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**Cultural Theft**

The Gemora in Sanhedrin (108a) tells us that although the Dor Hamabul (the generation of the flood) were guilty of many sins including immorality and corruption, it was the sin of theft that was the catalyst for destruction.

Why? How can the seemingly less significant sin of gezel, trigger a flood that destroys the entire world, more than other more serious crimes?

Rav Yosef Tzvi Dunner ztl, the former Ra’avad of London, in his Mikdash HaLevi, gives an illuminating answer. He points to a Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 31:5) which says that if a person saw his friend had some turmusim (beans), he would steal less than a “shaveh perutah”, a very small amount, so that he could not be prosecuted.

The next person would do the same and so would the next. Each criminal would vindicate his action by saying I only took a small amount. Nothing wrong in pinching a few beans. The seller won’t mind if I try a grape or some nuts.

When someone does an aveiro, he knows he has done an aveiro. And when a person knows he has done an aveiro, there is the possibility that he will do teshuva and repent. But if a person doesn’t even consider his action wrong, there is no hope he will ever repent. What’s a few peanuts or garinim between friends? Nothing to see here officer.

Rav Yaakov Bender gives the same answer in his new sefer on Chumash. There may not have been a technical aveiro of gezel, but there was a culture of gezel. And in HKBH’s eyes, that is far worse.

It is tempting for us to shake this off dispassionately. We may have even spotted someone picking a grape whilst shopping or nushing a few nuts, or do something similarly and seemingly inconsequential, and may even have expressed disapproval, but not us. We would never pilfer a few nuts from a shop front.

But there are other areas which may be closer to home.

Rav Bender tells that Rav Elyashiv once saw a man crossing the street when the red man was showing.

“This is retzichah - bloodshed,” Rav Elyashiv told him.

The man looked up in surprise. The streets were empty of cars, he pointed out.

“It is true,” Rav Elyashiv replied, “but someone who sees you crossing now may develop a certain indifference toward crossing when the red man is showing, and while it may not be a danger here, it may be on other occasions. And who knows where that can lead?”

Rav Bender gives another example. We have all seen signs imploring people to return seforim to their right place. So how come there are so many siddurim and chumashim left all over the shul after davening? And so many seforim left in the Beis Hamedrash at the end of the day?

What about the person who has to clear them up and what about the person looking for the sefer which you didn’t put back and the bittul Torah and agmas nefesh caused?

It’s not just about a few peanuts, it’s a way of behaving. A certain sensitivity. These are people who won’t leave dirty tissues behind them, who will park considerately, or who will ensure they close their car doors quietly early in the morning or late at night.

This sensitivity will not just make them more upright people, but it will make them better husbands, wives, children and members of society.

Rav Dunner adds that this explains the words of Chazal (Bava Metzia 44a):

אמרו מי שפרע מאנשי דור המבול ומדור הפלגה הוא עתיד להפרע ממי שאינו עומד בדבורו

The Sages said: He Who exacted payment from the people of the generation of the flood, and from the generation of the dispersion, (i.e., that of the tower of Bavel), will exact payment from whoever does not stand by his statement.

Just as the people of those generations were not punished by an earthly court but were subjected to Divine punishment, so too, although no earthly court can compel the person who reneged to complete the transaction, punishment will be exacted at the hand of Heaven for any damage that he caused.

What’s the connection between the sins of the generation of the flood and those who don’t keep their word?

Rav Dunner explains that in light of the above Medrash, both don’t feel they’ve done anything wrong. It’s ok to change my mind; I never signed the contract. Words aren’t binding. And they’ll never do teshuva as they don’t see anything wrong in their actions.

Rav Bender says this also explains why the Dor Haflagah was not destroyed but the Dor Hamabul was.

Those who built the tower of Bavel were wicked and brazenly waged war against Hashem. They made no secret of their wickedness, so the possibility of teshuva was still there.

The Dor Hamabul, however, committed small acts of gezel and while being innocent of any actual crime, the possibility of teshuva was gone. Small acts which chipped away at the barriers of human decency.

As Rav Bender says, that can destroy a world, and so they were destroyed. It starts with small acts: it is where lesser people fail and where great men rise.

**Rabbi Golker is the** **Menahel of Hasmonean Boys School and Hasmonean Girls School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**