

ONE MAN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The rabbis of the Talmud have taught us that all new beginnings are fraught with difficulties. This week's parsha in its details of the beginning of human existence on this planet certainly confirms that observation. Seemingly, everything goes wrong from the start. Adam and Chava sin and are expelled from Paradise, Cain slays his brother Abel, and in a short span of generations and time the world sinks into a state of idolatry and moral depravity. The Torah even allows for a note of regret, so to speak, emanating from God Himself regarding the fall of humankind. It is hard to find a note of optimism until the last verse of the parsha. There it states that Noach found favor in God's eyes. The rabbis in the Mishna stated that there were ten generations that passed between Adam till Noach. The message here is clear. God somehow found it worthwhile to outwait the ten generations until humankind would produce an individual who would be worthy enough to start the world anew from him and his progeny. The Torah here teaches us important lessons: The worth of a single individual; the patience and fortitude of God with humankind; and that in God's scheme of things it is worthwhile to wait generations and persevere for the sake of finally achieving a truly good role model for human behavior. These lessons are the primary messages of the parsha and provide for us the guidance in viewing the rest of the Torah narrative as well as for viewpoints in our own personal and national lives.

The Talmud teaches us that Adam was created singly and alone so that no one of the human race could claim to be of greater pedigree than others. A second reason advanced by Jewish scholars is that this fact alone proves the power and inherent worth of an individual. In a world that has barely survived a century where hundreds of millions of individuals were deemed to be worthless except to serve an almighty state or ideology, the Torah comes to reaffirm the worth of an individual life. Every individual is a potential Noach, someone who can find favor in God's eyes so to speak and give the world a new and fresh start. But to create such individuals requires exquisite patience on our part. We are not allowed to be dismayed by the daily disappointments and failures that plague society and its leaders. Even if generations seemingly fail to achieve the desired improvement of the human character, we are still bidden to strive to achieve that goal. For that we also have the words of the rabbis of the Mishna: "It is not necessarily incumbent upon you to complete the work [of making a better world] but neither are you freed of the task of attempting to do so." This is the lesson of the first ten generations of humankind as recorded in this week's parsha. It remains the lesson for all later generations, including our own.

Shabat shalom.

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