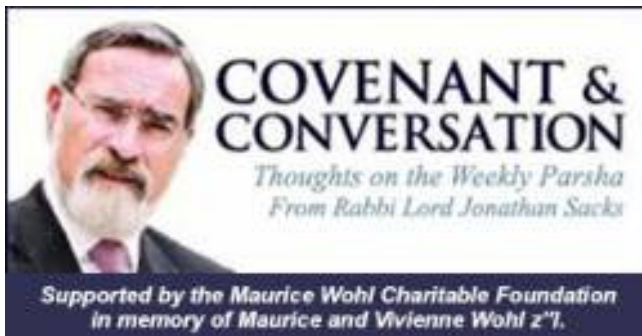


In this Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by *Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by *Rabbi Ari Kahn*
- **Mayanot** by *Rabbi Noson Weisz*
- **Rabbi Frand On the Weekly Torah Portion** by *Rabbi Yissocher Frand*



On Leadership: Righteousness Is Not Leadership

The praise accorded to Noah is unparalleled in Tanach. He was, says the Torah, “a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God.” No such praise is given to Abraham or Moses or any of the Prophets. The only person in the Bible who comes close is Job, described as “blameless and upright (*tam*

ve-yashar); he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). Noah is in fact the only individual in Tanach described as righteous (*tzaddik*).

Yet the Noah we see at the end of his life is not the person we saw at the beginning. After the Flood:

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father’s naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked. (Gen. 9:20-23)

The man of God has become a man of the soil. The upright man has become a drunkard. The man clothed in virtue now lies naked. The man who saved his family from the Flood is now so undignified that two of his sons are ashamed to look at him. This is a tale of decline. Why?

Noah is the classic case of someone who is righteous, but who is not a leader. In a disastrous age, when all has been corrupted, when the world is filled with violence, when even God Himself – in the most poignant line in the whole Torah – “regretted that He had made man on earth, and was pained to His very core,” Noah alone justifies God’s faith in humanity, the faith that led Him to create humankind in the first place. That is an immense achievement, and nothing should detract from it. Noah is, after all, the man through whom God makes a covenant with all humanity. Noah is to humanity what Abraham is to the Jewish people.

Noah was a good man in a bad age. But his influence on the life of his contemporaries was, apparently, non-existent. That is implicit in God’s statement, “*You alone* have I found righteous in this whole generation” (Gen. 7:1). It is implicit also in the fact that only Noah and his family, together with the animals, were saved. It is reasonable to assume that these two facts – Noah’s righteousness and his lack of influence on his contemporaries – are intimately related. Noah preserved his virtue by separating himself from his environment.

That is how, in a world gone mad, he stayed sane.

The famous debate among the Sages as to whether the phrase “perfect in his generations” (Gen. 6:9) is praise or criticism may well be related to this. Some said that “perfect in his generations” means that he was perfect only relative to the low standard then prevailing. Had he lived in the generation of Abraham, they said, he would have been insignificant. Others said the opposite: if in a wicked generation Noah was righteous, how much greater he would have been in a generation with role models like Abraham.

The argument, it seems to me, turns on whether Noah’s isolation was part of his character, or whether it was merely the necessary tactic in that time and place. If he were naturally a loner, he would not have gained by the presence of heroes like Abraham. He would have been impervious to influence, whether for good or bad. If he was not a loner by nature but merely by circumstance, then in another age he would have sought out kindred spirits and become greater still.

Yet what exactly was Noah supposed to do? How could he have been an influence for good in a society bent on evil? Was he

really meant to speak in an age when no one would listen? Sometimes people do not listen even to the voice of God Himself. We had an example of this just two chapters earlier, when God warned Cain of the danger of his violent feelings toward Abel – “Why are you so furious? Why are you depressed? ... sin is crouching at the door. It lusts after you, but you can dominate it” (Gen. 4: 6-7). Yet Cain did not listen, and instead went on to murder his brother. If God speaks and people do not listen, how can we criticise Noah for not speaking when all the evidence suggests that they would not have listened to him anyway?

