

PARASHAH SEVEN

Genesis 8:15–9:17; Isaiah 42:6–21; 2Tim 2:8–19

notes by Tim Hegg

Starting Over

The Torah text before us outlines a new beginning. Having destroyed the majority of living creatures by the flood, God now commands Noah and his family to leave the ark of safety and venture out into the aftermath of the deluge to begin the rebuilding process. Reiterating the earlier command to be fruitful and multiply, God indicates to Noah that there is hope for the future—there is a way to rebuild. The original blessing in the command to “be fruitful and multiply” is reiterated to Noah and his family three times in our *parashah*. Added to this was the Divine promise that there would never again be a flood of these proportions in which every living being would be killed. The primary reason given is “because the imagery of mankind’s heart is evil from his youth” (v. 21). The word translated “imagery” or “imagination” is the Hebrew יָצָר, *yetzer*, used also in 6:5, “Hashem saw that the wickedness of Man was great upon the earth, and that every product of the thoughts of his heart was but evil always.” In other texts, *yetzer* is used of something which is formed, like an idol (Is 45:16) or a pot (Is 29:16). What is significant is the fact that this statement in the mouth of God is found both before the flood (6:5) as well as after (8:21). In other words, it was not a bad social environment that brought about the wickedness in man’s heart—it was a characteristic of mankind himself!

The Sages explain this word with the definition “evil inclination,” and offset it by a corresponding “good inclination,” as in the prayer of the Daily Shacharit (morning service), “... Do not cause us to be tested, or brought to disgrace. Let us not be ruled over by the Evil Inclination...” But while the Scriptures clearly speak of an evil inclination, never do they suggest that an equally good inclination exists within the heart of man. Both in 6:5 and in 8:21, the emphasis is upon mankind’s general tendency to turn toward evil without any sense that he also has the ability, in himself, to overcome his basic evil inclination. Note the words of the Psalmist: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin (בְּחַטָּא) did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5); “The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies.” (Ps 58:3). Qohelet adds this: “... the heart of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecc. 9:3) and Jeremiah writes, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (17:9). Note Job’s assessment: “What is man, that he can be clean? Or he that is born of a woman, that he can be righteous? Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks iniquity like water!” (15:14-16). Indeed, no one on his own stands righteous before God: “Enter not into judgment with your servant; for no man living is righteous before You.” (Ps 143:2). Paul taught the same thing when, in good rabbinic fashion, he gathers together the texts quoted in Rom 3:10-18 in which the conclusion is, “there is none righteous, no not one.” Isaiah sums it up when he writes, “We have all become like a *niddah* (one who is separated because of uncleanness), and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” (Is 64:6).

So the condition of man’s fallen heart was the same after the flood as before. Even the severe punishment in which life is nearly universally snuffed out by the wrath of God in the flood makes

no enduring mark on the conscience of mankind. What then is the remedy? How will God prevent the same situation from occurring again, i.e., that mankind should become so corrupt that there would be nothing left to do but to destroy him and start over? The remedy is the promised redemption which God alone could make, a redemption which not only paid for the sins of wayward man, but also effected a change in his heart. This is the message of Yeshua to Nachdimon (Nichodimus). The solution to the problem which Nachdimon brought was that he needed to be “born again” or “born from above.” A change of the environment was not enough—there needed to be a change from within. The heart of stone must be removed and a heart of flesh put in its place, a heart upon which the Torah of Adonai may be written.

In the covenant which God makes with Noah, a covenant which encompassed all mankind, we see the further unfolding of this redemption which is the only hope for mankind. God is calling humankind to Himself, away from idolatry. He does this by asking people to believe that what He has promised He will perform. In other words, He requires of man an act of faith, the conduit through which redemption would flow to the individual sinner. God had demonstrated His faithfulness in spite of the destruction He had brought upon mankind, for He had preserved the “seed of the woman” in order that the promise He had made could be fulfilled. God’s overarching purpose was not to annihilate mankind, but to dwell with him in unending shalom.

