

MAN THE POLLUTE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

And I, behold, I am about to bring the Flood waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which there is a breath of life from under the heavens.

Be'er Yosef: Rashi explains the "behold" as indicating Hashem's readiness to concur with the angels that protested Man's creation. "What is Man, that You should make mention of him," ² they asked. Ramban challenges this (and the medrash from which Rashi draws his comment.) Hashem was poised to deliver Noach and his family, and renew human civilization through them, positioning them so that they would propagate and repopulate the earth. How can this be seen as concurring with the angels and their dismissive attitude towards human beings?

We could explain Rashi's reasoning as follows. The angels did not object to Man's creation per se, but to the role and power G-d assigned to him. "They shall rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and over the animal, the whole earth." ³ The angels were irked by the complete dominion that Hashem offered to Man. (Indeed, this is born out by the lines in Tehilim that follow the one cited above. "You give him dominion over Your handiwork. You placed everything beneath his feet: sheep and cattle, all of them, even the beasts of the field.")

The extent of Man's dominion was reflected in the devastating destruction wrought by the Mabul. The waters wiped out not only human life, but animal and even plant life. Three tefachim of topsoil - the typical penetration of the plowshare - were washed away. ⁴ Man's sin had corrupted everything around him, so that even animals and plants mated and produced in atypical ways; they, too, had to be removed from the face of the earth.

We can attribute the corruption of other life forms to the mandate given to Man to rule over all infra-human species. This license included the consequence that the behavior of all things would be linked to the activities of Man, who could either elevate everything around him, or corrupt all things. When Man's behavior became horribly sinful, he compromised the integrity of all things, such that corruption spread everywhere- even to the very soil around him. (It is for this reason that Chazal⁵ tell us that the Land of Israel was spared the effects of the Mabul. While the nature of its animals was corrupted even there, the inherent kedushah of the Land ensured that the earth itself was shielded from the polluting influence of Man's sins.)

In the Flood's aftermath, Hashem pledged, "I will not continue to curse again the ground because of Man." ⁶ This is puzzling. How could G-d issue such a guarantee? Man possesses the ability to choose between good and evil. Should Man make the wrong choices, whatever Divine reasoning that necessitated the destruction of mankind at the time of the Flood would apply once more! Man would then have to be destroyed once again. Did G-d mean to limit Man's free will?

Not really. The changed position of Man relative to the rest of Creation allowed G-d to make the pledge, without limiting Man's choices in any way. Man lost the ability to completely transform everything around him. Note that Hashem told Noach upon emerging from the Ark, "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth." ⁷ Man's relationship with the animal world had changed markedly from what it was before the Flood. Previously, Man was told that he would rule over the animals; now, they were simply fearful of him, and kept their distance. Man's "rule" was diminished - at least in the sense of his behavior directly changing their habits.

To be sure, everything that Man does - to this day - affects the entire cosmos, even the upper, spiritual worlds. Nonetheless, Man would no longer be able to directly transform the nature of the animals through his actions. His ability to corrupt the world around him was greatly curtailed. G-d could therefore pledge that no matter how evil he would become, Man would not be able to wreak so much havoc upon his environment that even the earth would need to be destroyed. While Man's power was thus curtailed, his diminished capacity was a Divine chesed, because it assured the continuity of Creation.

We now understand how Rashi would dismiss the Ramban's objection. The angels objected not to Man's creation, but to G-d granting him so much power that he could transform the natures of other creatures. In this regard, Hashem concurred with their objection, and limited Man's powers after the Flood!

Having come this far, the seemingly unwieldy phraseology of an earlier pasuk now becomes a work of elegance. "And Hashem reconsidered having made Man on earth." ⁸ Why would the pasuk underscore "on earth?" We now understand. Hashem did not regret, as it were, the creation of Man. He did reconsider creating him on the earth, i.e. giving him enormous power over everything around him, including the earth itself.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 6:17
2. Tehilim 8:5
3. Bereishis 1:26
4. Rashi, Bereishis 6:13
5. Zevachim 113

- 6. Bereishis 8:21
 - 7. Bereishis 9:2
 - 8. Bereishis 6:6
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