

Noah Katler

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Noach, we're told that the people on Earth are corrupt and evil.

At the end of last week's parsha, Bereshit, the Torah says:

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יִצְרַר מִחֲשַׁבַּת לִבּוֹ רַק רַע כָּל-הַיּוֹם

"G-d saw how great human wickedness on Earth was, how every thought in the human heart was evil all the time."

But there was one man, named Noah, who was righteous. G-d told Noah that the entire world was going to be wiped out with a humongous flood. G-d told Noah to build an ark, and to bring his family onto the ark, plus two animals from each species, so they would be saved.

Something that caught my eye was Genesis Chapter 6 verse 6 that says:

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל-לִבּוֹ

And G-d regretted having made humankind on Earth, and G-d had a sorrowful heart.

Then, G-d says, "I will blot out from the Earth humankind whom I created. Humans together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.

When I read this, I wondered why G-d (who the Torah told us was sorrowful) made the choice to destroy creation, instead of doing something to make things better.

Why didn't G-d help the people create a kinder community, instead of wiping them out?

I think G-d went straight from being regretful to being destructive because G-d felt ashamed and at fault, as if G-d was responsible for the people that G-d had created.

We're taught that we are made in G-d's image, *b'tzelem elohim*, so maybe we can understand how G-d jumped so quickly, from sorrow to destruction, by thinking about how sometimes people act rashly, based on their emotions.

Human beings have the ability to be kind and loving, but we also have a "fight or flight" response where we act out of fear or some other survival instinct.

The Jewish mystics called this part of our brain *nefesh habehamit*, the animal soul. When we're in this state, we don't stop to think about consequences, we are impulsive, and that can be very destructive.

There are many places where Jewish tradition warns us against getting swept away by our emotions.

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma asked: "Who is strong?"

The Answer: "He who subdues his evil inclination."

As it is stated: He who is slow to anger is better than a strong man, and he who masters his passions is better than one who conquers a city.

In other words, real strength is stopping to think, before you act.

The Talmud says "When a person becomes angry, his wisdom departs from him." It also teaches "The life of those who can't control their anger is not a life."

There are also examples in the Torah of someone acting on impulse and suffering severe consequences. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert and were thirsty, G-d told Moses to speak to a rock so water would flow from it.

In frustration with the people, who were whining and complaining, Moses hit the rock instead. His punishment for losing his temper was that he wasn't allowed to enter the promised land. That was a very serious consequence for letting his emotions control his actions.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said "what is dangerous about anger is that it causes us to lose control...While in its grip, we lose the ability to step back and judge the possible consequences of our actions. The result is that we can do or say things we may regret for the rest of our lives."

But anger is a natural feeling, and the fight or flight response is part of how our brain works. So how do we avoid acting on this impulse?

Some people manage their anger by taking deep breaths or counting to 10. Both of those actions give us a chance to pause and reflect and shift out of our "animal brains" so we can think clearly.

There's a story about one of the rebbes of Lubavitch: Whenever he was angry, he would take down The Shulchan Aruch to check to see whether or not anger was allowed in his situation. By the time he finished studying, his anger was gone.

That is an example of taking a moment to think before you act.

In my own life, as a baseball player, I had a similar experience when I was pitching. This past Spring, my team was in a playoff game that would determine whether or not we would go on to the championship.

It was the last inning and the score of the game was really close. My coach, Roger, asked me if I'd be willing to go in as the closing pitcher, in hopes that I would keep the other team from scoring any more runs.

I was terrified, because I knew that everyone was counting on me, but I said I would do it.

While I was pitching, the other team was heckling me and that was making me angry, on top of being scared. Roger came out to the mound and helped calm me down. I focused on my goal and not on the hecklers or my fears. Taking deep breaths before each pitch helped a lot, too. In the end, we won the game and ended up winning the championship, as well!

In the story of the flood, I think G-d acted on impulse and destroyed the world before taking time to think through the consequences or considering other, better options. But then during the flood, G-d had time to pause and reflect.

Afterwards, G-d promised to never destroy the world again. It was too late for the generation that was wiped out but not for the new world that would come. G-d made a covenant to be in partnership with human beings, and the symbol of this covenant would be the rainbow.

In conclusion, when we are angry or frustrated, we too should stop and think and calm ourselves down before we act, because our emotions can get the best of us and be destructive, just like it was with G-d in the Noah story.

Shabbat Shalom.