

To the KJ/Ramaz family:

A number of people who heard my sermon last Shabbat urged me to make it available on-line. As you will see, the sermon, which discusses a very disturbing and widespread problem, touches all of us, including, especially, our wonderful children.

Living In a Post-Moral World
Sermon for Parshat Noach
October 29, 2011
Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

Can one steal, without stealing? The answer is, yes. Consider the following:

ויאמר א-להים לנח: קץ כל בשר בא לפני כי מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם. והנני משחיתם את הארץ.

“And God said to Noah: “The end of all flesh is coming before me, for the earth is filled with *chamas* (wrongdoing) because of them, and so I am about to destroy them with the earth.” The 19th century rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, explained *chamas* as follows:

It is a wrongdoing which is too insidious to be caught by human justice but which, if it is committed over and over again, will lead, step by step, to the ruin of one’s fellow man. *Chamas* is related to *chometz* – vinegar – a decay that does not come all at once; it is only step by step that wine turns into vinegar. In this verse we are told, most significantly, that the earth was corrupt before the countenance of God . . . first came corruption of morals, sins that one might not consider capable of affecting the life of society as such. One might think that even if the young are rebellious and marriages have rotted from within, this need not prevent trade and commerce from flourishing and honest business relationships from continuing; but once the world is corrupt before God Himself, all the institutions of human society will not be able to save that society from destruction.”

Rav Hirsch has in mind the famous discussion in *Bereishit Rabbah* on the words: “כי מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם.” The Midrash asks, “What is the difference between *chamas* and *gezel* (theft)? Rabbi Chanina said:

Chamas is stealing something which is less than a penny’s worth while theft is more than a penny’s worth. This is what the generation of the flood used to do. One person would carry (on his back) a basket filled with seeds and another would come by and reach in and take less than a penny’s worth and then another would do the same; and a third would do the same,

always making sure that they took less than that for which they could be prosecuted in court...

In other words, there was no moral consensus. If there was no possibility of punishment, then each person simply did what he/she felt like doing.

Rav Hirsch continues:

Underhanded dealings coupled with cunning, wrongs that cannot be checked by human justice but can be prevented only by moral scruples acting as their own judge before God, are indeed capable of destroying a society. Moral corruption inevitably leads to *chamas*. Once immorality has taken root, it kills the human conscience and once that happens, a grave has been dug for the community and the society.

This is Hirsch's interpretation of God's decision to destroy all of humanity because of that kind of wrongdoing. The society produced the seeds of its own destruction.

Lest one think that this is all ancient history, let me cite excerpts from an article by David Brooks in the September 13th issue of the New York Times under the heading, "If It Feels Right..."

During the summer of 2008, the eminent Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith led a research team that conducted in-depth interviews with 230 young adults from across America. . . Smith and company asked about the young people's moral lives, and the results are depressing...

"Not many of them have previously given much or any thought to many of the kinds of questions about morality that we asked," Smith and his co-authors write. When asked about wrong or evil, they could generally agree that rape and murder are wrong. But, aside from these extreme cases, moral thinking didn't enter the picture, even when considering things like drunken driving, cheating in school or cheating on a partner. "I don't really deal with right and wrong that often," is how one interviewee put it.

The default position, which most of them came back to again and again, is that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. "It's personal" the respondents typically said. "It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?"

Rejecting blind deference to authority, many of the young people have gone off to the other extreme: "I would do what I thought

made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel.”

Many were quick to talk about their moral feelings but hesitant to link these feelings to any broader thinking about a shared moral framework or obligation. As one put it, “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong. . . .

In most times and in most places, the group was seen to be the essential moral unit. A shared religion defined rules and practices. Cultures structured people’s imaginations and imposed moral disciplines. But now more people are led to assume that the free-floating individual is the essential moral unit. Morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, (my emphasis, H.L.) but now it’s thought of as something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart.

And lest you think that this phenomenon is out there and has nothing to do with your world and my world, I actually found this problem this September in my sex ethics class in the 10th Grade at Ramaz. I gave the students an assignment to read an article about something quite grotesque: it described a group of Jewish married couples who gather periodically and engage in what is popularly called swinging, that is, spouse swapping. A sort of round robin sexual orgy. I asked them how many of you think that this is wrong? And only a few students raised their hands. Astonished, I asked them how could they not think that this was wrong. I got answers like: “well, since it is all out in the open and everybody knows that everybody is doing it, there is nothing fundamentally wrong. No one is cheating on a spouse because the spouse was also swinging.”

I said to them: “what about the seventh commandment – do not commit adultery.” One student answered that these people are really not religious. What the students didn’t seem to understand was that whether they were religious or not, there is a moral code that is rooted in the Bible which defines for us what is right and what is wrong. The problem is that when pressed, many of the students simply said that if it feels good and if it feels right then who am I to judge? I told them I wasn’t suggesting that they go over to somebody who is engaged in swinging and chastise them, but that they had to have an opinion on this practice. They looked at me with some disbelief.