The Talmud raises this very question in a different context, in another lawless age: the years leading to the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the First Temple, another lawless age:

R. Aha b. R. Hanina said: Never did a favourable word go forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, of which He retracted for evil, except the following, where it is written, “And the Lord said unto him: Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh

and cry for all the abominations that are being done in the midst thereof” (Ezek. 9:4).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Gabriel, “Go and set a mark of ink on the foreheads of the righteous, that the destroying angels may have no power over them; and a mark of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked, that the destroying angels may have power over them.” Said the Attribute of Justice before the Holy One, blessed be He, “Sovereign of the Universe! How are these different from those?”

“Those are completely righteous men, while these are completely wicked,” He replied. “Sovereign of the Universe!” said Justice, “they had the power to protest but did not.”

Said God, “Had they protested, they would not have heeded them.”

“Sovereign of the Universe!” said Justice, “This was revealed to You, but was it revealed to them?” (Shabbat 55a)

According to this passage, even the righteous in Jerusalem were punished at the time of the destruction of the Temple because they did not protest the actions of their contemporaries. God objects to the claim of Justice: Why punish them for their failure to protest when it was clear that had they done so, no one would have listened? Justice replies: This may be clear to you or to the angels - meaning, this may be clear in hindsight – but at the time, no human could have been sure that their words would have no impact. Justice asks: How can you be sure you will fail if you never try?

The Talmud notes that God reluctantly agreed with Justice. Hence the strong principle: when bad things are happening in society, when corruption, violence and injustice prevail, it is our duty to register a protest, even if it seems likely that it will have no effect. Why? Because that is what moral integrity demands. Silence may be taken as acceptance. And besides, we can never be sure that no one will listen. Morality demands that we ignore probability and focus on possibility. Perhaps someone will take notice and change their ways - and that “perhaps” is enough.

This idea did not suddenly appear for the first time in the Talmud. It is stated explicitly in the book of Ezekiel. This is what God says to the Prophet:

“Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against Me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says.’ And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a Prophet has been among them.” (Ezek. 2:3-5)

God is telling the Prophet to speak, regardless of whether people will listen.

So, one way of reading the story of Noah is as an example of lack of leadership. Noah was righteous but not a leader. He was a good man who had no influence on his environment. There are, to be sure, other ways of reading the story, but this seems to me the most straightforward. If so, then Noah is the third case in a series of failures of responsibility. As we saw last week, Adam and Eve failed to take personal responsibility for their actions (“It wasn’t me”). Cain refused to take moral responsibility (“Am I my brother’s

keeper?”). Noah failed the test of collective responsibility.

This way of interpreting the story, if correct, entails a strong conclusion. We know that Judaism involves collective responsibility, for it teaches *Kol Yisrael arevim ze bazeh* (“All Israel are responsible for one another” Shavuot 39a). But it may be that simply being *human* also involves collective responsibility. Not only are Jews responsible for one another. So are we all, regardless of our faith or religious affiliations. So, at any rate, Maimonides argued, though Nahmanides disagreed.¹

The Hassidim had a simple way of making this point. They called Noah a *tzaddik im peltz*, “a righteous man in a fur coat.” There are essentially two ways of keeping warm on a cold night. You can wear a thick coat, or you can light a fire. Wear a coat and you warm only yourself. Light a fire and you can warm others too. We are supposed to light a fire.

Noah was a good man who was not a leader. Was he, after the Flood, haunted by guilt? Did he think of the lives he might have saved if only he had spoken out, whether to his contemporaries or to God?

We cannot be sure. The text is suggestive but not conclusive.

It seems, though, that the Torah sets a high standard for the moral life. It is not enough to be righteous if that means turning our backs on a society that is guilty of wrongdoing. We must take a stand. We must protest. We must register dissent even if the probability of changing minds is small. That is because the moral life is a life we share with others. We are, in some sense, responsible for the society of which we are a part. It is not enough to be good. We must encourage others to be good. There are times when each of us must lead.

