

# FAXS VS. KIDNEY STONES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 165, Euthanasia. Good Shabbos!*

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## Unchecked Pursuit of Pleasure Leads to Worse Things

The Medrash says, "Had Iyov only come to explain the incident of the Flood, that would have been sufficient." According to our Sages there are many verses in the book of Job that refer to the sins of the generation of the Flood.

For example, the verse in Iyov [24:18] says, "He is light upon the face of the water, their portion in the earth is cursed, he does not turn by way of the vineyards." The Medrash relates this verse to the sin of the generation of the flood: They were cursed that they should perish in water. Why? The Medrash tells us that they were cursed because they lived with their wives not for procreation or for their wives' sake, but only for their own pleasure.

The Medrash in fact already alludes to this in last week's parsha. "The custom of that generation was to take two wives, one for having children and one for pleasure. The one taken for having children would sit ugly and neglected like a living widow; the one taken for pleasure would be sterilized and would sit by him, made up with cosmetics like a harlot."

There are two things that require understanding. First, while this is certainly a terrible practice, it is also not the worst of crimes. We all know cases of domestic violence and abuse, things much worse than these. There are hosts of crimes and perversions which we would consider more vile and worthy of destruction. As we know, there are many people today who live for worldly pleasures, neglecting their spouses and families. They aren't nice people. But are they the worst criminals which society has to offer?

Furthermore, what does the Medrash do with the literal interpretation of the verses? The verses themselves tell us what happened to the generation of the flood and why they were punished. "The earth was decadent before G-d, the land was filled with violence." [Bereishis 6:11]. The Torah tells us that there was so much perversion that it even affected the animals.

This is a whole different story. We can understand sending a Flood to destroy the world for that reason. We can understand such an extreme punishment for decadence, perversion, theft and violence. However, the Medrash tells us that their problem was that they lived with their wives for the purpose of their own pleasure. How can one understand this discrepancy?

The explanation is that the Medrash is not contradicting the verses. The Medrash is speaking of root causes. The verses are speaking of the eventual effect. How is a Generation of the Flood produced? How did they wind up so decadent and perverted that they were deserving of destruction? Our Sages tell us it comes from a philosophy of life that says, "Have a good time".

If the pursuit of pleasure goes unchecked, it will eventually deteriorate into a Generation of the Flood. One thousand five hundred years earlier, when Lemech took two wives -- one for children and one for pleasure -- that was not the absolute worst of crimes. But, it was a philosophy of life.

"Eat, Drink, be Merry, have a good time, and enjoy yourself; self- gratification, live-for-today." When people pursue pleasure with a vengeance, it eventually gives way to "the land became corrupted before the L-rd".

One has to go no further than to look at society today to discover what happens to a culture that is only interested in pleasure and self- gratification, in enjoying the moment -- whether it be with passions of the heart, with alcohol, with drugs, or whatever provides a 'good time' right now.

### **Noah's Failure to Learn the Lesson of the Flood**

With this idea, we can understand a teaching of the Rabbis at the end of the parsha. The verse tells us [Bereishis 9:20] "And Noach, the man of the earth, profaned himself and planted a vineyard." The Sages comment that Noach went from being a "righteous and perfect man in his generation" [6:9] to being a "man of the earth", an ordinary farmer.

This is contrasted with Moshe who starts out as being called "an Egyptian man" [Shemos 2:19] and ends up by being called a "Man of G-d" [Devorim 33:1]. Noach was not able to maintain his stature. He went in the other direction - - starting out as being called a righteous man and ending up by being called a man of the earth.

What was his terrible crime? Why did he fall so much in the eyes of G-d? Because he planted a vineyard.

So what is his terrible crime? True, he should have planted wheat; he should have planted string beans, because they are more of a necessity of life. But for that the Torah castigates him that he "profaned himself" (va'Yachal Noach)?

The answer is that Noach failed to learn the lesson of the Flood. Why did the Flood come about? How did it all start? The root cause was that people were into pleasure. What is the first thing one should NOT DO, after a Flood? Seek out pleasures.

Noach chose to plant a vineyard, to plant wine, something he could have lived without. Wine can be wonderful, but it is just for pleasure. This is precisely the lesson he failed to learn and that is how Noach profaned himself.