Now, please understand, these are good kids. I don’t for one minute believe that they will engage in this kind of debauchery when they are married adults. This is not related to what they are doing or will do; this is simply an indication that these children are not thinking in moral categories and that they feel that it is somehow politically incorrect to judge another’s behavioral choices. They are picking up from society in general a reluctance to judge.

I confess that I was so disturbed about their reaction that I spent much of the course, which is actually ending next week, coming back to this subject again and again in order to show them how far they have wandered intellectually from the religious sources in which they believe. These are children who follow the Torah which tells them to keep *Shabbat*, *Kashrut* and *Yom Tov* and to pray. They all do these things. But they don't seem to understand that the same Torah is the source of our moral values, and morality is not simply a matter of opinion. God gave the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai not the Ten Suggestions ! Morality is not personal; it is ultimately ordained by a higher authority.

I actually delivered this sermon yesterday in the class. At its conclusion the students gave me a round of applause. It seems they got the message.

In a recent essay on 9/11, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warned about the consequences of moral relativism and an over emphasis upon individualism in relation to morality. He quoted Bertrand Russell in his introduction to the History of Western Philosophy, speaking about the tendency of the most creative civilizations to self-destruct.

What happened in the great age of Greece, happened again in Renaissance Italy. Traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seemed to be associated with superstition. . . . The anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.

Rabbi Sacks adds that Russell's description of Renaissance Italy fits precisely the post-modern, capitalist west, with its urge to spend and its failure to save, its moral relativism and hyper individualism, its political culture of right without responsibilities, its aggressive secularism and resentment of any morality of self-restraint and its failure to inculcate the habits of instinctual deferral which Sigmund Freud saw as the very basis of civilization.

Freud's point was that the ability to control instincts and make decisions based on some kind of a moral compass, is the very basis of civilized life.

What is at stake in all of this? What is at stake when we live in a post-moral world where **איש כל הישר בעיניו יעשה**, where "each person does as each person chooses" – as long as nobody is hurt? What is at stake, Rabbi Sacks says, is something very serious. Europe today, he asserts, consists of a group of societies without a shared moral code, nations without a collective identity, cultures without a respect for tradition, groups without a concern for the common good.

If we, in America, are going to turn this kind of civilization around, we will have to do so on the basis of a shared morality, a religious tradition that is indigenous to this country, a respect for Biblical ethics that gives our children and ourselves the ability to make judgments about what is right and what is wrong and not simply what is pleasing to us and what is not pleasing to us.

The generation of the flood did not understand this. The Bible, the *Midrash*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, yes, and even the New York Times' David Brooks, warn us about the problems that will beset us in a post-moral age. Your future and mine may very well depend upon our ability to lead our young and our ourselves in a different direction.

Lest I end on a very discouraging note, let me quote from a beautiful essay of Daniel Gordis which came to my attention just as I was ending the preparation of this sermon. It was in the form of an open letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, dated, October 28, 2011. In a very real sense, it suggests an answer to our problem. Gordis writes:

Mr. Prime Minister,

Before the Shalit deal fades entirely from view, many of us are hoping that you have noticed what you unwittingly unleashed. I don't mean the next wave of terror or the terrible decisions that Israel must make before the next kidnapping. We knew about those even before last week. But last Tuesday, all of us – those opposed as well as those in favor (and there were persuasive arguments on both sides) – rediscovered something magnificent about this country. It would be tragic if we returned to business as usual without pausing to take note.

In addition to Gilad Shalit, we got one more thing in return that few of us could have expected; we got a reminder of the abundant goodness that still resides at the very core of this society. You could see it everywhere. Compare the speeches on our side, celebrating life and freedom, to the blood-thirsty Palestinian harangues calling for renewed terror and additional kidnappings. Compare the respectful restraint of our press to Shahira Amin's immoral and abusive interview in Egypt. But more than anything, we saw this reservoir of goodness in the streets – in the people so moved that they could hide neither the tears in their eyes nor the lumps in their throats. We saw it in the throngs along the roads, people who wanted Shalit to know that they too, celebrated his long overdue freedom. And we saw it in the hundreds of people in Mitzpe Hila who continued dancing long after he'd entered his house and closed the door.

We all felt it – it was innocent, pure and thoroughly decent. We were witness that day to an entire country believing in something again. Those young people outside the Shalit home were singing not only about Shalit, but about this land, this people, and about a future in which they still believe. Did you see them? Women and men, religious and secular, dancing with abandon in celebration of freedom? Did you hear them singing *anachnu ma'aminim benei ma'aminim ...* “We’re believers, the children of believers, and we have no one on whom to depend, other than our Father in heaven”? You didn’t miss it, did you? Hundreds of people of all walks of Israeli life, proclaiming without hesitation their belief in something bigger than themselves! (my emphasis)

If we do not want to live in a post-moral society we will have to teach ourselves and our children to believe in something bigger than ourselves. May we prove successful in that task.