FREE TIME

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Noach

> *These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 301, Teaching Torah To Non-Jews.*
> *Good Shabbos!*

Free Time: A Challenge and A Responsibility

The name Noach was introduced and explained in last week's parsha [Bereishis 5:28-29]. "And (Lemech) called the name (of his son) Noach saying: This one will comfort us from our toil and from the anguish of our hands, from the soil that G-d has cursed." Adam had received the curse that the ground would itself be cursed because of him, and that Adam would only eat bread by the sweat of his brow. Lemech's prayer was that the birth of this son Noach should somehow be a consolation and should in some way lighten the burden of this curse.

The Medrash Tanchuma elaborates on this pasuk [verse]: When his son Noach was born, how did Lemech know that Noach would be a great consolation that would revolutionize society and would lighten the burden of the curse? The Medrash explains that when Adam was given the curse following his sin in the Garden of Eden, he asked G-d until when the curse would remain in effect. G-d answered that the curse would last until a person was born already circumcised. Noach was born already circumcised, alerting Lemech to the impending lightening of this 10-generation-old curse. Lemech could therefore immediately proclaim "this is the baby that we have been waiting for." Now history will change.

The Medrash explains further that until Noach was born, when people planted wheat they harvested thorns. However, with the birth of Noach, nature returned to its intended pattern. When they planted

wheat, they harvested wheat; when they planted barley they harvested barley. Nature worked the way it was supposed to work. Furthermore, the Medrash states, Noach invented the plow and the hoe and all types of farming tools. Until his time, people did agricultural work with their hands. Imagine plowing a field with one's fingernails! It was Noach's brilliant idea that revolutionized the history of the world, and indeed saved his fellow man from "our toil and from the anguish of our hands."

Rav Avrohom Pam zt"l (1913-2001) observed that although this Medrash states that Noach made life much easier and made society far more economically productive, it was precisely in Noach's time that society became corrupt and debased. Apparently there is a correlation between hard work and the moral status of the world, between having it easy and moral deterioration.

Rav Pam remembered the "sweatshops" on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He certainly remembered pre-war Lithuania. People worked 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week! However, 50, 60, and 70 years ago in New York City, it was possible to walk outside at night. Now, with four days a week, flextime, shorter hours, and paid vacations -- all of a sudden -- we cannot walk the streets safely any more. It is sometimes not even safe to drive one's car down the street, much less walk!

We are so advanced, we have all these conveniences, and look what is happening to the world! Apparently, there is something corrupting about having so much free time on one's hands that one does not know what to do with it. When that happens, the world deteriorates. This is what happened during the years prior to the Flood.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) commented similarly. There was a striking change in the world after the Flood: "As long as the earth lasts, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night, shall never again cease to exist." [Bereishis 8:22]

This was a revolutionary change. Before the Flood, there was no such thing as a season. It was summer all year round.

Why are seasons necessary? Rav Hirsch explained that year-round summer is not good for society. When life is too easy and people have too much time on their hands, society deteriorates.

Life became easier during Noach's lifetime. Sudenly, people had too much free time on their hands. The world deteriorated. This is a great ethical lesson for all of us regarding the challenge and responsibility that free time presents to us.

The Generation of the Flood: Immorality Institutionalized

The Chavos Yair (Responsa Chapter 163) addressed the following question: A group of businessmen had a steady learning group with a certain rabbi for many years. Although they came together regularly for Torah study, outside of the learning sessions they were constantly at each other's throats over business dealings. There were frequent "Dinei Torah" [Monetary disputes requiring

Court intervention] between them over matters of business encroachments (hasagos Gevul). They were always putting down each other in the eyes of customers.

Eventually, their legal fees from contesting all these "Dinei Torah" were adding up to substantial sums. Finally one of the businessmen devised a brilliant idea. "Let us make a deal amongst ourselves that as much as we steal and rob and cheat and infringe and slander amongst ourselves -- we will automatically forgive (be 'mochel') each other for these sins and we will forgo our rights to monetary compensation via "Dinei Torah".

They asked their teacher if they were in fact allowed to make such a deal amongst themselves. The rabbi responded that he could not answer their question because he was an 'interested party' (nogeah b'Davar) -- since he in fact was earning a livelihood from collecting fees for services rendered in adjudicating their "Dinei Torah". Therefore they sent the query to the Chavos Yair.

The Chavos Yair responded that their desire to enter into such an agreement is itself a worse sin than all the stealing and cheating and infringement that they had been engaging in prior to contemplating such an agreement. They were now proposing to institutionalize falsehood and deceit. This would be a Desecration of G-d's Name. The other way was dishonest, but at least it culminated with a seeking of truth and justice. As unethical as their previous behavior may have been, it was not nearly as bad as throwing all ethics to the wind and formally sanctioning institutionalized falsehood and cheating.

The Chavos Yair added that this was the difference between the Generation of the Flood and the people of Sodom. In Sodom there were no righteous people. The people there basically engaged in the same practices as were prevalent in the Generation of the Flood. But by Sodom we read that "their cries came before Him" [Bereishis 18:21]. At least there they still cried. They knew they were being cheated. In the Generation of the Flood, there were not even cries. People could do what they want, say what they want. "Everything goes!"

A society that institutionalizes and sanctions sin is a society that is totally corrupt.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.
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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Bereishis are provided below:

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