For the earth is filled with robbery through them. (6:13)

The generation of the Flood did it all. Their behavior deteriorated to the point that immorality and idolatry had become a way of life. Their immoral conduct extended even to animals, whereby they completely disregarded the parameters of human decency and the separation between species. Yet, *Chazal* note that it was neither idolatry nor sexual perversion that catalyzed the final decree for their total extinction. It was *chamas, gezel*, robbery and thievery that brought them down. The commentators present a number of explanations why robbery was the ultimate factor that sealed their punishment. *Ramban* comments that robbery is a common-sense transgression. One need not be a rocket scientist to see the evil in stealing; no one wants to have his possessions misappropriated. He worked for them; he earned them – they are his. Thus, a sin of such magnitude is considered by Hashem to be a *to'eivah*, abomination. It is inexcusable and, thus, should be punished to the fullest extent.

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, views this from a practical approach. He cites the *Midrash* that teaches that the theft was in itself unique. They stole in such petty ways that it was not subject to the authority of the courts. While this may not seem to be the gravest of sins, it bespeaks a society that is morally repugnant. Thievery within the letter of the law weakens one's perspective on right and wrong, destroying his sense of guilt and corrupting the entire social fabric of society.

Last, we cite the *Melo Ha'Omer* who teaches us a significant, albeit frightening lesson. The *Midrash Vayikra* 17:4, teaches that Hashem does not harm human beings immediately. He first metes out His punishment on the individual's possessions as a signal to repent and correct his behavior. It is only after the subtle and, at times, not-so-subtle reminders have been ineffective that Hashem has no other recourse but to punish the person by inflicting pain, and ultimately worse, on him. This, explains the *Melo Ha'Omer*, can occur only if the money/material possessions which he owns are really his **legally**. If he has appropriated them through illegal means, then his possessions are not really his. They belong to someone else and therefore, they cannot protect him. The generation of the Flood paid dearly for their sins – with their lives.

The following true story took place a number of years ago in *Eretz Yisrael*: Two *yeshivah* students decided to take a trip up north to visit a number of the *kivrei tzaddikim*, gravesites of the righteous, that are situated there. It was a nice day, and since they were able to borrow a decent car, they decided to drive. Things were going along smoothly until they reached the highway leading out of Bnei Brak. They noticed that the car's thermostat was running a bit higher than it should. As the trip continued – and the heat of the day rose – so did the needle of the thermostat. Fearing that they would overheat, they pulled over on the side of the road to see what was wrong.

Neither one of these students was that knowledgeable in auto-mechanics, so after tinkering for a while, they gave up. With no other recourse, they attempted to wave down anyone who might help them solve the problem. A number of motorists pulled over and attempted to help, but to no avail. Apparently, they would need the services of a qualified mechanic. To put it simply: they were stuck.

Suddenly, a car pulled up and out came a man dressed in full *chassidic* garb. He asked, "What seems to be the problem?"

"Our car is overheating, and we have no idea what is wrong," they replied. "Let me see what I can do," the man said. The fellow removed his long frock and lay down on the ground beneath the car, searching for the trouble spot. After a few minutes of fiddling around, he came out from underneath and said, "I know the problem. Your fan belt tore and must be replaced."

"What should we do?" the *bachurim* asked. "Not to worry," the man answered, as he returned to his car and brought out a giant tool chest with car repair tools. He then opened his trunk and took out a brand new fan belt. After completing the repair, he packed up his car and was prepared to leave.

"How much do we owe you?" the *bachurim* asked. "Nothing," he replied. "What I did is a *chesed*. I enjoy helping people out." "Well, we cannot force you to take money for the time that you spent, but what about the part? That is an expensive part – why should you pay for it?"

"It is no problem. I must do this my way," he replied. "Why should you lose money because you are a nice guy?" they asked. "Let me tell you a story," he began. "I grew up in a totally secular environment, shunning the religious way of life. I was a highly successful car mechanic with a thriving business. Since I knew cars inside-out, I could diagnose a problem which the owner had no clue existed, or I would charge inflated prices for the repairs that I performed. One day, I decided to give up my life of abandon. I was *chozeir b'teshuvah*, prepared to live a life completely committed to Torah and *mitzvah* observance.

"One thing kept gnawing at me: During my years as a mechanic, I had been running a lucrative business which was not very honest. I was ripping off my customers with exorbitant prices, often for work that was unnecessary. How was I to perform *teshuvah* for the petty and often not-so-petty theft? I went to my *rebbe*, who was guiding me on my journey of return to Torah and asked his advice. He told me that since there was no way of identifying my victims, my *teshuvah* would have to be of an all-encompassing nature: offering my expertise to whomever was in need – free of charge. This is what I do. Twice a week, I drive the highways looking for people in trouble. I carry with me a complete set of tools and many vital parts. Whenever I notice someone in need, I offer my services. This is my *teshuvah*. You have enabled me to draw one step closer to Hashem. Thank **you**!"