

THE PATH TO SERVING GOD

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The opening parshiyot of the Torah portray a rather dismal picture of the human race and of our world generally. Everything noble and worthwhile seems to have spun away in a flood of vice, avarice, and murder. And this type of human behavior seems to have filtered down to the other forms of life on the planet as well.

The great flood described in this week's parsha can therefore be seen, so to speak, as a do-over, by God, of the time of creation. We all know the feeling that comes upon us when after working on a project for a period of time, when we become convinced of the project's failure and are aware of the need to start all over again from the beginning, we must discard all that had previously been invested in the endeavor.

But as the parsha indicates, there is little to choose between the world society before the flood and the one that emerged after the flood. So the Lord, so to speak, adopts a different tack. Though God is disappointed by human behavior, God never irrevocably despairs of humans, individually or collectively.

Now God will wait patiently until humans on their own, through their inner sense, seriously begin to search and find meaning and purpose in life. This search will inexorably lead to the Creator and a moral code of behavior. Noach, as great a person as he was, was unable to transmit to his descendants the necessary sense of self-morality and that inner drive for self-improvement and righteousness which he possessed. Without that inner search for the Creator, no outside revelation or cataclysmic event, no flood or war or Holocaust, can achieve an improved moral climate in human society.

The parsha records for us God's commitment not to bring another flood upon humankind. Outside pressures and historic events, no matter how impressive and intense they may be, are not the ways to inspire and improve human behavior. A change of the human heart, a rethinking of life's meaning and mission, a yearning for spirit and eternity, is the proven method for achieving a more just and noble society.

That is clearly the message that all of the great prophets of Israel imparted to us. As we recently commemorated the conclusion of the seven-year daily learning cycle, an enthusiastic young man boasted to me how he had now "gone through" the Talmud. It brought to mind the sharp comment of one of the great Chasidic masters of earlier times who replied to such a boast from one of his

followers: "Wonderful! But now the question remains how much of the Talmud has gone through you?!"

The lesson of this week's parsha, as it is the lesson of the Torah in its depth and entirety, is that the path to knowledge and service of God runs through one's own inner feelings, attitudes, ideals and commitments.

The task of Jewish parenting and education is to impart this basic truism of life to the next generation. And as the Torah itself testifies, this ability to do so was what separated Avraham from Noach, and the Jewish people originally from the nations of the world.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com