

THE SHAME OF CHAM

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In the aftermath of the Mabul, Noach planted a vineyard. The vineyard produced grapes and Noach made wine. Noach drank the wine and became "intoxicated". Alone in his tent, Noach disrobed and fell into a deep sleep. While asleep and uncovered, Canaan the son of Cham, Noach's grandson, entered his grandfather's private residence, saw his grandfather's less than dignified condition and informed his father. Cham entered his father's tent, degraded and assaulted his father's person and dignity and then told his two brothers. Shem and Yefes undertook to care for their father without further compromising his dignity.

Upon awakening from his sleep, Noach knew what his youngest son Cham had done to him. He gathered his three sons, blessed Shem and Yefes and cursed Cham and Canaan. Shem was blessed with becoming the progenitor of the Jewish people and Yefes was granted the gift of esthetics, design, and architecture. Cham and Canaan were cursed with being subservient and subject to Shem and Yefes.

What was Cham's sin? Why was Canaan so prominently implicated in his father's doing? Whatever Cham had done to Noach was Cham's decision and responsibility, not Canaan's. Canaan had only provided the information.

Rashi references two descriptions of Cham's sin. 1. He castrated Noach; 2. He sodomized Noach. Both explanations are distasteful and demand further clarification.

Rashi records Cham's reasoning for the first answer. "Adam had two sons, Kayin and Hevel. Kayin killed Hevel because he did not want to share the world with his brother. My father has three sons and desires a fourth. As it is, I stand to inherit only 1/3 of the world. If my father has more sons, my portion will be even less! Therefore, I will make sure that my father cannot have any more sons."

Could Cham have been that selfish? In the aftermath of the Mabul, at the dawn of a brave new world, is it possible that he had forgotten the lessons of the Mabul? The Madul was not just another natural disaster. It was the single greatest destruction and revelation ever in human history. The eight survivors of Noach's family were witness to a second creation. The past was gone. All remnants of humanity's ignoble failure had been wiped away. Only the righteous remained. All evil had died. All bad had ended. The righteous were rewarded, the good had been saved. Yes! Who could question it? There truly was a G-d in the universe who cared enough to punish the bad and

reward the righteous. The universe had a purpose. There was rhyme and reason to the events of history!

Mattan Torah (Revelation at Mt. Sinai) by contrast was experienced by one small segment of humanity. The Mabul, on the other hand, involved all of humanity. Mt. Sinai revealed a system that guaranteed G-d's judiciousness. Do His commandments and believe that the righteous will be rewarded. Do His commandments and believe that evil will be punished. However, the Mabul was justice! The Mabul was literally Divine justice revealed upon earth. How could Cham have not been affected?

It is possible that Cham was that "one bad apple" in the bunch. However, if that was true, why was he saved from the Mabul? Cham was not some teenager going through his rebellious stage. He wasn't a victim of circumstances who with a little patience and understanding would prove to be responsible and productive. Cham was over 100 years old! By then his true character should have been known. The fact that he was saved proved that he was deserving of being saved. He was among the righteous! What happened to him during the year in the Tayvah (Box - Ark) to so drastically alter his character?

The truth is that all sinning stems from the same primal conflict: "Do I do what I want or do I do what G-d wants?" Human egocentrism and desires are the setting for sin. The Medresh related that Cham and his wife were the only couple, human or animal, to cohabit while on the Tayvah. All of the other "survivors" remained celibate until emerging from the Tayvah one year from the start of the Mabul. Furthermore, Canaan was conceived during that year while on the Tayvah.

Resolve and commitment are only as strong as their first challenge. If we succeed in remaining strong and committed, we build on that victory and become even stronger and more committed, able to withstand even greater challenges. If we succumb to temptation, we not only do not grow stronger, we become more challenged and conflicted. Just as success breeds success, failure breeds failure. Having failed, we must also contend with an added sense of personal failure and guilt on top of the reawakened taste of forbidden pleasure.

Cham not only failed himself when he was together with his wife, he failed all of humanity. He sullied the new beginning. Humanity would not emerge pure and pristine from the cataclysmic destruction of the past. In order to deal with his own failure and the inevitability that his failure would be exposed with the birth of Canaan, Cham had to rationalize and convert his failure into a philosophy.

