PRIORITIES DEFINE A PERSON

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Noach

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 477, Tzedaka and Non-Jews. Good Shabbos!

This class is dedicated by Ephraim Sobol in loving memory of his father, Shlomo Mordechai ben Yaakov a"h.

Priorities Define A Person

There are two famous comments of Rashi toward the end of our Parsha.

At the end of the parsha, the Torah says that "Noach - the man of the land - planted a vineyard" [Bereishis 9:20]. Rashi comments on the words "the man of the land" (ish ha'adama) that this connotes that Noach was defined by the land (similar to Elimelech who is described as "ish Naomi" [Rus 1:3]). Noach was the "master of the land".

Ramban notes that this usage sets a precedent (zeh bana av) for such constructs elsewhere in Tanach. The person -- "ish" -- is defined by what comes after it. The Ramban cites the additional example of "ish haElokim" [Devorim 33:1] by Moshe - the man of G-d, meaning a person who defined himself by G-d. Noach, on the other hand, became a person who was defined by the land.

Earlier, Rashi comments on the expression "vaYachel Noach" (literally "Noach began" -- from the same root as "techila" -- beginning). Rashi explains that the word "vaYachel" connotes that Noach profaned himself (from the root 'chulin' - non-sacred) because his initial planting after the Flood should have been something other than a vineyard.

If we ask the question "Should Noach have planted a vineyard?" the answer is most certainly yes. After all, we must ponder - where did Noach get the vines from, if everything on earth had been totally destroyed? The answer is that together with all the animals which Noach brought onto the Tayva [ark], he took seeds of every kind of tree and plant, to eventually remedy the agricultural destruction that took place during the flood. There is no question that eventually Noach was

supposed to replant vineyards. The criticism which Rashi cites in the name of Chazal, is criticizing Noach for making the vineyard his initial planting.

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz explains that this teaches a lesson regarding the importance of proper priorities. There are many things which we must do in this world. We have many obligations. But priorities DEFINE what a person will become. The pasuk says "vaYachel Noach ish haAdamah". Our Sages note that earlier Noach was referred to as a pure and noble spirit (Noach ish Tzadik tamim). Look what happened to him! Suddenly he is called a "man of the earth." Where did he go wrong? Chazal explain that his spiritual descent was extremely subtle. It was not a dramatic rebellion or change of life style. Heaven Forbid! Noach merely misplaced his priorities and planted what should have been a later crop ahead of what should have been earlier plantings.

Noach's inappropriate first priority became his defining essence as mentioned in the previously quoted Rashi. [Ish haAdama <-> Ish haElokim <-> Ish Naomi] The vineyard defined him because that became the number one priority in his life. It is crucial to maintain appropriate priorities.

Rejection of Unity Results in Dis-Unity

The second insight I would like to share is also from Rav Yeruchem Levovitz. The end of the parsha contains the incident of the people of Bavel. They wanted to build a tower in the sky. Everyone spoke a single language. We know the rest of the story: "Let's build a tower; let's do battle with G-d." The Master of the World descended, He mixed up their languages and, as such, they were unable to communicate with one another.

This is a nice story. It is well known. However, most people do not realize that this story is the story of world history. This incident is one of the most seminal events in the history of mankind. What does this event symbolically represent?

The narration begins, "And behold the entire earth spoke one language". Rashi states that this was "the holy tongue". G-d's "Grand Plan" of the world was that there should be unity among people. One of the biggest blessings that the Almighty gave mankind was that there should be unity among people and unity among nations.

G-d is One. He is defined by his Oneness, His Singularity. The master plan for the world was for the world to mirror this sense of unity: One G-d <-> One Language. Had society been able to maintain an environment of One G-d and One Language, people would be able to get along. The people of Bavel, however, rebelled against this concept. They rejected 'One G-d.' They planned to build a tower in heaven and wage war against this 'One G-d.' "We want variety. We do not want to be subject to 'One God.'"

G-d responded: "I gave you the opportunity for the greatest blessing in the world and you did not appreciate it. You rebelled against 'oneness.' I will punish you with the worst curse. I am going to give you different languages." G-d allows sinners to walk in the path they choose for themselves.

Since they rejected unity, that is exactly what was withheld from them through the 'curse' of many languages.

I once saw a statistic that during the average person's lifetime, he lives through over 500 wars! We are obviously not just counting the 'big' wars (such as WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf Wars, etc.) This also includes the 'little' wars (such as Bosnia, Nicaragua, East Timor, Rwanda, Burundi) which are certainly all wars as well. Why do people fight? The Croats do not like Serbs; the Serbs do not like the Croats. One literally "cannot differentiate the players from one another without a scorecard." It gets so complex that one does not even know for whom to root!

Where does this stem from? Why are the Indonesians and the people from East Timor killing each other? Why have the people of Northern Ireland been killing each other for hundreds of years? There are situations like that all over the globe. People cannot get along. The primary reason for the strife is because of differences between peoples. How did that all start? It all started due to their rejection of 'Oneness.' The Almighty, as a punishment, precluded 'oneness' from the people of Bavel and from the seventy nations who dispersed from that place after that historic event.

Beginning from the Tower of Bavel, people stopped communicating, cultures went their own separate ways, and fighting and strife became inevitable. The current concept that there will one day be a unified language and a unified Europe will never succeed. It will never succeed because of the curse that descended to the world as a result of the Tower of Bavel. Mankind had their chance for unity, but they blew it. G-d assured that mankind would forever live with the disunity that they chose for themselves.

There is a movement in this country to make English the mandatory national language. All documents should be printed only in English. What is the reason for this effort? The reason is the recognition that multiplicity of languages is the first step in the breakdown of society. It is not inconceivable that in our lifetime Canada will break apart because of the French - English dichotomy in various parts of that country. The curse of this week's parsha continues to plague mankind in our own time. When "Hashem Echad" is rejected, the result is a world such as we have witnessed throughout history until this very day.

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 Noach are provided below:

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