

GRACE SAVED

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In last week's Rabbi's Notebook I shared with you my Grandfather's novel understanding of the concept "Ch'ain." Based on the last verse in Parshas Bereishis, "And Noach found "Ch'ain in the eyes of G-d," Rav Moshe Ztl explained "Ch'ain as Noach's overall attitude in performing G-d's commandments with Simcha (contentment) and joy. The reward for Noach's "Ch'ain was G-d not subjecting Noach to the severity of justice; instead, G-d focused on Noach's strengths while seemingly ignoring his weaknesses. This week I would like to continue the discussion of "Ch'ain and extend it into the story of Avram and Sarai.

Why should the presence of "Ch'ain suspend the severity of justice? Our understanding of justice vs. mercy and forgiveness is that G-d takes everything into account. There is no such thing as a sin that isn't punished or a good deed that isn't rewarded. However, G-d mercifully grants us the divine gift of Teshuva (repentance) that allows us to say we are sorry and are committed to changing our sinful ways. The notion of forgiveness without Teshuva is not part of that understanding. Yet, my Grandfather Ztl's formulation of Ch'ain seems to do just that! So long as we serve G-d with contentment and joy He is willing to suspend the severity of justice! He is willing to "look the other way!"

Why did G-d save Noach, his wife, their three sons and daughters in law? On the one hand we can suggest that each of them was relatively so much better than the rest of the prediluvium world that they deserved to be saved. On the other hand there must be more than that. As I explained in last weeks essay, G-d could have started all over with a clean slate. Why engage in the "suspending of the severity of justice?" Apply the severity of justice and let the chips fall where they may. If it meant that Noach and his family also deserved to die with the rest - so be it. Why engage in relative justice? Why grade on the curve? We must conclude that, justice not withstanding, Noach and his family represented something that G-d specifically wanted to save and bring across the generational divide of the Mabul (Great Flood). He did not wish to start from scratch. The 1,656 years of human trial, tribulation, and challenge did have something worth preserving. That something worth preserving was Ch'ain.

The verse unequivocally states that it was Noach who had Ch'ain. It was Noach who had found favor in G-d's eyes. That means that his sons and their wives were saved from the deluge of punishment because of Noach and Naamah - not because of their own merits.

Of the three sons, Shem proved himself to be a true servant of G-d. As his name indicates, he looked

beyond the external and found the essence and meaning of existence. As such, he discovered G-d in everything he saw and touched.

Yefes was different than Shem. As Chazal explain, Yefes was endowed with aesthetic ability. Whereas Shem saw beyond the external and discerned the essence and meaning of all things, Yefes was visual and surface in his appreciation of G-d and creation. As such, his brothers easily influenced him. Sometimes he was attracted to the understanding, respect and appreciation of Shem (the story of covering Noach in the tent) and other times he was influenced by the passionate selfishness of Cham.

In contrast to Shem, Cham emerged from the Tayvah determined to best G-d at His own game. The year in the Tayvah (box) only reinforced Cham's belief that physical existence was all there was. In fact, the miraculous survival of his family proved to him that humanity could beat G-d at His own game.

Cham knew who he was and knew that he did not deserve to be saved. Why then was he saved? For that matter, he knew that the rest of the family was also not perfect. Why were any of them saved? Why didn't G-d start over from scratch? Why save anyone?

I would like to suggest that Cham concluded that being saved from the Mabul revealed G-d's one limitation. He believed that he had discovered G-d's Achilles heel! The reason why G-d had saved the family of Noach, deserving or not, was because G-d needed people to worship Him! How else could He be a true G-d? The one thing G-d needed that He could not provide for Himself was humans who would willfully serve Him! As the Talmud states, "There is no king without a nation." Therefore, G-d had to save a representation of humanity from destruction! Armed with his flawed logic, Cham emerged from the Tayvah determined to maximize on what he believed to be the one advantage he had over G-d.

Cham was wrong. G-d is all-powerful, non-corporal, limitless, and independent of all creation. G-d needs no thing and no one. The reason Cham was saved had nothing to do with either Cham or G-d's neediness. G-d saved Cham and the rest of the family because they were the family of Noach and Noach had found Ch'ain in the eyes of G-d.

Let us revisit the concept of Ch'ain. The reason why G-d is willing to suspend justice for Ch'ain is because Ch'ain reflects on the integration of life in the service of G-d. My Grandfather Zt'l wrote that on the basis of justice alone a person might approach G-d demanding due reward for his good deeds. However, on the basis of justice G-d is compelled to look at all the factors leading up to and including the performance of the good deed. Was the deed done as an act of love and subjugation to G-d or for the sake of receiving a reward? Was something not done because of the fear of Divine retribution or because it would be a betrayal of the relationship with G-d? On the other hand, if a person does not demand "due and just reward," instead, he perceives his relationship with G-d as the foundation and *raison d'être* of his existence and realizes that he must always strive to be more

disciplined and consistent in relation to G-d, then the inconsistencies of his performance are less important than his overall performance. Such a person trusts that G-d will always reward justly while recognizing that G-d takes everything into consideration. Such a person has chosen to live with G-d, and such a person will be judged in the context of his entire life's performance not just the performance of any one deed, good or bad.

