

BEYOND YOUTH

by Rabbi Label Lam

HASHEM smelled the pleasing aroma, and HASHEM said in His heart: "I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man, since the inclination of the heart of man is bad from his youth nor will I again continue to smite every living being as I have done." (Breishis 8:21)

Could this verse mean as some have mistakenly tried to explain that man is a hopelessly wicked creature? Certainly not! Then what does the verse mean to tell us about the nature of human nature?

First of all the word bad, "rah", doesn't mean evil or absolute bad. It means broken or substandard. A shaky ladder is called a "sulam r'uah" using the same Hebrew root "reish" / "ayin" to describe its instability. Sure it might be dangerous to stand on the top but it is not absolutely evil. It's still a ladder and it can be fixed.

Similarly, imagine the rebbitzin doubles a cake recipe to meet the needs of the many guests she's expecting for Shabbos, but she forgets to double the sweetener. When desert arrives people politely dissect the cake to make it look as if it was eaten.

After a time the rebbitzin sits down to join in and she tastes the cake and she becomes painfully aware of her mistake. She's mortified! What an embarrassment! The cake was bad-"rah"! Was it evil, poison, a WMD? No! There were even some vitamins and nutrients to be gleaned from the bad cake? It only failed to achieve the culinary standards of the chef.

When the Torah tells us that the "inclinations of the heart of man are bad", it refers to "his thoughts" that are in need of serious editing. A clear reading of the verse yields good news and bad. We are all in great need of training. Without a proper moral education the worst qualities will tend to be manifest. The Torah recognizes that reality. We are all attracted to bad things, naturally. Those seeds of selfishness are found within the gardens of our minds, from our youth.

We live at constant risk of becoming worse and worse if simply no efforts are made to consciously weed-out unhealthy habits of thought, speech, and action. "Doing what comes naturally" is a dangerous business. Things that are left to chance go to chaos.

To become better and better, to approach fulfillment requires a lifetime of strategic effort. To fail is easy and natural like gravity. Birds may fly effortlessly but for a man to soar a feat of engineering is required.

A great man passed away a couple of years ago. His name was Rabbi Avigdor Miller ztl.. During the week of mourning, I was told that someone overheard his wife say that for more than sixty years he did not open the refrigerator. This is just a single pencil line in a sketch of his character. Try not opening the fridge for 60 minutes. Then you can appreciate how much imaginative willpower is required to remove food from the center one's consciousness.

An acquaintance told me of a child he knew, not more than 5 years old, that was diagnosed as having "gender confusion". I asked Rabbi Miller directly if this is possible. He told me, "We all have tendencies for all kinds of wicked things. Did you ever look over the ledge of a tall building and think of jumping? You didn't! Did you!?"

A man is a dynamic being, neither entirely good nor irredeemably evil initially. He has enormous capacity for either "from his youth." Ultimately he tends to one or the other, and we are ultimately responsible for what happens "beyond youth".

Good Shabbos!

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