



Not the money

RABBI GAVRIEL GOETZ
Noach, Genesis 6:9-11:32

I put my laptop down in its case in my office and walked out for a short time. When I came back, the computer was gone. It was very disappointing and upsetting. Many of us have had similar unfortunate experiences at some time in our lives.

I would venture to say that if I had met this thief, I would not have thought that he was an evil person. If this thief can be looked at in a positive way, how can we explain his actions?

Maybe we imagine that the thief desperately needed the money he could make by selling the computer. He probably reasoned that the person who owned this laptop could easily go buy another computer - and anyhow, it was probably time for the original owner to upgrade.

At this point, the thief might even have rationalized that not only did he have the right to take my computer, but that he actually was doing me a favor.

In this week's Torah portion, God said to Noah that the entire world would be destroyed because of the sin of stealing. As it says in Genesis 6:11-14, "Now the Earth had become corrupt before God; and the Earth had become filled with robbery. And God saw the Earth and behold it was corrupted. For all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the Earth. The end of all flesh has come before me, for the Earth is filled with robbery through them; and behold I am about to destroy them from the Earth."

The commentaries explain that people in that generation knew it was wrong to steal. They were not robbing banks and kidnapping. They stole small amounts at a time, as is explained in the Jerusalem Talmud. They made sure to steal less than the amount that is considered money. (Something is considered to have monetary value when you can buy something else with that amount. Less than that amount is not considered money.) Today, for example, actual monetary value would start at about 25 cents, because you can buy gum for that price. So the people in that generation would only steal the value of, say, 10 cents at a time.

The people in Noah's generation would take from each other less than what they could be punished by the courts for taking.

A great question remains. Why did God punish Noah's generation so severely if all they did was steal very minute amounts?

Perhaps we can answer this question with the story of my stolen laptop. What really upsets a person who was robbed is not just the monetary loss, but the loss of all the work that went into what was stolen. The more effort that is invested, the more it hurts. I put loads of files, photos and contact information into my computer. We all know how much time is needed to upload information into a personal computer.

When someone steals from another, it is not the monetary loss that really hurts; it is the lack of sensitivity that creates the pain. Our feelings, our time and our work were not valued. The thief seems to be concerned only with fulfilling his or her own needs.

From this perspective, we can begin to understand why Noah's generation got wiped out. It was not because they stole. However, their stealing was significant because they demonstrated by these actions that they did not care about anybody but themselves.

It was a dramatic lesson for the world then. And we get reminders still today.

Rabbi Gavriel Goetz is with the Phoenix Community Kollel.