Shabbat Shalom

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. Do you see Noah as “perfect” because he managed to maintain this despite his contemporaries, or was he only “righteous” relative to the people that surrounded him?
2. Why is it so difficult to take a stand on something we believe in when we are uncertain of the response?
3. Is it possible to live in an Ark, or in complete isolation from society, and still be considered a moral person?

NOTES

1. See Rambam, Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Melachim* 9:14. Ramban, *Commentary* to Bereishit 34:13, s.v. *Ve-rabbim*.



Everyone Dies

Perhaps with the birth of every child new hope fills the hearts of the parents. However, when we look at the list of births representing the line of descendants from Adam through his son Shet (Seth), one son stands out in terms of the hope that he represents:

And Lemech lived one hundred and eighty-two years and he fathered a son. He called his name **Noah** saying: **this one will bring us comfort from our actions and from the sadness of our hands from the earth which has been cursed by God. (Bereishit 5:28,29)**

Why did this son, more than all others, ignite this wave of optimism, this prospect

of deliverance? Why now? Was the name given to this son an expression of hope, a prayer, or was it perhaps a prophecy? And if the latter, did this prophecy, in fact, come to fruition? God's response to Lemech's words is instructive: When He describes mankind's failure, He uses the same language to describe the dashed hopes for the elevation of humanity and to foreshadow the coming destruction:

(6) God regretted that He had made man on the land, and He was saddened in His heart. (7) God said, "I will eradicate man whom I have created from the face of the earth; from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I have regretted that I made them." (8) But Noah found favor in God's eyes.

The name given to Noah was extrapolated from *yenachamenu*, denoting comfort, condolence or consolation – yet God uses a word constructed from the same core letters to describe regret or frustration. Much ink has been spilled explaining the theological difficulty of ascribing regret to the all-knowing, omnipotent God; most commentaries write this difficult phrase off as an anthropomorphism. But all of the philosophical wrangling and squirming is

unnecessary when we read the verse in context, and note that “regret” is a poor translation of the play on words with which God rejects Lemech’s dream/prayer for his son: This child brings neither comfort nor redemption; he will be a part of the destruction. Lemech employed similar wordplay when explaining the significance of his son’s name: Lemech intended for this child to mark a new beginning, to repeal or rescind the curse under which they were living, and the language Lemech uses echoes the language of that curse: Both Adam and Eve are sentenced to different types of *etzev* -“sadness” or “anguish” – and this *etzev* is precisely what Lemech hopes will be banished by the birth of his son Noach.

(16) To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply your **anguish** in pregnancy. In **pain** you will bear children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” (17) To Adam He said, “Because you have listened to your wife’s voice, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground on your behalf. Through **anguish** you will eat of it all the days of your life. (18) And it will yield thorns

and thistles to you; and you will eat the herbage of the field. (19) By the sweat of your brow you will eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Following the linguistic thread, we realize that Lemech thought that this child would bring a change, and the curse¹ meted on Adam² would be expunged:³ “He called his name **Noah** saying: **this one will bring us comfort from our actions and from the sadness of our hands from the earth which has been cursed by God.**” **God thought otherwise. In fact, He seems to “double down” on the curse, bringing mankind even more *etzev*, more pain, more regret, and not comfort.**⁴

What was the catalyst for God’s harsh response? The verses between Noah’s birth and naming and the response of God, provide the answer:

He called his name Noah saying: this one will bring us comfort from our actions and from the sadness of our hands from the earth which has been cursed by God. After the birth of Noah, Lamech lived 595 years and begot sons and daughters. All

the days of Lamech came to 777 years; then he died. When Noah had lived 500 years, Noah begot Shem, Ham, and Yaphet.

Chapter 6 It happened, when men began to multiply upon the surface of the ground, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of the powerful saw that the daughters of man were beautiful, and they took for themselves wives of all that they chose. God said, “My spirit will not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; and his days will be one hundred twenty years.” The *Nefilim* were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of the powerful took with the daughters of man, and they bore them children. They were the mighty men of the ages, men of renown. God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all day long. And God regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. (Chapter 5,6)

The breakdown is identified with sexual violence and corruption, a society without

a moral compass. While Noah will not be a part of the solution, he will be used to facilitate the appropriate punishment.