Thus He calls man to a renewed relationship with Himself, a call to recognize Him as the One true God. God promises to maintain the regular order of the universe, the seasons which will mark the appointed times of Adonai. In stark contrast, mankind had, in his idolatrous perspective, thought it necessary to offer a bribe to nature via offerings and festivals, as though the created world was itself a god. It does not take much research to see the many festivals and ceremonies throughout the history of the pagan nations which were created to assure the people that the gods and goddesses would cause spring to follow winter or cause the crops to grow after the dormant season. All sorts of rituals involving fertility acts (whether among humans, animals, or foliage) characterize the pagan attempts to coax the gods to bring spring, or cause the crops to grow, or bring calving or lambing. What the God of the Bible promises, however, is that “Continuously, all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

In this promise, He calls mankind to a relationship of trust—of faith, in Him. He calls us all to believe that what He has said, He will do, and to live life accordingly. In fact, the rainbow which He set in the sky is a sign between God and mankind, between God and the earth (9:13). But the emphasis is upon it being a memorial to God of the promise He had made. Once again, the concept of “remembering” is cast in the realm of covenant faithfulness. There, in the sky, is a sign that God will always be faithful to the promise He has made—He will remember. Yet the rainbow is also for our benefit—a constant sign that calls us to trust in God. And God’s faithfulness is emphasized because even though mankind’s heart is still evil, God will maintain the created order of things. “For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt 5:45).

The covenant made with Noah and all living things is therefore a one-sided covenant, entirely dependent upon God’s faithfulness. When we begin our morning prayers by praying “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the Universe, Former of the light and Creator of darkness, Maker of peace and Creator of everything,” we are reminding ourselves that God is faithful to the promise He made to Noah. The physical world is maintained by God, and at every rising and setting of the

sun He is therefore to be praised for His faithfulness. As the Psalmist wrote: “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of Adonai is to be praised” (Ps 113:3).

Let us now combine the two primary thoughts: that man’s heart is continually wicked, and that God invites him into a faith relationship. Here we seem to have an impasse: man is wicked in his heart, yet God asks him to come into a righteous relationship based upon faith! Our Torah section gives us the subtle yet clear answer to the dilemma—the sacrifices which Noah offered are called a “sweet aroma” (רֵיחַ הַנִּיחֹחַ) to God. After so much death and carnage, how could the sacrifice of one of the few animals preserved through the flood be a “sweet aroma” in God’s nostrils? The answer lies in the fact that every sacrifice was a foreshadowing of the offering of the Messiah, the ultimate and complete means by which mankind would once again enjoy fellowship with the Almighty. For not only does the infinite payment of Messiah’s death balance the scales of divine justice for those who believe, it also secures the means by which the redeemed child of God is enabled to live righteously. Here is the answer to mankind’s wayward heart; here is the way back to Eden; here is the fulfillment of the promise. It is in the sacrifice that Noah offers, and the notice that it is a sweet aroma to God, that we hear the prophetic message: “this is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!”

The “Noachide Laws”

The text of 9:1–7 formed the basis for what the Sages designated as the Laws of the sons of Noah (בְּנֵי נֹחַ), a designation which stood for the human race as far as the Sages were concerned. The earliest formulation of the Noachide Laws is found in the Tosefta, *Avoda Zarah* 8:4ff. The seven listed are: 1) setting up courts of justice, 2) prohibition of idolatry, 3) prohibition of blasphemy (cursing the Name), 4) prohibition of fornication, 5) prohibition of murder, 6) prohibition of thievery, 7) prohibition of eating meat torn from a living animal (i.e., an animal must be properly slaughtered before its meat is fit for consumption). The Bavli gives the same list but in a different order (b.*Sanhedrin* 56a): *שבע מצות נצטון בני נח דינין, וברכת השם, עבודה זרה, גילוי עריות, ואבר מן החי ושפיכות דמים, וגזל, ואבר מן החי*, “seven mitzvot were prescribed for the sons of Noah: justice, and blessing of the Name [a euphemism for cursing the Name], worshipping an idol, uncovering of nakedness, and shedding blood, and stealing, and a limb from a live animal.”

