Russian journalist and writer, Vasily Grossman, entered Berlin in 1945 with the forces that subdued Nazi Germany. At the Berlin Zoo, he found hundreds of mutilated animal corpses. At the gorilla’s cage, Grossman talked to the old caretaker. Grossman asked him if the gorilla was wild. “No,” replied the old man. “She just roars loudly. Humans are wild.” At that time, it was difficult to doubt it.

Rousseau claimed that human beings are essentially good. It is culture that spoils them. Nevertheless, the opposite seems true as well – human nature is fundamentally evil and it is only culture that subdues that evil and restrains it.

When Avraham feels his days are numbered, he calls to his faithful servant and has him swear in the name of G-d: “that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell” (Bereishit 24:3). What’s so bad about Canaanite girls? (The Radak mentions that Noach cursed his grandson Canaan.) Do they have some sort of eternal, metaphysical, evil gene in their DNA?

This explanation is a little problematic, as Avraham seems to recognize the possibility that Yitzchak may indeed have no other option but to marry a Canaanite woman. Avraham declares that if Eliezer does not find a woman in Charan willing to come with him to the land of Canaan, Avraham’s allies. Hence, the prohibition on marrying a Canaanite woman is relative and not absolute.

If so, the question remains: what is so bad about Canaanite girls? It is possible that the emphasis is not on their nature and character but on the Canaanite culture. As Bnei Yisrael were about to enter the Land, G-d repeatedly warned them not to imitate the evil deeds of the people of Canaan. The Canaanite culture was corrupt and degenerate, cultivating the lowest aspects of human nature, such that it would be imperative to find a wife for Yitzchak from another place.

Avraham already knew then how much local culture can influence a person’s behavior and life.

Human nature is a mixture of good and evil, desires and dreams, light and darkness. The culture that surrounds us and the education we receive will largely determine how we develop. Of course we have free choice, and one can overcome one’s environment. Avraham himself, the son of pagans, is a case in point.

Sometimes we hear of the romantic myth of the ‘noble savage’: pristine man, uncorrupted by civilization, is surely good and fundamentally honest. We know the truth. It is impossible, said Karl Popper, to return to the harmonious state of nature: “If we turn back, then we must go the whole way – we must return to the beasts.”

David HaMelech captured this tension perfectly: “What is man that You should remember him, and the son of mortal man that You should care about him? Yet You have made him slightly less than angels, and crowned him with soul and splendor” (Tehillim 8:5–6).

We have seen the depths and the heights human beings can reach.

The choice is ours.

1. The Fall of Berlin.
2. The Open Society and Its Enemies.