Why did Lamech have such high hopes with the birth of this child? Was he delusional, out of touch with the reality around him? In fact, he seems to have read the situation more accurately than we might have guessed; the text seems to bear out his optimism. Despite the chaos and corruption around him, Lamech’s son is different:

Noah found favor in the eyes of God. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was an innocent⁵ man, perfect in his generation Noah walked with God.

While the rest of the generation displeased God, Noah pleased God. While the others were guilty, Noah was innocent. While the others ignored the word of God and were not God-fearing, Noah walked with God – but he was not the first to have done so. There was another individual who had walked with God generations before; his name was Hanoch (Enoch), and he was Noah’s great-grandfather.

(18) Yared (Jared) lived one hundred sixty-two years and fathered Hanoch. (19) Yared

lived after he fathered Hanoch eight hundred years, and he fathered sons and daughters. (20) All the days of Yared were nine hundred sixty-two years, and he died. (21) Hanoch lived sixty-five years and fathered Metushelah (Methuselah). (22) Hanoch walked with God after he fathered Metushelah three hundred years, and he fathered sons and daughters. (23) All the days of Hanoch were three hundred sixty-five years. (24) Hanoch walked with God, and he was no more, for God took him.

Hanoch also walked with God, and the result was his disappearance. The nature of his disappearance may help us understand his “walking with God”. Hanoch lives fewer years than the others in his family line, he dies at three hundred and sixty-five, all of his ancestors average a life span of over nine hundred years. Some see him as being so good, or walking with God in such a profound way, that he was too good to be of this world and was returned to Eden – and never died. The word death is not mentioned in his disappearance, rather “he ceased to be, for God took him”. While the Targum Neophiti leaves his disappearance as a mystery,⁶ the Pseudo-

Yonatan says that Hanonch ascended to heaven:

And Hanoch served God in truth and he no longer lived among those who inhabit the earth. For he was taken and went up to heaven by the word before God, who named him Metatron the great scribe. (Pseudo-Yonatan (5:24)

Other commentaries are even more specific: Hanoch was taken away – untouched by death, back to the Garden of Eden.⁷ The curse of death is visited on others, on those who deserve to die; Hanoch does not merit this same fate. He is of a higher order, and is worthy of returning to the Garden, where he lives as Adam before the sin – beyond the reach of death.

The Netziv attributes Hanoch’s fate to the results of religious ecstasy.⁸ Hanoch’s desire to be near God caused his disappearance from this world.⁹ According to this approach, Hanoch achieved spiritual perfection that enabled him to shed the physical constraints of this world and achieve unique proximity to God in the non-physical sphere.

On the other hand, there are those who see Hanoch as far less perfect in his spirituality. Rashi following the Midrashic approach, describes Hanoch as tainted. Although righteous, Hanoch was inconsistent, his spiritual landscape was made up of peaks and valleys. In an act of kindness, God took him before he slipped from the apex of his spiritual peak, before his fall into bad behavior, hence his relatively short life.

AND Hanoch walked [with God] – He was a righteous man, but his mind was easily induced to turn from his righteous ways and to become wicked. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore took him away quickly and made him die before his full time. This is why Scripture uses a different expression when referring to his death by writing "and he was not", meaning, he was not in the world to complete the number of his years.

