have been ashamed of his physicality when he was more pure. The Torah is telling us that this was not the case.

Chazal tell us that prior to Adam partaking of the Tree, his dimension of spirituality was at a level that radiated a holiness that had a semblance to G-d's own radiance. Adam's radiance was so intense that the heavenly angels had confused it with G-d's radiance and began singing his praises. His level of clarity and perception of Truth was so acute that he was able to see from one end of the world to the other. There was nothing that was obscured from his view. Because his physicality was totally spiritualized, he was at this very advanced level.

After Adam had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, Chazal tell us that he was spiritually diminished. He no longer radiated holiness as before. He immediately understood and sensed that his own spirituality was no longer at the level that it had been prior to the sin. He thus experienced and internalized the reality of his own diminishment to the core of his being. He understood that his physicality had been reduced to that of an animal and that he no longer had the semblance of his previous state. This was the source of Adam's shame.

One who senses spirituality also understands that the physicality of his being is only a means and not an end unto itself. The physicality of a human being is purely "the animal" of the person. All of the physical tendencies of man are shared by the animal kingdom. Thus, the more one is in touch with his own spiritual essence, the more he will understand that the body itself is not a source of pride. One who quantifies himself solely through his occupation or material status and does not value his spirituality will have a lesser degree of shame. Shame/conscience is rooted in the spirituality of the human being. The inherent characteristic of shame/conscience has relevance to every Jew because we descend from Avraham our patriarch. He established within himself this unique dimension of spirituality. He did not inherit this characteristic; but rather, through his own quest for Truth, he came upon G-d and advanced himself to that special level of spirituality. Thus, his shame/conscience was one of a kind.

The Jew's level of conscience is unique. There is no other nation who has conscience like the Jewish people because they descend from Avraham. It is because of this innate characteristic within the Jew that causes him to do certain things and refrain from others. One who has lost his sense of shame is a person who is devoid of spirituality. It is because humanity has totally embraced physicality as the "end all" that society conducts itself the way it does.