How did Noach make such a blunder? Noach was a Tzadik. Why did he plant a vineyard? The answer is because we have our Sages to point out the root causes of the evil in the Generation of the Flood. Noach's mistake was to only look at the results and to fail to see the cause. Had he realized that the root cause of the behavior of that generation was the tendency to pursue pleasure, he would never have planted a vineyard. He was smarter than that. He was a bigger Tzadik than that.

His problem was -- as is so often the problem -- that he looked at symptoms and failed to see the disease. We, too, look at outcomes and don't look at causes. This is not a sin of malice or disregard, but a sin of failure to recognize underlying causes.

The underlying cause of the sin of the generation of the flood was not initial decadence. It was a philosophy of "Have a Good Time". That is what Noach failed to see. He looked at the bottom line, rather than at the whole picture.

### **The Role of Bricks In The Rebellion Against G-d**

At the end of the parsha, the Torah tells us of the incident of the Generation of Dispersion (Dor haHaflaga). We all know the story -- they built a tower that reached into the sky. The Torah describes their dialog [11:3] "They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.' And the brick served them as stone, and the lime served them as mortar."

Rash"i tells us a novel fact -- "In Babylonia there were no stones..." This is what the Torah is telling us, because there were no rocks, they made bricks.

The next thing we find after they made the bricks is [11:4] "Come, let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens..." In other words, the flow of the verses is (a) we make bricks; (b) we build a tower and challenge G-d.

What is the significance of the making of bricks in connection with the rebellion against G-d? Why does the Torah have to mention this fact? Why is this the crucial introduction to the rebellion?

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zt"l, once explained the matter: The Generation of Dispersion became enamored with technology. Imagine -- bricks in Babylonia -- it was a revolution that at least rivaled the FAX machine! There were no stones, how could one build? Some guy came up with a brainstorm -- one can take mud, bake it, and he has a brick! It was unbelievable. He patented it. He made a fortune. It was a revolution!

Technology! "Ah -- what man can't come up with." What is the next step after one becomes enamored with technology? A person starts to think, "my strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth" [Devorim 8:17]. A person thinks that the sky is the limit -- literally.

That is the message of this parsha. They became so intoxicated with their ingenuity and they were so overwhelmed with their own intelligence -- for inventing bricks that they said, "Who needs G-d anyway? We are in control. Let us build and make for us a name."

Two weeks ago [1989] there was a horrible earthquake in San Francisco. Whether people called it nature or whether they were a little more religious and called it G-d, everyone's reaction was that such an event was a humbling experience. In spite of the FAX machines and in spite of the computers and in spite of all that we can do, a man is a man and he is here today and gone tomorrow.

There is no such thing as "Let us make for ourselves a name." We live here by the Grace of G-d. Sometimes it takes an earthquake to make us realize what we are and what significance we play on this planet. It is an old mistake. It is a mistake that goes back as far as the Generation of the Dispersion.

Someone told me that he once had a kidney stone. This is an excruciatingly painful experience. He could not pray, he could not talk, he could not eat, and he could not find his place. He literally could not exist. Finally he passed the stone. The Doctor showed him the stone. It was the fraction of the size of a raisin. This little spec of sand made him a non-functional person. "...For if one of them becomes opened or one of them becomes closed, it is impossible for us to stand and exist before you..." [From the Asher Yatzar prayer, said after using the bathroom].

There is a urologist here in Baltimore who has a plaque in his office. On that plaque is the Asher Yatzar prayer. This is no joke. We don't need an earthquake, we don't need a highway to collapse or the [Chesapeake] Bay Bridge to fall to pieces. One needs only a speck of sand to remember who we are and how fragile life is. In spite of 'let us build bricks' and all the other modern technologies, a man is a man and he lives by G-d's Grace.

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## Glossary

**Tzadik**-- righteous person

**Asher Yatzar prayer** -- (literally Who Creates), Blessing recited after using the bathroom, which praises the Divine Providence inherent in our bodily functions.d

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## Sources and Personalities

**Rash"i**-- (1040-1105) Rav Shlomo ben Yitzchak; Troyes and Worms, France.

**Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld** -- (1849-1932) Rav of the Old Yishuv, Jerusalem.

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