

# PARSHAS NOACH

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari*

We have in this parshah an example of a form of commentary [apart from his usual question-answer method] that Abarbanel uses fairly often and is almost singular to him. Apart from commentating on verses, he writes an essay to analyze a particular subject in this case Dor Hahaflagah. This is one of the reasons that it is relatively easy to construct from his commentary in general, an overall *haskafah* of Abarbanel.

He is concerned with the nature of the sin of the 'Dor Hahaflagah' concerning which the text is silent, in contrast to that of the generation of the Flood whose evil is specified. Furthermore, he argues that their punishment, that the Torah tells us was dispersal and the *bilbul* of their language, had to be appropriate to their wrongdoing.

He sees in the Midrashim in Bereishit Rabbah, meanings and perspectives that are irreconcilable with the *peshat* and therefore he seeks the idea that is expressed by the text. We must bear in mind that Noah, Shem, and Avraham were all living at this time. The idea that, that generation simply wanted to ascend to heaven and do battle with G-d, he dismisses as ascribing stupidity to them. Even if the generation were stupid, surely the wise men would never have let such stupidity become action; G-d Himself would've simply laughed such an attempt out of existence rather than punish stupidity. If we are to see their sin as rebellion and immorality, then their punishment should have been destruction akin to that of the generations of the Flood or S'dom, rather than mere dispersal and chaos of language?

The idea that they built the Tower of Bavel in order to protect themselves from Divine persecution, in the form of another flood, was already rejected by Ibn Ezra, because of the presence of Noah and his sons who knew of the covenant of the rainbow that precluded another deluge. In addition, Abarbanel rejects the argument of Rabbenu Yonah that Hashem dispersed them in order to prevent them from establishing a monarchy that would rule over all mankind, both because there is no mention of such a ruler in the text and because, of itself, such a monarchy would not be a sin. It could only be a sin if that monarchy would be devoted to idolatry and to persecuting those who believed in Hashem; the appropriate punishment would then again be destruction. It should be noted that the dispersal of Mankind would seem a beneficial thing, part of the Divine plan to populate the Earth and allow it to flourish and develop. So, we have to seek a special sin that would make it actually a punishment. Furthermore, that punishment only came to them after they built the town and tower, so that must be considered as relevant to their sin.

The sin of the Dor Hahaflagah was simply a continuation of the sin of Adam and that of Cain and his descendants.

Adam being created in the Divine image and possessed therefore of wisdom, should have desired to perfect his soul through acknowledging his creator and understanding the sublime wisdom of His world. Then he would have understood that nature's fruits, shrubs and water in Gan Eiden were sufficient for all his needs, since that is what Hashem had provided for Mankind there. There was therefore no need for human technology, artifices and invention to improve on that provided by nature. However, Adam chose rather to satisfy his needs for luxury through other actions, as though perfecting thereby the errors made by the Creator; the Tree of Knowledge of a mixture of good and evil, in preference to the Tree of Life.

Therefore Adam was exiled from Gan Eiden and he and his descendants became tillers of the soil, spending their time ploughing, sowing and harvesting that which they wrested from the soil through artificial means. His very soul became subjected to the satisfaction of his animal and material needs. It is true that Hevel became a shepherd, satisfying his needs only from what nature provides, and using his time in spiritual development. In that respect Hevel is a prototype for the Avot, Moshe and David who all were shepherds and as such lived on the periphery of civilized society, devoting them-selves to the spiritual. But Cain killed Hevel so that Adam's descendants continued their economic and material development through taming nature and changing that created by G-d for their welfare. "And Cain built a city... and Jabal was the father of those who dwell in tents...and Jubal was the father of all who handle the harp and flute...Tubal-Cain the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron" (Ber.4:16-22). With civilization and materialism came greed, jealousy, theft murder and as a consequence sexual immorality and idolatry. Thereby, the descendants of Cain brought on themselves the destruction of the Flood.

Now the generations, following the advice and leadership of Ham and his descendants, once again sought to exchange the divine gifts of nature and its blessings for the artificial lifestyles that they were able to create. Although they careful not to repeat the sins on Dor Hamabul, nevertheless, they envisaged urbanization, self-interest, vain honor and luxury, as their main aim in life instead of their spiritual enhancement. "And Hashem created Man âupright-yashar' but they sought many inventions-alternatives" (Kohelet, 7:29). So they built a city in which all the techniques, inventions and trades necessary for these artificial lifestyles would develop and then created a tower that would enable them to ascend to the Heavens where they would transform and pervert the purity and the majesty of divine creation. In that city there was not only the means of changing pristine nature but also the necessity of changing the egalitarian, just and moral social organization that existed previously in their rural areas. In its place there arose a non-representative form of government, a despotic monarchy [Nimrod] and an unjust social framework aimed at the exploitation of its weaker members that ultimately led to idolatry. [It should be borne in mind that Abarbanel, alone of all our commentators, was anti-monarchist and a great admirer of the Italian republics]. Abarbanel stresses

the propensity for evil contained in the knowledge of transforming the material things of the world. There were 3 uses to which such knowledge could be put and all of them constituted the sin of Dor Hahaflagah.

**1** To assist and improve the natural workings of the world. This was a rebellion against G-d who had provided that nature for their benefit.

**2** To distort the workings of nature through the construction of homes, manufacturing and shipbuilding, whereby natural resources were transformed into something artificial, the product of human hands rather than their original Divine form, eg. Bricks, instead of natural rock.

**3** To make natural resources operate contrary to their normal fashion for example by damming and diverting rivers [genetically derived agriculture?] and to change the natural equality and harmony in which Adam was created.

So they journeyed *âmi kedem'*, away from the Gan Eidein that Hashem had planted *âmi kedem'*.

Abarbanel thus takes an approach that radically differs from almost everybody else who see Mankind's working and improving upon nature as part and parcel of their divinely appointed task; "*le avdah ulshamrah*- to work and to guard the world" (Bereishit 1:15.). We must not, however, see him as some sort of Jewish Rousseau, believing in a noble savage inhabiting Walden. His objection is to civilization and to tampering with nature, instead of devoting time, wisdom and effort to the perfection of our spiritual lives; in that process, perverting and corrupting the divinity that is within-ourselves.

However, since the things that Dor Haflagah did have now become part of human nature, they were not forbidden to Israel, but rather Hashem gave us a Torah whereby civilization, material progress through the transformation of nature and urbanization would not become evil. For example, through commanding that their king and thereby their social organization would be with the guidance and approval of G-d's prophets and subject to the halakhot of kingship. [The Chassidic Masters saw this as the special spiritual ability and task of the Jew; "*Kadesh et atzmecha ba mutar lecha*- sanctify yourselves through that which is permissible to you"].

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