

The Curse of Canaan

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Those of you who have seen Hollywood's version of Noah starring Russel Crowe will know how much fanciful material was added to the Biblical story. Some of it actually has a source in Midrash most of which was written down a thousand years after the Torah. And in a way we keep on adding to Midrash whenever we try to find explanations or lessons that are relevant to us today. The Hebrew word Darshan, the person who explains the Torah in lectures or sermons is the same word as Midrash. The difference lies in authority.

The Torah tells us almost nothing about Noah's sons except in the case of Ham whose son Canaan was cursed for seeing Noah drunk and naked and making fun of him (some Midrashim say he did something much worse). Some misled people thought this meant that black descendants of Ham were cursed. But it was only Canaan who was. As Ibn Ezra in medieval Spain said there were Canaanite kings and he rejected any suggestion of racism. Judaism always welcomed anyone who wished to become Jewish regardless of race. It was behavior that determined.

The narrative is hinting at the reason for the Israelites future displacement of the Canaanites for their corruption and immorality. All three sons had an identical background yet one of them seems to have spawned more evil than the other.

And indeed, we see all around us different cultures and different people within cultures who seem more violent or more corrupt than others. Some cultures seem much more prone to violence and death than others. Like the Canaanites, those that choose violence end up destroying themselves.

The message I derive is clear, that good moral education starts at home and can have a profound impact on the way our children lead their lives. But it also illustrates how even within perfect homes some children do not always turn out the way parents hope. It may not be because of anything we have done. The more we understand of genes the more we realize that humans are capable of being both better and worse than the examples they have seen around them.