

The journey through the eons that began in parashah Bereshit culminates this week with the final origin stories and Abraham entering adulthood. The human journey begins. For all concerned, it has thus far been neither smooth nor satisfying. Gifted with the power of reason and the power of speech but limited in vision, these “protohumans” have managed to wreak havoc on HaShem’s perfect creation. In turn, HaShem painfully learns that humans by their very nature are not invested in maintaining creation in its divine perfection. Out of Eden and on our own for better or worse, we have reached pinnacles of dignity as well as nadirs of depravity, while HaShem, bound by the Noachide covenant to never again utterly destroy creation, continues to renew it no matter how well or poorly we live in it. There is a wealth of speculation on what exactly moved HaShem to destroy nearly all of earth’s creatures and start anew. Chapter 6, verse 11: “The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth became full of robbery. The root תנש means corrupt, damage, destroy, violate, deal corruptly. The root שונ means robbery, oppression, evil-doing, and in Jewish law, violent robbery. (It is ironic that this word, with its derogatory connotations in Hebrew, has become the name of the radical political organization Hamas. In this context, it is an abbreviation for its Arabic name, *Charakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah* as well as the Arabic word for enthusiasm and heroism. The lessons of the Tower of Babel in eloquent action!) The Talmud (Sanhedrin 108a) offers this explanation of corruption, which focusses on sexual immorality: “The generation of the flood became haughty due only to the covetousness of the eyeball, which is similar to water ... Consequently, God punished them with water, which is similar to an eyeball. ...” This refers to the end of parashah Bereshit, when “... the *Nephilim* appeared on earth – when divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.” These mysterious *Nephilim* could be anything from “fallen angels,” to authorities who misused their power, to the “giants” who inhabited Canaan during the conquest. At any rate, we are to have no contact with them, both because there must be total separation between divine and earthly, and because they represent temptation. Thus, parashah Bereshit ends with HaShem’s decision to destroy the earth’s fauna, except for Noach, who had “found favor with Adonai.” Rabbi Yochanan’s explanation follows: “This teaches that the people of the generation of the flood mated male domesticated animals with female undomesticated animals, and male undomesticated animals with female domesticated animals, and all male animals with human females, and human males with all female animals.” He continues, “Come and see how great is the power of robbery, as the generation of the flood violated every precept, but their sentence to be destroyed was not sealed until they extended their hands in robbery.” Why is robbery the final straw? Robbery, taking something that does not belong to you, originates with coveting, which is explicitly prohibited in the 10th Commandment. We see it, we want it, we take it, as parents of toddlers know all too well. Restraint is not an intrinsic human characteristic; it must be learned. Chapter 8, verse 21: “... And the Lord said to himself, ‘I will no longer curse the earth because of man, for the inclination of man’s heart (*jetzer lev*) is evil from his youth ...’” Upon eating from that fateful tree, we gained the ability to discern between right and wrong, good and evil. We became adults, responsible for our own actions. We understand that we have both the *jetzer ha tov* (good inclination) and the *jetzer ha ra* (evil inclination). It is our duty to keep the latter at bay, and this must be diligently taught, not only by correction, but by example. Every generation grapples with this within the context of its own era, but the underlying challenge remains the same: Balancing the concerns of the individual with the concerns of the community. Taken to the extreme, individual freedom robs others of their own freedom and the ensuing chaos ultimately destroys society. When people begin to steal, the incentive to produce gradually ceases, theft becomes endemic, and society crumbles under the pressure of survival at all costs. People have reverted to the egocentrism of early childhood. In a sense, this is mirrored in the characters of Noach and Abraham. We read that Noach was “blameless in his age.” But had he lived at the time of Abraham, he would likely not have been granted this distinction. When HaShem informs him of the impending destruction, Noach shows no emotion; he simply follows orders, building the ark and gathering the animals. Abraham however, confronted with the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, pleads with HaShem to save the lives of those who may be innocent. Noach’s thoughts do not extend beyond himself, but Abraham’s vision includes his fellow human beings. He is adult enough to feel empathy and act for the greater good. Balancing our own concerns with those of others is a daunting, multileveled task. It is the work of a lifetime, set against the work of all the lives that have come before us and all who will come after us. Our sacred writings are full of examples, good and bad. It is up to us to learn from them and act wisely for the good of all.

Shabbat shalom!