Adam and Chava were born perfect. As 20 year olds, before their sin, they were the only adults to ever have had a moment of absolute purity. The rest of humanity is born perfect with pure hearts but at an age that makes it impossible to willfully remain pure. By the time we become responsible for our actions, good and bad, much has been scripted in our character and behavior that is not pure. As such, the institution of Teshuva had to be created by G-d to allow for humans to survive their own fallibility. It also made Adam and Chava inaccessible to us as role models of who we should be. Yes, we can learn the essence of sinning from their actions along with the lesson of Teshuva and forgiveness. However, as the Medresh relates, Adam himself could not forgive himself. Adam could not understand how to integrate human fallibility into a relationship with G-d. All he wanted to do was hide from G-d! All he could feel was shame and embarrassment. It was only after G-d suspended Kayin's punishment that Adam began to recognize the possibility of Teshuva. Because Adam had tasted perfection he remained different from us forever.

On the other hand, Noach was not perfect. He was raised in a world that was far from pure. He had to struggle with his emerging moral consciousness and realize that the struggle would be life-long. In contrast with Adam, Noach understood that there had to be Teshuva. He accepted that humans were destined to sin and that sin did not signal the end of the relationship. If anything, it could strengthen the resolve to be better and more committed. It allowed Noach to better understand himself and the world into which he was born. The Ch'ain that Noach developed reflected the contentment and joy of having an integrated and trusting relationship with G-d. Noach did not demand due reward for his perceived righteousness. Noach knew that he was also fallible. Therefore, G-d judged him for the totality of his person and could forgive and forget the shortcomings because of Noach's commitment, devotion, trust, and love.

Noach was also the perfect person to teach the new human family. Had it not been for Cham's despicable attack, he too could have fathered more children. However, it was not to be and that proves that G-d's plan for Noach was for him to teach and direct the emerging generations. Neither G-d nor Noach assumed that the new generations would be perfect. They were human and humans are fallible! Instead, following Noach's example they would have the chance to integrate failure and success within the framework of a loving and trusting relationship with G-d.

Cham was saved from the Mabul because he was an essential component of the human experience. Nothing mandated that he be evil ? that he choose over selflessness. It was possible that the experience of surviving the Mabul would awaken his passion to serve humanity and G-d rather than himself. Who better than Noach, the master of integration and forgiveness, to shape his character

and destiny? Unfortunately, Cham chose to understand the Mabul as a confirmation of his philosophy of selfishness. He chose to be evil and to promulgate his philosophy among his emerging generations.

Cham's philosophy climaxed in the actions of his son and grandson. His son Canaan fathered a nation that would sacrifice their children to the fire god Molech. Canaan attained the lowest level of human self-centeredness. He even lost the fundamental love and compassion of a parent for his child.

Cham's grandson Nimrod became emperor of the world and led a rebellion against G-d. Nimrod maximized his grandfather's philosophy of G-d needing humanity to serve him. He gathered all of humanity in the collective effort of denying G-d's place in the universe. Knowing that G-d would not destroy all of humanity he willingly placed all of humanity in danger. If in the end only he remained standing it would have been worth it! By collectively denying G-d's mastery over the universe he hoped to destroy G-d. A god without followers cannot possibly be G-d! Of course, Cham's tragically flawed philosophy resulted in the eventual destruction of Canaan and the dispersion of all the nations.

In direct contrast to Cham, Nimrod, and Canaan is this week's Parsha detailing Avram's emergence on the moral conscience of the world. Suffering the humiliation of Avram's miraculous emergence from the fiery furnace, Nimrod witnesses the destruction of his kingdom. First Avram bested Nimrod proving the impotence of his claimed divinity and then his dream of world dominance crumbled along with the Tower of Babel. However, the Nimrod's of the world do not recede into obscurity. Rashi (14:1) references the Talmud in Eruvin that identifies Amraphel as Nimrod. As one of the Four-Kings who attempted world dominance. Amraphel led a successful campaign through the Middle-East; however, his dominance was not to be. In the end, Avram led his trusted servant Eliezar (son of Nimrod) into battle and vanquished the four kings, including Amraphel / Nimrod.

Following his victory, Malki Tzedek, (Shem the son of Noach and great grandfather of Avram) the priest of G-d the Most High, greeted Avram with the following blessing. (14:19) "Blessed be Avram to G-d the Most High, Owner of heaven and earth." Rashi explains that Shem was called, "the priest of G-d the Most High," but he blessed Avram in the name of, "G-d the Most High, Owner of heaven and earth." Shem's addition of "Owner of heaven and earth" to the name of G-d was done as a special praise of Avram. "Until now G-d was only the G-d in heaven above because no one believed in Him, but you Avram have made Him the G-d of the earth through your teachings of monotheism."

It all comes together. Noach the perfect example of human and divine integration taught the philosophy of Ch'ain to his children. Shem embraced the philosophy and the responsibility while Cham denied both. Cham's selfishness and heresy culminated in the nation of Canaan and the empire of Nimrod, while Shem's devotion and service culminated in the birth of Avram and Sarai. Nimrod and Avram clash and Nimrod's empire crumbles. Avram was sent to Canaan to possess the

land that Cham's descendents no longer deserved. Nimrod reattempts world dominance in opposition to G-d and Avram and suffered complete defeat by the hands of his son Eliezar the trusted servant of Avram. Avram is then praised by Shem as the one who crowned G-d as King of heaven and earth. Finally, in the clashes of philosophy between Noach, Shem, and Avram with Cham and Nimrod, Avram emerged as the successor too Noach's philosophy of Ch'ain. It was the gift of integration that Avram and Sarai bestowed on humanity. It was the gift of Teshuva the ability to always rebuild a relationship with G-d, the essence and success of Avraham's teachings.

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