At the beginning of the Parsha, Rashi explained that the prediluvian world had devolved into wanton crossbreeding between the various species including humans. The natural demarcations set by G-d were ignored and erased. This extended to all aspects of human society and there was no respect for the person or property of another. Rape, murder, and thievery were rampant. Cham reviewed the history of his world and concluded that speciation was the key to creation. However, he rationalized that the human was just another species. Granted, we were more intelligent and resourceful, but in

the final analysis they were just another species of animal.

As another species of animal, the human had to remain apart and distinct, but nothing else. Beyond that they had no other nobler responsibility or purpose. Just as G-d had destroyed both human and animal so too had He saved both human and animal. It was all about survival and only survival. Human or animal, there was no real difference except to remain apart and distinct from each other. So long as humanity respected G-d's established, natural, lines of demarcation between the species, G-d's purpose for destroying the past would be accomplished. Beyond that, there was not any greater nobility to the human race than any other species.

Cham went so far as to justify his behavior on the Tayvah. Not only had he not sinned, he had done that which guaranteed a head start for his own species within the species of human. It was pure Darwinism in its most primal sense.

Canaan, was not the scarlet letter of the new world! Just the opposite! Cham saw Canaan and himself as living symbols of human endurance and survival. They represented the divine imperative given to all species to survive at all cost. Therefore, caring for others and concern for all other species was restricted to the arena of self-serving interests and desires. If it did not advance Cham's personal goals they were not significant. His goal was to survive and perpetuate his progeny!

Emerging from the Tayvah, Noach sought to inject purpose and nobility into creation. However, more than anything else, he wanted to give birth to a new and pure generation. Shem, Cham, Yefes and their wives were survivors of the past. They would struggle with memories of a G-dless world. Their noble and holy aspirations would always be contrasted against a backdrop of hedonistic pleasure. However, their children could be raised in an environment of pure devotion and G-dliness without the contrasting enticements of prediluvian amorality. Noach himself wanted the chance of birthing such a generation. He too wanted more children and said as much to his three sons. However, it was not to be.

Noach's desire to plant a vineyard and make wine was noble and purposeful. Wine, drunk in moderation, has the ability to grace. On the other hand, wine in excess usually disgraces. Noach wanted to attach grace and dignity to the new world. He wanted to frame pleasure in moderation and purpose. However, he was unprepared for the potency of its affect. Noach should have waited much longer before attempting the reintroduction of luxury into the new world. As a result, he became intoxicated. However, he had sufficient control and dignity to remain in privacy.

Cham, on the other hand, had advanced his own thinking in opposition to his father's. Hurting from the assumed and most likely stated criticism of his actions on the Tayvah, Cham was already prepared to take action when Canaan ran to tell him of Noach's intoxicated disgrace. Cham seized the moment to secure his own future and that of his offspring.

Furthermore, according to the second of Rashi's descriptions, Cham decided to symbolically degrade his father, the progenitor of humanity, to the level of animal. It was an act that did not

negate the natural boundaries of speciation, yet, it reduced human nobility to the level of base selfishness and animal desire. It was an act that captured the essence of Cham's personal philosophy perpetrated on Noach who symbolized the nobility of the divine human!

In the end, Cham was truly the perpetrator of the crime, although Canaan was a willing conspirator in the assault. Canaan knew his father's philosophy. He knew that he was different than all the other cousins. He was older by at least 9 months. He was the first to be born in the new world, and he was seen as the hope of humanity and its future. Canaan was also the direct beneficiary of Cham's perverted philosophy and actions. As the first-born he stood to inherit his father's 1/3 portion of the world.

All in all, G-d judged Canaan to be responsible for his own actions and intent. Rather than choosing to follow the teachings of his uncles and deny his father's perversions, Canaan ignored the living examples of Noach, Shem, and Yefes and supported his father. Therefore it was Canaan who was "cursed" with becoming "a slave to slaves to his brothers."

As in all situations, G-d's curses are really blessings in disguise. If Canaan would subjugate himself to the teachings of his uncles they would provide him with the proper education and necessary corrections. Rather than a philosophy of self-serving egocentricity and selfishness, and survival he would have been shown a life of generosity, Chesed, and caring for all others.

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