The Tosefta is roughly dated to 300 CE, and the Bavli to 500 CE. It can be seen, therefore, that the rabbinic formulation of these laws occurred well after the time of the Apostles. The fairly common practice of finding the “Noachide Laws” as a foundation for the Jerusalem Council’s edict to the Gentile believers (Acts 15) is therefore anachronistic: the Noachide Laws as a standard formulation did not occur until 250 years later.

Moreover, it is clear that the Sages had formulated the Noachide laws on other principles, and were only looking for a Torah text to substantiate their formulation. This is clear from the midrash on Gen 2:16 which is based upon the rabbinical hermeneutic of *gezerah shevah* (which links texts via a common word in each text):

AND THE LORD GOD COMMANDED THE MAN, SAYING: OF EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN YOU MAY FREELY EAT (II, 16). R. Levi said: He gave him six precepts: AND HE COMMANDED (WAY-YEZAW) alludes to idolatry, as you read: Because he willingly walked after zaw-i.e. idols (Hos. V, 11). THE LORD alludes to blasphemy, as you read, And

he that blasphemes the name of the Lord (Lev. XXIV, 16). GOD alludes to the [authority of] judges, as you read, You shall not revile God-i.e. the judges (Ex. XXII, 27). THE MAN: this alludes to bloodshed, as you read, Whoso sheds man's blood (Gen. IX, 6). SAYING alludes to incest, as you read: Saying: If a man put away his wife, etc. (Jer. III, 1). OF EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN YOU SHALL FREELY EAT: here He commanded him against theft. The Rabbis interpreted the whole passage thus: AND THE LORD GOD COMMANDED. He said to him: 'What am I? God, [and I command] that I be treated as a God and not cursed.' How do we know [that Adam was forbidden] incest? [From the passage], And cleave unto his wife (Gen. II, 24), which implies, but not to his neighbor's wife, nor to a male, nor to an animal. OF EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN YOU MAY FREELY EAT. R. Jacob of Kefar Hanan said: When does [an animal] become food, and when is it fit to be eaten? When it is ritually slaughtered. Thus He intimated [the forbidden character of] a limb torn from a living animal. (Mid. Rab. Genesis xvi.6)

Further study of the Noachide Laws in the rabbinic materials shows that even into the Talmudic era, the Sages were not agreed upon the number of laws or even which laws should comprise a legal standard for non-Jews. Even more to the point, until the middle ages and the *halachic* writings of Rambam, no rabbinic literature indicates that the Noachide Laws afforded Gentiles a way for obtaining a place in the world to come. Rather, the Noachide Laws are primarily referenced in the rabbinic literature to show the basis for condemning the nations. The reason given is this: only a few laws were given to the nations but they refused to obey even these. Thus, even if the Torah had been given to the nations, they would have refused it as well. It becomes clear that the Noachide Laws in the rabbinic literature were formulated as way of marking the clear distinction between Jew and non-Jew, not for giving the Gentiles a way to have a place in the world to come. From this it is clear that the four prohibitions enacted by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 had no connection at all with the much later rabbinic formulation of the Noachide Laws.

This is not in any way to diminish the importance of the laws given to Noah in our *parashah*. They are divinely ordained and therefore necessary for the rebuilding of human society following the flood. The sanctity of human life becomes a cornerstone of all true societies. Where the sanctity of life is neglected, human society falls to the level of the animal kingdom. Thus capital punishment is the divinely ordained judgment for murderers based upon the presence of the image of God in man (9:6). It is the very fact that man is created in God's image that distinguishes him from the animals.

The ability of man to rule over the animals, the sanctity of life (both of man and animal), the priority of human life over that of animal life—all of these are foundational principles upon which any viable society is built. To neglect them is likewise to throw society into the downward spiral that brought on the flood in the first place. Here we find an important principle pertaining to divine law in general: God gives us His commandments for our good. To the extent that any society recognizes and enacts these laws, to that extent the society is given the ability to maintain. God's laws are never given as a "trap" to snare mankind. God's laws are good and they aid people in living in a way that benefits all.

In 9:3 the notice is given that meat from animals could now be used for food in the same way that the green plants were given previously. This does not necessarily mean that people had not eaten meat up to this point but only that now the killing of animals for food was divinely permitted.

