

In Line with the Divine

BY DON JARASHOW

The ten generations from Adam to Noach ended in complete moral collapse. Humanity had spiraled downward, distancing themselves from the Creator, until Hashem decided that the inhabitants of His greatest creation – the entire world and all it contained – would be wiped out, sparing only Noach and his family.

The people of this era, known as the *dor hamabul*, initially sinned with immoral behavior. Though these were grave *aveiros*, Hashem was willing to overlook them, giving time for the people to repent. However, when they began to engage in *gezeilah*, Hashem proclaimed, "The end of all flesh has come before Me" – it was time to destroy the world. As the verse relates (*Bereishis* 6:12):

וירא אלקים את הארץ והנה נשחיתה כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על הארץ. ויאמר אלקים לנח קץ כל בשר בא לפני כי מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם והנני משחיתם את הארץ.

When Hashem saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth, Hashem said to Noach, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth."

THEIR FATE WAS SEALED

While the word חמס is loosely translated as lawlessness, the Gemara Sanhedrin 108a tells us: "לא נחתם גזר דינם אלא על הגזל – *Their fate was sealed solely because of theft.*"

At first glance, we might find this understandable. After all, "לא – *Do not steal*" – is one of the *Aseres HaDibros*. However, on second thought, you may ask a question which many *mefarshim* wonder about: The prohibition of *gezeilah*, while certainly a serious sin, is not one of the *gimmel aveiros chamuros* – one of three cardinal sins for which one must sacrifice his life. If a person is

not required to give his life to avoid theft, then how could *gezeilah* be the reason for the destruction of the entire world, affecting all of mankind?

TYPES OF THEFT

To make this even more perplexing, the Midrash elucidates on the exact details of the theft which took place, which seemingly only intensifies the question further.

The Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 31:5 relates:

כי מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם, איזהו חמס ואיזה הוא גזל, אמר רבי חנינא חמס אינו שוה פרוטה וגזל ששוה פרוטה, וכך היו אנשי המבול עושים, היה אחד מהם מוציא קפתו מלאה תורמוסים והיה זה בא ונטל פחות משוה פרוטה, וזה בא ונטל פחות משוה פרוטה, עד מקום שאינו יכול להוציא ממנו בדיון, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא אתם עשיתם שלא כשורה אף אני אעשה עמכם שלא כשורה.

For the earth is filled with violence because of them – Rabbi Chanina explains that there were two types of theft in the time of the Flood generation: chamas, a kind of petty theft worth less than a penny, and gezel, outright theft of something significant. In that generation, people would practice chamas: one person would bring out a basket full of legumes, and others would come along, each taking less than a minimal coin's worth. One person would take a small amount, then another, and another, until the owner was left with nothing. But because each amount was so tiny, it couldn't be brought to court.

This was how they escaped the legal definition of theft, but it

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still caused real harm. Hashem, seeing this pattern of exploitation, said, “Just as you acted unjustly, so I will act with you.” Their small, seemingly harmless actions were far from harmless in Hashem’s eyes and led to fitting consequences for the whole generation.

This raises a deeper question: If the theft involved such negligible amounts – less than a *shaveh perutah*, the smallest halachic monetary unit – how could it be that Hashem decided to destroy the world because of this? One chickpea from a basket isn’t even halachically considered theft. How, then, can we understand that these seemingly trivial actions led to such drastic, earth-shattering retribution from Hashem?

RAV CHATZKEL’S ELEVEN WORDS

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, in a letter quoting this midrash, acknowledges the weight of this profound question and, in eleven words, provides an entire world of understanding:

נמצא שכל עונש דור המבול היה רק על ענין שלא כשורה.

It turns out that the entire punishment of the generation of the Flood was solely due to the fact that they acted shelo k’shura – not in line with Hashem’s will.”

Meaning, it’s true that *gezeila* is not one of the three cardinal sins, and it’s also true that their thefts were less than a *shaveh perutah* – a minimal value that doesn’t even register halachically as theft. Even though idolatry and immorality are fundamentally opposed to godliness, the people of the Flood generation weren’t just sinning in these areas. By stealing in such a way – taking less than a *shaveh perutah* – they were essentially telling the Ribbano shel Olam, “We recognize Your will, but we will find a way around it completely.” This deliberate, systematic effort to sidestep Hashem’s *shurah* was more brazen than anything else, than any other *aveirah*, and for this, as the Midrash concludes, “As you acted improperly, so will I act with you improperly.”

The mindset of deliberately opposing Hashem’s will required the destruction of the world.

A PUZZLING QUESTION

On the topic of Hashem’s *shurah* – the Divine line – I’d like to share an experience I had last night at Rutgers University, learning with my friend Yehuda, who is actively searching for clarity. Among the many questions he has about Yiddishkeit and Hashem, one of the greatest confusions he experiences is, that although he leads a mostly secular life, there are certain mitzvos he faithfully observes and certain *aveiros* he avoids. What puzzles him most is that he doesn’t fully understand why, especially given how distant and disconnected he feels from his Jewish identity.

While no one has the perfect answer for every person searching for truth and self-discovery, sometimes Hashem provides the right words to help guide and uplift. I looked into Yehuda’s eyes, jabbed his heart, and told him as follows:

“The reason you observe certain mitzvos and avoid certain *aveiros* is because you are a Yid, created with a *tzelem Elokim* – a Divine image. No matter how far you feel from Hashem or how removed you may believe you are, there is a small but powerful flame within you, called the *pintele Yid* – the Jewish spark. It’s an eternal fire, always burning. It draws you towards those mitzvos that your *neshamah* deeply craves, and shields you from *aveiros* that would bring it pain. This inner spark keeps you connected, even when you feel most distant.”

“It wasn’t just about the one chickpea that was stolen...the focus is on the shurah – the line and the boundaries we are obligated, and so privileged, to maintain.”

BOUNDARIES

The concept of the *shurah* – the Divine line and boundaries that Hashem expects us to follow – is integral to our understanding of our responsibilities as Yidden. When we abide by these boundaries, we are actively perpetuating the post *dor haflagah* era, essentially the reason Hashem recreated the world and sustains it. On the contrary, if we stray from these guidelines, *chas v’shalom*, we risk reverting to the opposite.

As we reflect on the *dor haflagah*, let us remember that it wasn’t just about the one chickpea that was stolen, which led to the destruction of the world. Rather, as Rav Chatzkel points out from the Midrash, the focus is on the *shurah* – the line and the boundaries we are obligated, and so privileged, to maintain.

Every day, we face choices between good and bad. While the *tzelem Elokim* within each of us guides us, no matter where we are holding, no matter how distant we may be or feel, it ultimately falls to us and our *ko’ach habechirah* – the power of choice – to make the right decisions and align ourselves with the desires of the King. By honoring the *shurah* that Hashem has set for us, we reaffirm our commitment to our faith and our mission in the world.

By this virtue, may we merit the long-awaited next step of creation, freed from the current day *חמס* we face – with the arrival of Mashiach Tzidkeinu *bimheirah beyameinu amen*. •

