

THE BEST POLICY

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

"For the land was filled with hamas [robbery]" -- Beresheet 6:13

A mere 1650 years after creation of man Hashem destroyed the world by flooding the planet. The Torah describes the sorry state of human behavior that brought on the tragedy in a few terse phrases. "And G-d saw the Earth and behold it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. G-d said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the Earth is filled with robbery...I am about to destroy them." Our sages explain that the world was filled with idol worship and immorality but the decisive blow to the continued existence of the human race was robbery.

The Hafetz Hayim explains with a parable. A businessman came upon bad times and was forced to close down his business. His business failure hurt a lot of people yet no one came forward to seize any of the property that remained in the debtor's possession that the man needed for himself -- like his house, car or furnishings. One day a frustrated creditor came and seized the man's car and before you know it others came and stripped the man of all of his belongings. Explains the Hafetz Hayim: Every sin creates a damaging demon that can harm the sinner and prosecute him or her in the Heavenly court. Yet, even if one has a "basketful" of sins, none of the demons comes forward to harm the sinner. However, the demon created by robbery has a measure of gall -- huzpah -- and attacks the individual who created it. The others soon follow suit.

The flood lasted forty days to hint at the fact that the key element that brought on the waters was gezel -- robbery. Every letter of the Aleph-Bet has a numerical value. Gimmel equals 3. Zayin is 7. Lamed is 30. The numerical value of the word gezel -- robbery-- is not coincidentally -- 40.

The choice of rain as the destructive force is also crucial to our understanding of G-d's hate for robbery. Even in a torrential storm, with countless drops descending from the heavens simultaneously NO TWO DROPS TOUCH. Each drop has its own path from heaven to earth designated by Hashem and no drop enters the space of another. G-d distributes property to each person and He despises when people attempt to take matters into their own hands -- to disrupt His system -- by cheating and robbing.

Two young men used to visit Rabbi Mordechai Schwab, zt'l, in Monsey, NY. The Rabbi was very ill and as the two drove up the highway from NY City to Monsey one said to the other, "The Rabbi is failing, if you have anything you need to ask him don't delay." Before leaving the frail sage the young man inquired, "Dear Rabbi, how come we see so much suffering in the Jewish people in our times.

People are sick with all kinds of horrible diseases, so many can't find a job or a mate and others can't have children. In our Holy Land people live under the threat of attack every minute. What is wrong?" The Rabbi answered softly but with a certainty that drove through the young man's heart. "Are we honest in our dealings with one another?"

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt'l, summed it up in one sentence. "Taking anything that is not yours is considered theft." Living in a land corrupted by greed and dishonesty it is very difficult to live up to the sterling standards of honesty that the Torah demands. "Everyone does it" does not justify wrongdoing. Each of us has an obligation to study the Torah's laws of business and property in order to accept upon ourselves its statutes as a way of life that will bring us all blessing and prosperity rather than curse and destruction that dishonesty yields.

SHABBAT SHALOM

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