For God took him – before his time; a similar meaning of "to take" we find in (Yehezkel 24:16), "I take away from you what your eyes desire [by a plague]". (Rashi Bereishit 5:24)¹⁰

Others see the removal of Hanoch as an act to save him from the wickedness of his generation.¹¹

The Seforno offers what may be the most intriguing insight, describing Hanoch and Noah in the same manner:

Both Hanoch and Noah are described as "walking with Elokim" – the name of God that denotes judgment. This very particular phrasing indicates, for many commentaries, that both Noach and Hanoch were innocent of transgression; they broke no laws, committed none of the crimes that were so rampant in their surroundings. However, this statement says nothing about their proactive, positive behavior. We know what they did not do, but we are given no information about what they did do. Nonetheless, the Seforno eschews this interpretation and prefers to understand the idiom of "walking with Elokim" as *imitatio dei*, following the attributes of God.¹²

He walked in the paths pleasing to God in order to rebuke and call to order the people of his time. (Seforno Bereishit 5:22)

He walked in God's way trying to be helpful to others, and to instruct and if necessary to

rebuke them, as our sages pointed out. ... (Seforno 6:9-10)

According to the Seforno, Hanoch and Noach were spiritual twins, both proactively tried to help others by teaching and admonishing, and rebuking when necessary, in an attempt to change the tide of history.

Seforno's approach fails to address one problem: As we noted, both men "walked with Elokim," the Almighty God of Judgment, rather than with the Eternal, the God of Compassion. We must also ask why the ultimate fates of Hanoch and Noach were so different from one another if they were so similar in their spirituality, their goals, their interaction with others.

The Rashbam's comments¹³ invite us to take a step back and consider Noah in the context of his birth. Rashbam explains the hope expressed when Noah was born by drawing our attention to a simple fact that emerges from the text, specifically from the list of births, deaths and the lifespans of Noah's ancestors: Noah was the first person born after the death of Adam.¹⁴ Adam had lived to see eight generations of descendants.

When Noah is born, in the year 1056, his father and grandfather are still alive.¹⁵ His great-grandfather Hanoch was gone – for he alone died (or was taken) young. However, another four generations of ancestors beyond Hanoch are still alive. In other words, Noah was born surrounded by nine generations of people who averaged 900 years of life; most of his ancestors were still alive when Noah was born. For these people, death must have seemed to be extremely rare. Until Adam's death in the year 930, no one had died of "natural causes"; Hevel's murder was of a different order altogether. Death, until that point was not perceived as "natural."

Adam's descendants had heard a rumor about death, but nearly a millennium had gone by and no one had died. We cannot but wonder what sort of impact this might have had on their behavior, and on their lives. One could procrastinate for a hundred years and not feel that an opportunity had slipped away. Multiple generations had arrived on the stage of history; none had exited. And then, perhaps surprisingly, Adam died. His descendants may have seen his death as a personal punishment, fulfillment of God's promise, and assumed that death had run its course; the curse would begin and end

with Adam. A new life came into the world; the child called Noah would bring comfort, and a new world order, free of the stain of sin and the curse of sorrow and death, could begin.¹⁶

There was counter-evidence, warning signs that this was no more than wishful thinking: Adam's son Shet had also died before Noah was born. The rest of Adam's descendants should have understood that Adam's fate was their own, and the curse would be carried by all humanity. They should have understood that, as God had warned, eating from the forbidden tree had brought death into the world and irreversibly altered the human experience. Just as Eve was cursed with the pain of childbirth and that curse was now part and parcel of human procreation, so, too, death was here to stay. Instead, they chose to explain Shet's death on an individual level: Perhaps they preferred to explain Shet's death as the extension of Havah's private punishment. Perhaps seeing her son die was Havah's personal sorrow, a punishment that would begin and end with her. We can imagine them ascribing Shet's death to the curse with which Havah was punished: if she was doomed to bear children in pain, this was surely pain.

Perhaps they all hoped that Noah would cause the pain to be forgotten, and that the punishment of death had already been exacted upon humankind. This was a new world, a world of life – and by extension, a world devoid of responsibility, a world with no need for morality, a world in which everyone would live forever.

What of the one man who had died young, Hanoch? He was a righteous man who died after Adam and before Shet; they could not explain his death.¹⁷ Could it be that they preferred to say that he simply “disappeared?” Perhaps some took this as evidence that “only the good die young” – and concluded that a life of righteousness was not desirable.

