

PARSHAS NOACH

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Noach

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King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (10:25), "When the storm passes, a wicked one is no more, but a righteous one is the foundation of the world." R' Yehoshua ibn Shuiv z"l (Spain; early 14th century) writes: A wicked person is compared to a storm because he damages others before disappearing without a trace. In contrast, a righteous person is solid like a foundation; not only does he have permanence, but others can rely on him.

R' ibn Shuiv continues: Our Sages stated that this verse refers to the generation of the flood. "When the storm passes, a wicked one is no more." Like a storm, the generation of the flood did great damage and then met its end quickly. On the other hand, "a righteous one is the foundation of the world." From the righteous Noach, an entire new world was built.

In addition, writes R' ibn Shuiv, this parashah contains several foundations of our beliefs. In last week's parashah we learned that G-d created the world. In this week's parashah we learn that G-d continues to supervise His creation (hashgachah) and that He rewards and punishes those who do good and bad respectively (s'char va'onesh). As our Sages note, Noach himself had to learn these lessons, for even he doubted that the flood would come until the rain started falling. It is for this reason that Noach brought olot sacrifices after the flood, for an olah atones for heretical thoughts. R' ibn Shuiv notes that the gematria of the word "olot" [Bereishit 8:20] equals 500, the number of years that Noach's was less than what was expected of him. [Noach was 600 years old at the time of the flood. However, our Sages say that, at the time of Noach, the age before which sins did not count, was 100.] (Derashot R"Y ibn Shuiv)

"These are the offspring of Noach--Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noach walked with Elokim. Noach fathered three sons--Shem, Cham, and Yafet." (6:9-10)

Were Noach's sons righteous as well, or were they saved only in their father's merit? R' Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim z"l (1843-1905; rabbi of Ponovezh, Mir and Yerushalayim; known by his initials as "the Aderet") answers:

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 108a) teaches that the fate of the generation of the Flood was sealed because of the sin of petty theft. Writes the Aderet: Since only one family was saved, this presumably means that everyone else was a thief. If so, why were they punished; each one was only stealing back what was his! Even if one assumes that A stole from B, who had stolen from C, who had stolen from A, A would not be liable for stealing from B since one is permitted to collect a debt from his debtor's debtor (i.e., from B, who had stolen from C, who had stolen from A)!

Perhaps one will say instead that everyone stole from Noach, who did not steal from anyone. That is why they were considered guilty. However, this cannot be, for our verse says, "Noach walked with Elokim." The Gemara (Shabbat 149b) states that a person who is the cause of another person's being punished is not permitted to enter G-d's inner sanctum. Since Noach was able to walk "side-by-side" with Elokim, it is apparent that Noach was not the cause of the flood. This indicates that Noach was not a victim of his generation's theft.

The only possible conclusion, therefore, is that the people had stolen from Noach's sons. And, since the generation was punished for that, we can infer that Noach's sons themselves did not steal. Rather, they were righteous. (Seder Parshiyot)

"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." (6:13)

If man sinned, why were the animals punished? R' Yosef Bechor Shor z"l (12th century; France) explains: Everything was created for man's benefit. [If man is destroyed, there is no need for the rest of existence.] (Bechor Shor)

"As for Me--Behold, I am about to bring the Flood-waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which there is a breath of life from under the heavens; everything that is in the earth shall expire." (6:17)

Why did Hashem choose water as the way to destroy the world? Also, we read at the end of last week's parashah (6:3), "Hashem said, 'My spirit shall not contend forever with Man be'shagam / since he is but flesh; his days shall be a hundred and twenty years'." Literally, this verse is stating that the Flood would begin in 120 years. However, Midrash Rabbah notes that this verse alludes to Moshe Rabbeinu--first because the gematria of "be'shagam" equals the gematria of "Moshe"; second, because Moshe lived 120 years. What is the connection between Moshe and the Flood?

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) answers in light of another question: Moshe Rabbeinu's name recalls that he was drawn from the water (see Shmot 2:10). Why was that event so significant that it was memorialized in his name?

Maharal explains: Water has no form of its own; instead, it takes the form of whatever container it is in. In contrast, Moshe Rabbeinu achieved the highest "form" that a person can achieve. [In Maharal's thought, the term "tzurah" / "form" is synonymous with both perfection and intellect.] Moshe was "drawn from the water," i.e., he was as far removed from the character of water as could be.

In this light, it is not surprising that Moshe Rabbeinu's own sin--hitting the rock to obtain water (Bemidbar ch.20)--led to his downfall. For the same reason, Pharaoh's astrologers had predicted decades earlier that the redeemer of Bnei Yisrael "will ultimately suffer misfortune through water" (Rashi to Shmot 1:22). Moshe Rabbeinu and water are opposites; therefore, they cancel each other out.

Maharal concludes: The destruction of mankind in our parashah was necessitated by mankind's failure to achieve its intended form, in contrast to Moshe, who did achieve the perfect form. This explains why the destruction occurred through water. Likewise it explains why the Torah alludes to Moshe Rabbeinu in this context. (Gevurot Hashem ch.18)

R' Yehonasan Eyebchutz z"l - note that he died in 1764 - explains the purpose of the Tower of Bavel, which appears in our parashah, as follows: The people of that generation feared another flood, and they thought that the only safe place for them was on the moon. They knew, however, that launching a spaceship out of the earth's atmosphere was beyond their capabilities. Therefore, they decided to build a tower with its top in the heavens, i.e., near the top of the atmosphere, and they planned to launch their ships to the moon from there. (Tiferet Yehonatan)

"When Terach had lived seventy years, he fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran." (11:26)

R' Yosef Gikatilla z"l (1248-1310; Spain; author of the kabbalistic work Sha'arei Orah) writes: Terach's name signifies that he caused G-d's anger "to boil." Why was it G-d's Will that a great tzaddik such as Avraham be born from such a wicked person? He explains:

G-d did man a favor by giving him free will, for otherwise man could not be rewarded for his good deeds. Likewise, if man did not have free will, G-d could not have a "Chosen People," for that would cause the other nations to complain, "Why did you force that nation to do Your Will? It's Your fault that we are distant from You!"

To highlight the impact of man's free will and the fact that G-d chose the nation whose ancestor

chose Him voluntarily, Hashem arranged for Avraham to be fathered by Terach, someone who could not have been a positive influence on his son. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tzofnat Paneach)

Letters from Our Sages