

חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

SOCHATCHOV · SHEM MISHMUEL, NOACH

Why theft alone sealed the Flood generation's fate

Shem MiShmuel

Theft (gezel) is uniquely devastating because it robs a person of the very inner stirrings—akin to hunger pangs or bodily pain—that normally prompt teshuvah (repentance), so the Flood generation's fate became an irrevocable sentence rather than a reversible judgment, unlike other sins where such reminders still function. Noach himself included his own silence—failing to rebuke or pray for his generation—as a subtle form of chamaz (violence/robbery), since withholding needed speech is itself likened to robbery, explaining why even this tzaddik tamim (perfect righteous man) saw himself implicated in the generation's guilt and required the ark's purification like a metzora (leper). AI SUMMARY



In Rashi's comment, their sentence was sealed only on account of theft, and one needs to understand this — surely there were more severe transgressions than theft, such as idolatry and sexual immorality, concerning which the halachah (law) for Israel is "let him be killed rather than transgress," whereas theft for Israel is only a negative prohibition. The Ramban wrote that this is because it is a rationally comprehensible mitzvah (commandment), requiring no prophet [to teach it], and it is "bad toward Heaven and bad toward creatures."

One can add further: this world is a shadow and a likeness of the upper world, and physicality is a shadow and likeness of spirituality. Just as there is physical sustenance for the body, so there is sustenance for the spiritual soul, which is Torah and prayer. And just as there are illnesses and remedies for the body, so too for the soul, as the Rambam wrote.

And in Chovot HaLevavot it is explained that the reason man was created in such a way that if he does not eat he becomes hungry is that otherwise, being preoccupied, he would not turn to eating, and little by little he would weaken and die; therefore he was created so that he would feel hunger if he did not eat, which serves as a reminder to eat. It seems that for this same reason, when a limb weakens, one feels pain, so that it serves as a reminder to seek a remedy — for otherwise one would not turn to seek healing until it weakened and became ruined beyond cure.

Certainly the same applies to matters of sustenance and healing of the soul — that there are reminders for it, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said: "Every day a heavenly voice goes forth from Mount Chorev and proclaims, saying, 'Woe to the creatures because of the disgrace of the Torah.'" And it is stated in the sefarim (books) that from this comes to every single person, each day, some stirring of teshuvah (repentance) in some small measure, as it is written (Iyov 33): "In a dream, a vision of the

night, when deep sleep falls upon men, in slumberings upon the bed, then He opens the ears of men, and seals their instruction..."

So too with oppressive matters, Heaven forfend, as in the matter stated, "and Pharaoh brought Israel's heart close to teshuvah" — similar to the pain of the limbs and body which serve as reminders to seek a cure. But through the sin of theft from others, they are punished by having stolen from them the very arousal for the sustenance and healing of their soul. Therefore there is no longer any hope for teshuvah for them.

Moreover, the sitra achra (the "other side," i.e., the forces of evil) steal the arousal for their own ways, and from this comes further arousal toward evil matters, and the arousal and longing for holiness are overturned into external longings. And the arousal, longing, and influences meant for the sustaining of the world go instead to loss and to the destruction of the world.

From this came, in the generation of the Flood, the desire for the destruction of seed through immorality, so that they would "not spread forth" [i.e., corrupt their seed] — and all this is because of theft, and there is no longer any hope for them.

Therefore this is their sentence (gezar din), for a sentence is something that admits no more change, and after the court's act nothing further applies — just as they had become wicked without any further possibility of change. This is unlike other transgressions, even ones more severe than theft, where the soul still has hope for the repentance of the "creature of the earth" [i.e., man], because, as above, his sustenance and the healing of his soul serve as reminders to him.

But because of theft, everything is stolen from him, as stated — except that if, of his own accord, he exerts himself to remind himself of his evil state, certainly the paths of teshuvah are not locked before them. Therefore, all the forty days that the rain was upon the earth, had they then done teshuvah, there would still have been a remedy for them. But this was not an arousal from Heaven, for the rain descended for the purpose of the Flood, and not for arousal [to repentance].

According to these words, one may explain the statement in Bereishit Rabbah: "I regret that I made them" (Bereishis 6:7) — and Noach, except that he found favor in the eyes of Hashem." And likewise what Noach himself said: "I did just as they did, and what difference is there between me and them, except that You favored me and said to me, 'Come, you...' etc. And at first glance it is puzzling: if there was indeed a claim against him, how could such a tzaddik tamim (perfect righteous man) not have done teshuvah (repentance)? For surely "a righteous man all his days" would be in teshuvah. And on the essential matter, one may wonder further: did Noach not know that they had corrupted their ways, while he was a tzaddik yesod olam (righteous foundation of the world)?

Now it appears thus: Behold, in the Midrash Rabbah it is said, "Kinim (compartments/nests) shall you make the ark" — Rav Yitzchak said: Just as this ken (nest/bird used for purification) purifies the metzora (leper), so too your ark purified you. One must understand what connection Noach has to a metzora.

But this may be understood according to what the Zohar HaKadosh (Holy Zohar) writes, that Noach's sin was that he did not pray on behalf of his generation, and therefore he is called "mei Noach" (the waters of Noach, i.e., implicated in them).

There are also midrashim that accuse Noach of not rebuking the people of his generation, although he certainly did rebuke them, as it is written in Midrash Rabbah: "One crier stood for Me in the generation of the Flood — this was Noach" — see the Matnot Kehunah.

Nevertheless, one may say that he did not do as was required. Now, withholding speech in a place where one needs to speak — this itself is a sin, just like one who speaks what is not fitting for him to speak. And so it is stated explicitly in the Zohar HaKadosh (Chelek 3, 46b) that just as tzara'at (leprosy) comes upon one for the sin of lashon hara (evil speech), so too it comes for withholding speech in a place where one needs to speak and to rebuke. Therefore Noach required purification similar to the purification of the metzora.

Now, Sarah said to Avraham, "Chamasi alayich" ("My wrong be upon you") — Rashi explains: "You are robbing me, for you hear my disgrace and remain silent." This shows that withholding speech where one ought to speak is called chamas (robbery/violence). By this we may understand the statement of the midrash: "Nichamti ki asitim" ("I regretted that I made them") — Noach, meaning that the decree had been sealed on account of gezel (robbery), as it is written, "for the earth was filled with chamas (violence)." And a similar form of chamas was found even in Noach, and in the time of wrath he too was

liable to be punished. This is the meaning of "As they did, so I did — and what is the difference between Me and them?"

Even though they had corrupted their ways, while he was a tzaddik, the foundation of the world — nevertheless, Noach, in his righteousness, indicted himself for withholding speech in a place where it was fitting [to speak], which is itself a kind of chamas, similar to that for which the decree had been sealed.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)