The birth of Noah presented a new possibility for engagement with God, and they assumed that this engagement would be on different terms. The curse of the earth would be lifted – and in their minds the curse that hung over Adam's head had run its course. They were to be freed of the sorrow, left to sip the waters of the fountain of youth.

But something else happened instead. One after another, Noah's ancestors perished. By the time the flood arrived in the six hundredth year of his life, Noah was alone,

an orphan; in short order, Noah lost seven generations of ancestors. But that was not the worst of it: Rather than a fountain of youth, a flood covered the earth. Instead of being surrounded by teeming life, Noah was surrounded by death. Life as they had known it – long and self-absorbed – would come to end, and people would begin to live with the end in sight. The flood brought with it the realization that everyone dies – which was a far cry from the reality they had perceived not too long before the rain began to fall.

Instead of being a harbinger of life, Noah experienced the death of his ancestors; with death already in evidence all around him – and only then – he entered the ark. The flood completed what had already begun. The decadent generations who believed they were impervious to God's judgment, including the poisonous progeny of Cain, were washed away.¹⁸ They thought they were beyond *Elokim's* judgment, Noah knew he wasn't. He "walked with *Elokim*" – he always kept the aspect of God's judgment in his consciousness as he went through life.

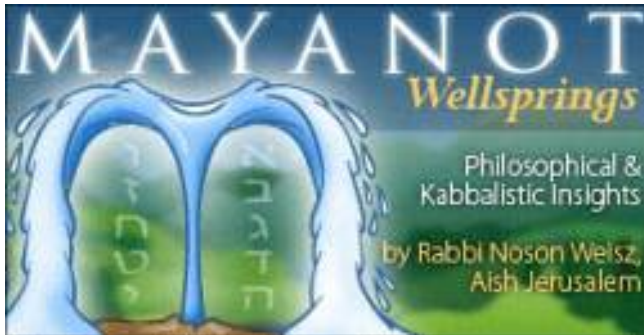
Noah's birth had brought hope for change, but those who were washed away had failed to appreciate the nature of the

change.¹⁹ After the flood a new world did, indeed emerge, a world in which people would live shorter lives, but hopefully honest, productive, decent lives. After the flood, everyone finally understood that everyone dies.

1. See Hizkuni Bereishit 5:29.
2. There are some who say that it is the curse of Kayin which disappear – as would the entire line of Kayin – with the flood, see Bkhor Shur, and Aderet Eliyahu on Bereishit 5:29.
3. Rashi explains that the blessing of Noah – or the manner he would counter the curse, was by creating a plow, which would make the dreary work of the land more manageable. THIS WILL COMFORT US – He will ease from off us (יִרְחֲמֵנוּ) the toil of our hands. For until Noah came people had no agricultural instruments and he prepared such for them. The earth had brought forth thorns and thistles when they sowed wheat in consequence of the curse imposed upon Adam Harishon: in the days of Noah, however, this ceased (Tanchuma 1:1:11). This is what is meant by the word יִרְחֲמֵנוּ (viz., יִרְחֵנוּ). If, however, you do not explain it in this manner, but from the root נָחַם "to comfort", then the meaning you give to this expression (connecting it with the idea of "comfort") will have no application to the name נֹחַ, and you would have to call him מְנַחֵם "Comforter".
4. The Rosh cites a teaching from Rav Yehudah HaChasid that prior to Noah people's hands were different and the joints did not provide the same dexterity. With fingers that could not bend, the opposable thumb was of little service. Also see Hadar Zkainim.
5. As per the translation of the Targum Unkolus.
6. See Targum Yerushalmi Neophiti 5:24.
7. See Derech Eretz 1:18, also see Ralbag Bereishit 5:23; Radak Bereishit 5:24; Hizkuni Bereishit 5:24.
8. See Haamek Davar Berishit 5:24
9. Rashi, in his comments regarding the death of Ben Azzai, uses a similar description, which seems the source for the thoughts of the Netziv. Ironically (or not) Hanoch – who according to some opinions morphs into Metataton, also has a role in the Pardes story. For more on this see "Crowns on the Letters" page 222 note 8.
10. Rashi is based upon Bereishit Rabbah 25:1.
11. See Bchor Shor, Bereishit 5:24.
12. See Dvarim 13:5 (also see Dvarim 28:9); Talmud Bavli 14a (and Shabbat 133b).
13. There is some intrigue in reconstructing the commentary of the Rashbam to these chapters of Bereishit – which is beyond the scope of this essay. For these comments of the Rashbam see the version in the Bar Ilan Responsa project, which seem based on

