

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

Author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)

No'ach

V'CHOL YETZER MACHSH'VOT LIBO
- RAK RA KOL HAYOM (B'reishit 6:5)

As last week's parasha of B'reishit closes, Hashem explains why He decided to destroy all of humanity. And He tells us the reason for Man's corruption by stating that every inclination of Man was only evil all the time.

It was for this reason that G-d brought the flood.

This reason is echoed in the middle of this week's parsha, when No'ach brings offerings to G-d after the flood. It was then that Hashem pledges never to repeat the destruction of the earth in such a fashion, and He explains:

KI YEITZER LEIV HA'ADAM RA
MIN'URAV (9:21)

"Man's inclination is evil from his youth."

It would seem a most strange statement! G-d uses the reason that Man's inclination is only evil as the

rationale for destroying humanity; he then uses the very same reason, that Man's inclination is evil from his youth, to explain why He would never again destroy all life?!

How is it possible to understand this seeming contradiction?

HaRav Soloveitchik asks this very question and finds its resolution in this week's haftara. Yishayahu makes mention of No'ach and the flood in this 54th perek of his sefer, in order to convince the nation that, just as mankind had sinned in No'ach's time and were punished with the inundation of the earth, AND YET... soon after, he forgave humankind and promised never again to do so again, so too, Hashem would quickly forgive Israel of her sins despite the painful punishments they would suffer.

In doing so, G-d refers to the flood waters as MEI NO'ACH, the waters of No'ach which, the Rav explained (see last year's article) that identifying the flood as the "waters of No'ach" was a subtle way of blaming No'ach for his failure to plead with Hashem to rescind the decree. But the oath he gives to No'ach following the inundation marks a dramatic change in HaKadosh Baruch Hu's treatment of Man.

Before the flood, the Rav argues, the

human being's inclination was RAK RA -it was ONLY evil - that is, he could be COMPLETELY evil with no hope for redemption. He was, therefore, punished. After the flood, however, there was no significant change. Society remained corrupt. Man remained evil. Hashem had proven that severe punishment could not change humankind's ways - KI YEITZER LEIV HA'ADAM RA MIN'URAV. And that is why He took the oath no longer to punish humans for their "natural" inclination.

Instead, Hashem granted them the capacity for repentance. No longer would sin and corruption automatically bring severe results. Man could repent... because G-d could forgive.

And this is precisely the lesson Yishayahu taught his generation and all who followed: Hashem's anger is, comparatively, only short-lived. But His forgiveness, His "desire" to return to Man so that Man could return to Him - or vice-verse - is eternal.

What a powerful message to receive right after the month of t'shuva closed! The navi teaches us a lesson that grants us hope in the worst of times and joy in the best of times.

A lesson we should always remember.

