

RETRIBUTION AND RESPONSE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FLOOD

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

PURPOSES OF PUNISHMENT

The central theme in the Biblical account of the Flood is Heavenly Retribution. Man has sinned and become corrupt. God regrets His creation and decides to destroy all living things. Our Rabbis clearly understood the Flood as a punishment:

He who exacted retribution from the Generation of the Flood... (Mishna Bava Metzia 4:2).

Discussion of punishment raises the issue of objective, i.e. what is the purpose of punishment? Is it rehabilitative, preventative, protective (the social concern) or a vehicle for atonement (the religious orientation)? This question is based upon an implicit premise: that punishment has a design and a deliberation; it is not capricious. When discussing God's punishment, this premise is assumed by the faithful Jew. Unlike the pagans, our belief system has consistently stressed the ultimate justice of God's Providence. God's rewards and punishments are appropriate and fair. Punishment is the meting out of justice. It naturally follows that any retribution ascribed to God is not only deliberate, but designed to serve the aims of justice. To understand the purpose of punishment, we must first understand the nature of punishment.

II

HOW DOES GOD PUNISH?

INTERVENTION AND INHERENCE

There are, generally, two ways to understand God's involvement in this world, including the mechanics of reward and punishment. One is **Intervention**; the other **Inherence**. They are both founded upon a basic premise: Good is rewarded and evil is punished.

Following the **Intervention** mechanism, God, eternally aware of all thoughts and actions, perceives Man's evil and decides to intervene in the normal course of events. This intervention is expressed in the form of punishment. Conversely, God perceives Man's good and, again, decides to intervene in

the normal course of events. This intervention is expressed in the form of reward. The underlying definition of "Intervention" is the lack of a "natural" causal relationship between the evil and the punishment. God must interrupt the flow of nature to exact justice. Justice, therefore, is not an inherent part of the scheme of this world.

"Inherence" starts out with a radically different world view. The world, bearing the stamp of its Creator, is an intrinsically just world. Woven into the eternal and holy tapestry of creation are the threads of justice.

...as the architect builds...from blueprints...so, The Holy One, blessed is He, would look into the Torah and create the world. (Midrash Rabbah, Bereshit 1:1)

Justice is, therefore, the natural and logical consequence of actions in this world. Reward becomes the natural good produced by good, and punishment the natural evil resulting from evil. In this mechanic, God has created the consequences of our actions and implanted them into the "natural" scheme of things. The only interruption of nature would be the suspension of justice.

What caused the almost total destruction of the world?

"...For all manner of flesh perverted their way"; R. Yohanan said: this implies that they (the Generation of the Flood) mated domestic animals with wild, wild animals with domestic and all of them with man. Nevertheless, their verdict was only sealed because of their thievery." (B.T. Sanhedrin 108a)

The corruption of society was expressed in two ways: the breakdown of sexual boundaries and thievery. Both of these, however, can be understood as having a common root: the blurring and eventual removal of limits. When Man's qualitative superiority over animals no longer limits his sexuality to other humans and when the boundaries of ownership are no longer being respected, then society's fundamental need for order is not being met. We have found the sin; now let us analyze the retribution.

III

MAN AS GOD'S PARTNER IN CREATION

God created Man in **His own Image**. Traditionally, this has been understood as a reference to Man's creative powers. Indeed, the entire institution of Shabbat is encouragement to Man to join and imitate the Creative process. We create for six days and cease on the seventh in pale imitation of God. God's creation, perfect as it was, was incomplete so as to allow Man room to experience the potency of creation. God's intent in creating Man was to have a partner in creation (see B.T. Shabbat

10a).

The central feature of the Creation is creating order out of chaos-creating light, then dividing light from dark; creating plants, each that will regenerate according to its own species; creating animal life and eventually humans that will reproduce according to their own kind.

That phrase is repeated often enough in the first chapter of Bereshit that it becomes the anthem of creation. What is creation? Order; setting boundaries: light up to here, dark from here on; apples here, oranges there; birds up there, fish down there, animals over here and humans over there. Man's corruption of order is the regression to a pre-Bereshit world: chaos; dark and light ruling together; all sorts of beasts cohabiting; all natural and social boundaries being violated so often that they cease to exist.

Inherence raises its passive head and decrees:

You have upset the borders of Bereshit! Those selfsame borders, which have protected you until now, will also be obliterated.

And the sky, which has divided the waters above from the waters below opens up and destroys all life. Man has corrupted the order and now that corruption destroys Man.

The approach of **Inherence** is a fearful one, for it puts the onus on Man. God has created a world such that we can form our own destiny; we can create or destroy. In a world gone crazy with tools of destruction, chemical warfare and ecological suicide, we must realize that, like the Generation of the Flood, we will eventually pay the price of our actions.

The story of the Flood reminds us of our responsibility to carry on the process of creation toward its ultimate goals:

They shall not hurt nor destroy on My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea.

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