

Rabbi David Stav

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**PARASHA**

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# Noah

*Parashat Noah*, the second *parasha* of the book of Genesis, contains some of the most important and fundamental stories relating to human history. To summarize it in modern terms, we could say that the vision failed, and that the great dream of a utopian world shattered to pieces. God brings a flood, almost completely destroying His world.

Let's take a step back to review the previous *parasha*, *Bereshit*. God creates a near-perfect world of flora and fauna, places man at its center, and gives him the power to rule over all of creation. Initially, man rebels against God's command with a relatively minor act, by eating from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The situation continues to deteriorate, as Cain, Adam's firstborn son, kills his younger brother

Abel. In both of these cases, God punished individuals for their actions. But at the end of the *parasha*, we witness a further deterioration: “And the Lord 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” (6:5). This verse speaks not of an individual who rebels against his Creator, but of all of humanity that constantly thinks and commits evil – the very opposite of God’s will. In this situation, local punishment cannot suffice. Something drastic is called for, and thus the path is paved for the decision: “I will erase My creation, humankind, from the face of the earth” (6:7). God wants to annihilate His world. There is only one man who finds favor in His eyes, Noah. “And Noah found favor in God’s eyes” (6:8). Thus ends the previous week’s *parasha*. This week, we continue to follow the events. What will God do to a world that is wholly sinful, in which only one person does good? The proposed solution is to save that man by means of an ark; he will enter it, and the rest of the world will be destroyed in a flood. At the end of the story, after leaving the ark, Noah offers a sacrifice, at which point God informs him that He will never again destroy the world on account of humankind’s sins: “For the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (8:21).

These words raise a perplexing question. Didn’t God



already know this beforehand? Did we not read, before the flood, that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”? What has changed?

A careful reading suggests that we pay attention to the unique phrase “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” This phrase reflects a common reality among adolescents, perhaps, but one that can be repaired and directed. This isn’t a fatalistic decree to which the human race is irredeemably condemned, without any capacity for improvement. Moreover, while this energy can bring forth great evil, it can also be directed in constructive ways.

What caused God to alter (as it were) His conception of the situation? It would seem that Noah’s sacrifice was the deciding factor.

Perhaps this *parasha* comes to teach us of the power of the individual, of a single, simple person. At the beginning of the story, we hear of Noah who was good and righteous, but whose actions had no effect on his surroundings. He followed his path of righteousness, while the world followed its path of wickedness, and therefore, his behavior could not save a world full of corruption, violence, and sexual impropriety. But from the moment that Noah offered a sacrifice, affirming his faith in God and his belief in His values, God saw that man, while capable of great evil, can also do good, that

## *Genesis*

he does not need to succumb to human evil. As long as even a few people will take responsibility for their lives, and the lives of those who surround them, the world can continue to exist. A famous tale tells of thirty-six hidden righteous people in whose merit the world exists. This legend expresses society's need to base itself on individuals who place the world's well-being before their own personal good. A person is tested by his ability to stand up to outside pressure, and to say that he is willing to cling to his beliefs and fight for them; in this way he can save the entire world.