

NOW -A HOPEFUL PLACE

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 imagery of man's heart is evil from his youth, nor will I continue to smite every living being, as I have done. (Breishis 8:21)

There's something awfully incongruous about this verse. After "taking in" the "pleasing aroma" of the offering brought by Noach after "The Flood", The Almighty justifies a decision not to destroy the world again with a portrayal of the human condition that is hauntingly similar to the depiction that substantiated the destruction of the world, as it says, "And G-d saw that the evil of Man was great upon the earth and that every imagery of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all day". (Breishis 6:5) "The evil imaginings of man's heart from his youth" should be cause for less not more Divine forbearance.

Some false religionists have wrongly employed this description to justify their picture of man as an irredeemably damned and evil being. Nothing could be further from the truth. Why should that be the cause of a greater tolerance? Is it just a lowering of the standard of expectation? What then is the relevance of the "pleasing aroma"?

There's a rugged sounding Mishne in the 3rd Perek of Pirke Avos that states: Rebbe Yaaov says, "One who is going along the way and learning and he interrupts his learning and says, "How nice is that tree!? How nice is that newly plowed field?!" the verse speaks about him as if he had placed himself in mortal danger!" What had he done so terribly wrong? The Mishne is certainly not attempting to discourage people from admiring the kindness, genius, and unity embedded in every swirling molecule of creation. What's so bad? He interrupted his learning to do so. He is in the process of meditating on and hearing more deeply the messages of HASHEM and he allows himself to be distracted. He is like a mother that neglects to feed her child because she is too occupied admiring pictures of her child.

Assuming that point is understood, why does the Mishne mention a "tree" and a "plowed field"? We know that Mishne is very terse and sparing

with its words. It could easily have said apple or flower or just a tree or just a field or any other object of beauty! Why pick on specifically those two items? I have searched all over for an answer to this question. I didn't find yet anyone who even asks the question. Therefore, forgive me if I make a wild swinging attempt on my own!

There's a curious phenomenon that I have observed. It's not a fast rule but a generalization. In Jewish homes across the world there are usually two types of pictures that adorn the walls. There are pictures of Tzadikim-great personalities and pictures of little children. Rarely do you find portraits of middle aged people. Inspiration is to found in the faces of little children and holy men. Included here are newly-weds as well. Why?

When we gaze at the countenance of a Tzadik, like a full tree in an open field we attach ourselves to an image of actualized potential. That's a portrait of what's possible when the seed of life is optimally nurtured. When we behold the cherubic likeness of a little child we are struck by the endlessness of pure potential, as a newly plowed field. Who can know what orchards of goodness the furrows of that innocent mind will bear for mankind. The person who interrupts the seeding of his mind with holy ideas which if developed fully could produce supple branches weighted with nourishing fruits, and seeing both a newly plowed field together with a fully developed tree fails to connect them and be inspired to return to his task but rather sits back admiringly - he has put himself in mortal danger by missing the message.

Similarly, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch ztl. explains "from his youth" refers to the ability of the young to "shake off", to endure- survive and transcend the effects of evil. Like a newly plowed the youth represent the "hope that beats eternal within the human breast". The offering of the Tzadik -Noach with its "pleasing aroma" is like that single tree. Seeing both of these, side by side, the presence of individual Tzadikim in every generation with the ever emergence of youth, the whole world, like a fragile ark, is **now - a hopeful place**. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.