

NOACH DID NOT BECOME WICKED, HE JUST BECAME PLAIN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Noach

Noach Did Not Become Wicked, He Just Became Plain

Following the emergence of Noach and his family from the Tayva [Ark], the Torah teaches: *"And Noach, the man of the earth, debased himself (vayachel Noach) and planted a vineyard."* [Bereishis 9:20]. Rashi explains that the word vayachel comes from the root of chulin (profane or secular). Rashi states: He should have occupied himself with some other kind of vegetation as his first planting (after emerging from the Tayva).

The parsha begins with *"Noach was a perfectly righteous person (tzadik tamim) in his generation"* but at the end of the parsha, Noach is on a lower spiritual level. He had become regular, plain, or mundane -- depending on how exactly we translate the word chulin. Rather than possessing lofty goals, he became a mundane person. What was his crime? He planted a vineyard.

We might speculate why he planted a vineyard. He had been in the Tayva for a lengthy period of time. When he left the Tayva, he found a world that had literally been destroyed. Is there a more disheartening and depressing scene than to realize that humanity has to begin all over again? It is so surprising then that Noach planted a vineyard? *"Give wine to the bitter of soul"* [Mishlei 31:6]. It is natural for a depressed and bitter person to look for ways to cheer himself up. *"Wine will gladden the hearts of man"* [Tehillim 104:15]. Noach's actions were very understandable. He felt lonely and forsaken. It was about time that he did do something for himself!

Rav Simcha Wasserman says that this is exactly the definition of *"he made himself profane (chulin)"*. It was not a crime. It was not a sin. It was simply chulin -- not holy, but rather the mundane and pedestrian approach. Noach should have continued on what had been his mission during these many days in the Tayva.

What did he do in the Tayva? He fed the animals. He took care of that which remained on the face of the earth. Therefore, as tired as he was, his goal should have been: "I need to carry on for humanity. I need to feed the rest of the world. I need to make sure that humanity continues."

If a person saw his mission as feeding the rest of the world, he would plant wheat or at least

vegetables. Planting a vineyard for one who is depressed might be understandable, but it is chullin. It is not continuing on the path of greatness that Noach had been following until now. This is the essence of the comment of Chazal: He made himself profane.

It is ironic that in the life story of Avraham, we find that he also planted. Avraham planted an "Eishel" [Bereishis 21:33]. According to one interpretation in Rashi, "Eishel" is an acronym for Eating (Achila), Drinking (Shtiyah), and Lodging (Lina). Avraham's inclination was to do for others. He wished to provide an inn and take in guests. Noach was different. He did not sin by planting the vineyard. He merely highlighted the difference between himself and Avraham. He made himself chullin.

Bavel Builders Lost Sight Of the Forest

The parsha contains the story of the Tower of Bavel.

"The entire world was of one language and of unified words... Let us make for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heaven. Let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be dispersed over the face of the entire land." [Bereishis 11:1, 4].

The people had the best intentions. They were trying to form a centralized government. They were trying to protect themselves and trying to preserve the society they had achieved. Their ideals were lofty. They wanted to work for the good of mankind.

Pirkei D'Rebi Eliezer provides some background to this narration. There were no bricks where they lived. They needed to create bricks. [Bereishis 11:3]. Pirkei D'Rebi Eliezer describes that if a person fell off the tower during construction, the workers ignored the accident. However, if a brick fell during the course of construction, they would sit down and mourn its loss.

Two things were needed to build the tower: People and bricks. Every brick was a precious commodity. The people were not that precious.

The whole purpose of building the tower was to preserve humanity (lest we become dispersed) and yet when a worker was killed there was no reaction. What happened to their concern with humanity?

The lesson is that too often we lose sight of the forest because of the trees. We lose sight of the goal because we get so wrapped up in the means to achieve that goal. There are all sorts of organizations whose purpose is to help people but sometimes they get so caught up in the bureaucracy of the organization that the people become secondary.

This was the crime of the Generation of Dispersion. This is an all too common phenomenon. The example I always cite is when people come into shul because they have Yahrtzeit for a parent. They want to daven for the amud. Why? They want to make a Kiddush Hashem [Sanctify G-d's Name in memory of the departed as a source of reward for his/her soul] by reciting blessings and Kaddish publicly.

What happens when two people approach the amud, each having Yahrtzeit? Each inevitably claims

precedence and arguments ensue. The result is Chilul Hashem [Desecration of G-d's Name] ?- the antithesis of what they were ostensibly trying to accomplish. They have lost sight of what "Kiddush Hashem" is all about. 'Davening for the amud' is only a means to create Kiddush Hashem. Too often, the means becomes the goal in and of itself.

The tower "for the sake of humanity" became the goal itself, rather than the means. We always need to be on guard that we don't lose sight of what we are "in this for" in the first place.

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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