BS”D

Parshas Noach 5776

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The Nature of Man’s Heart

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

After the great Flood wiped out almost all of mankind, G-d declared (Breishis 8:21), “I will never again curse the earth because of man since the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”

Why is the fact that man’s heart is evil from his youth a reason *not* to destroy the world? The Ramban says that there is a positive twist to this sentence. Man’s heart is wicked only when he is young. As he grows older, he learns to master his impulses and become good. Thus, his evil heart is only a temporary, immature state that he grows out of.

I’d like to share with you some insights on the above verse from three great commentaries or, more precisely, my understanding and interpretation of their comments.

The first is based on the Akeidas Yitzchok (Chapter 14):

Man was created and lived in a carefree world. He knew no discipline. He felt no restraints. The creation was an act of kindness and, despite Adam’s sin, there were very few restraints on man. Man misused that freedom and that kindness. Each person thought of himself and only himself. They stole from and mistreated one another. They knew no moral restraints whatsoever. And they brought about their own destruction.

But the Flood had a salutary effect as well as a destructive one. The survivors learned of G-d’s judgment. They learned that actions have consequences. They could never again be oblivious of the fact that they were responsible for their actions.

Another change after the Flood was that mankind now descended from three couples (Noach’s three sons and their wives) rather than one. Coming from different ancestors leads to great diversity. The advantage of diversity is that it makes it harder for society to be all evil as happened before the Flood. Even if evil flourishes, there will be dissenting voices; someone out there will speak up and stand for good.

This is the meaning of the passage: Man’s inclination is evil from his youth. In mankind’s youth, they all turned to evil, and the world was almost completely destroyed. But as mankind became more mature through suffering and diversity, there would never have to be a Flood again.

Here’s an interpretation based on the Be’er Mayim Chayim:

G-d created an unfinished world. He gives man the opportunity to improve and fix the world (*tikun olam*).

One example: Man takes grain and works on it till it becomes bread. He reaps and winnows and grinds and sifts etc. until he finally bakes bread. A lot of things that are inedible are discarded before the final bread is ready.

Another example: Man makes metal such as gold and silver from ore. Much effort is expended to separate the metals from the rest of the ore. Much is discarded before the final gold or silver emerges.

Man himself is full of impurities and “dregs.” It is his task to purify himself of his baser nature so that the spiritual and G-dly part emerges. In a sense, his work is discarding his bad character-traits and coming up with his best and purist self.

The word for youth (*na’ar*) can also be translated as *to shake off*. We can retranslate our passage as (I will not curse the earth) because man’s evil impulse is cast away (by the person who purifies himself).

In this view of things, our struggle for moral self-betterment is part of the terms of our very being. G-d respects that struggle and gives us the time needed to succeed and finish the job of creation within ourselves.

The Pri Tzadik of Parshas Noach (Chapter 10) comments on the weekly Haftorah “Rani Akarah.” The Haftorah includes the verse (Isaiah 54:9), “For this is to Me like the waters of Noach; that I swore that the waters of Noach would never again flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry at you or rebuke you.”

The Zohar says that the Flood waters are named “the waters of Noach” because once he knew that he and his family would be saved, he did not pray for the rest of mankind.

When no one stands up for mankind, what hope have we? There is still someone. There is G-d Himself who defends us. This is what is meant by stating that man’s heart is wicked from youth. G-d is actually speaking up and standing up for man. G-d says I am partially responsible for man’s sins for I created the evil impulse. I could have created man without it, but instead I gave man the difficult task of overcoming it. Since we share the blame, I will never again destroy mankind.

As we approach the Messianic era, we must turn back in Teshuva to the A-lmighty. This will surely hasten the redemption. But even if we do not, G-d Himself will stand up for us. He will say: “Enough! *I* will speak up for the Jewish People. *I* will stand up for them. *I* will bring the redemption.”