The language of the Hebrew is curious: כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ אֲשֶׁר הוּא־חַי לָכֶם יְהִי לְאֹכְלָהּ , “every creeping thing which has life in it shall be food for you.” The question is how to understand רֶמֶשׂ, *remes* which refers to animals that crawl on the ground, especially reptiles. In fact, the Lxx translates רֶמֶשׂ here with the Greek ἑρπατόν (*herpaton*), a word that often means “snake, serpent.” (Note the English “herpetology,” the study of reptiles.) In Gen 1:24–26 (cf. 6:7, 20), רֶמֶשׂ appears to be a category of animals different from cattle (בְּהֵמָה, *b’heimah*) and birds (עוֹף, ‘*of*). Likewise, in 1Ki 4:33 רֶמֶשׂ comprises one of four main categories of animals: “...he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish.” Yet in Ps 104:25, our word describes marine life: “There is the sea, great and broad, in which are swarms without number, animals both small and great.”

So what exactly was given to Noah and his family for food when the verse speaks of “every *remes* that is alive shall be food for you?” Many commentators take the view that *remes* in our verse refers to all the animals listed in v. 2: “...every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea.” Thus, the NASB translates כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ as “every moving thing,” indicating that all animals, both clean and unclean, were permitted for food. It does seem probable that *remes* in this case has a wider sense than merely reptiles since the phrase “that has life in it” is added. While clearly prohibiting eating from a carcass, the added phrase may broaden the sense of *remes* to include all classes of animals.

But it seems curious that this means “every animal,” for in the previous narrative such careful attention is given to distinguishing between clean and unclean animals. Moreover, the very next verse puts a restriction on the eating of blood. Thus, it would appear the later food laws (e.g., Lev 11) had, in some measure, been revealed to Noah and his family. Wenham (*Word Bible Commentary: Genesis*, p. 193) writes: “This passage’s keen concern with other food rules, e.g., no consumption of blood or cadavers, suggests that the unclean/clean distinction may be taken for granted.” If this is the case, then “every *remes*” of 9:3 would be naturally limited by the previous clean/unclean distinctions of animals saved on the ark. Whatever the case, in the subsequent Torah legislation, the food laws are clearly delineated for all of God’s chosen people.

The *haftarah* passage chosen for this Torah section is Is 42:6–21, and it is clear why the Sages chose it, for it begins with the picture of Israel being appointed as a covenant to the peoples. Even as the covenant made with Noah applies to all who dwell upon the earth, so Israel was to shine forth the light of her covenant with God so that all the nations would see and be drawn into that covenant. Yet, like the Noahic covenant, it is God who performs the work to bring about the expansion of Israel’s covenant to include the nations: “These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone” (v. 16). Thus, the universality of the Noahic covenant which includes all peoples is paralleled by the final drawing of the nations into the covenant made with Israel, even as the promise was made to Abraham: “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). And the final verse of the *haftarah* passage gives an indication of the means by which God will make Israel a light to the nations: “Adonai was pleased for His righteousness’ sake to make the Torah great and glorious” (v. 21). It is through Israel’s obedience to the Torah that they would shine forth the light of God’s grace in the covenant He had made with her, a light that ultimate casts its focus upon Yeshua our Messiah. “For Messiah is the goal of the Torah for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4).

The Apostolic portion was chosen to highlight the faithfulness of God which our Torah portion emphasizes. The Noahic covenant depends entirely upon God’s faithfulness to keep His covenant promises in spite of mankind’s evil inclinations. Paul also speaks of God’s faithfulness in the face

of man's lack of faith:

If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself. (2Tim 2:12-13)

While the eternal blessings of God come only upon those who confess Him and cling to Him, the purposes of God cannot be thwarted by the sinfulness of man. Our salvation does not depend upon our strength, but upon His, and He has determined nothing will stand in the way of fulfilling His purposes to redeem a host of people who will forever glorify Him as the one and only God. "The One who began a good work among you will keep it growing until it is completed on the Day of the Messiah Yeshua" (Phil 1:6, CJB).