



Parashat Noach
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We read in Parashat Noach that in the aftermath of the flood, God decided that He would never again destroy the earth, noting the inherently sinful nature of man: "I shall never again curse the ground on account of man, for the inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth, and I shall never again smite all living things as I have done" (8:21).

Maimonides cites this verse as part of his discussion of the Book of Iyov, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:22). Based on a number of comments by *Chazal*, Maimonides identifies the "satan" described in the Book of Iyov as an allegorical reference to the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil impulse within every person that lures him to sinful conduct. In the context of this discussion, he draws our attention to the Sages' comment (*Bereishit Rabba* 34, *Sanhedrin* 91b) that the evil inclination surfaces within a person already from the moment of birth. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi is cited as explaining the word *mi-ne'urav* ("from his youth") in this verse to mean "from when he is shaken," referring to the time of childbirth, when an infant is "shaken" and displaced from his position in the womb. Already from that moment, a person experiences a natural drive for vain pleasure and gratification. Maimonides contrasts the evil inclination in this respect with the *yetzer tov*, the innate tendency toward good, which does not surface within a human being until "the mind is developed," meaning, until he reaches maturity.

Interestingly, after drawing this distinction between the onsets of man's two conflicting tendencies, Maimonides cites a passage in *Masekhet Nedarim* (32b) that offers an analogy to describe the good and evil inclinations. This analogy is based upon a story briefly related in the Book of *Kohelet* (9:14-15) of a small city besieged by a powerful king, and one "poor, wise" man somehow succeeds in fleeing the city to safety. The *Gemara* explains this image as a symbol of the "mighty" *yetzer ha-ra* that overtakes a person. The "poor, wise" person represents the person's *yetzer tov*, which is capable of rescuing the individual from the grip of the evil inclination.

It appears from Maimonides' presentation that he understood the *Gemara*'s analogy as referring to the different points in one's life at which these two internal forces surface. The *yetzer ha-ra* is described as a "great king," whereas the *yetzer tov* is compared to a "poor" person because the former surfaces before the latter. The reason why the evil inclination often seems far more powerful than the good inclination is not because, quite simply, it got there first. An infant comes to the world with an ingrained desire for instant gratification, and a selfish preoccupation with his own needs and wants. During infancy, a child is incapable of feeling concern for the needs of others, or of suppressing his natural impulses in submission to a higher purpose. By the time one develops a moral and spiritual conscience, he has already grown accustomed to focusing exclusively on his own needs. This is why one often finds it difficult to curb his instinctive tendencies in submission to the wishes of his *yetzer tov* – because he spent the first years of his life pursuing gratification, rather than virtue.

Thus, it is not that our evil impulses are necessarily stronger than our inclination toward spiritual greatness. Rather, the evil impulses take hold of a person before he

develops his *yetzer tov*, and this accounts for every person's lifelong struggle to empower his good inclination over the bad.