R' Haim Paltiel 5:29. However see the version in AlHatorah.org, and the explanatory note at the end of the citation <https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Bereishit/5.29#e0n6>.

14. Also see the Riva, and Hadar Zikanim.
15. See Seder Olam Chapter 1.
16. See the comments of the Rosh, he says (in the name of the Pesikta) that Noah was seen as a replacement for Adam.
17. He died of natural causes, with no explanation; see Ibn Ezra Bereishit 5:24.
18. See Bchor Shor Bereishit 5:29.
19. Rabbi Meir taught that death was good; see Bereishit Rabbah 9:5. In (the margin of) the Torah of Rabbi Meir they found it written 'and behold everything was very good and behold death is good.'



Paradise Lost

This week's Torah portion -- which relates the story of the great flood and of the events that lead to the building of the Tower of Babel -- contains this seemingly positive declaration:

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. (Genesis 11:1)

It sounds like peace on earth, good will to all men, utopia.

Indeed, it was peace on earth, but a war against heaven.

Rashi tells us that the people of the earth had united around the following idea:

"God has no right to take the heavens for Himself; let us go up to heaven and wage war with Him." (See Breishis raba, 38,6.)

This very strange idea is presented as the underlying theme of the Generation of the Dispersal. The consequence of this war with God was the splitting of mankind into seventy different languages and cultures:

And God dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because it was there that God confused the language of the whole earth, and from there God scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:8-9).

WAR AGAINST GOD?

How can we understand the idea of waging war against God? It is one thing to be skeptical about His existence, but to believe in God and yet decide to fight Him? How could a rational human being possibly adopt such an attitude?

Moreover, what is the war about? Rashi says it is over the fact that God assumed exclusive possession over the heavens. But

what does man want with the heavens? He surely has no desire to live there. After all, man's habitat is the earth, and it is the earth that is his focus of interest. Rare is the human being who is interested in departing it prematurely to obtain a taste of heaven. Why then, should man want to wage war to gain control over the heavens, even assuming he had the power to aspire to such a dominion?

This question points the way to the answer and gives us the key to understand the dispersal. Man wants control over the heavens because it is the heavens that provide the inputs he requires to enrich his earthly life. The essence of belief in God is the knowledge that it is God who is the source of all being and energy. A created world is not assembled out of pre-existing materials. It is fashioned out of Divine energy. Even the "natural processes" of such a world must all be fueled by fresh inputs of Divine energy.

This constant input of Divine energy is called the "heavens" in the very first verse in Genesis: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* "Heavens" is the generic term used by the Torah to express the idea of "giver" (or energy source), whereas the earth is the generic term for the idea of "receiver."

If God controls the heavens, the input of Divine energy that maintains the earth is supplied on His terms, according to conditions set by Him. If man controls the heavens, then this input of Divine energy follows the dictates of man. As man has no supernatural powers, and cannot directly dictate to the Divine energy and tell it what to do, practically speaking, man's control of the heavens translates into a universe that runs entirely according to natural law. For as long as the Divine energy is distributed according to the dictates of natural law, man has total control over all the inputs into his universe.

This is due to the fact that all processes that are governed by natural law can be brought under man's control. He can study natural law and understand it, and he can, therefore, make the universe do his bidding in ways that he can predict and control. When he fully unravels the mysteries of natural law -- and that is simply a matter of time given human intelligence -- he can find solutions to all his problems. But if God is in control of the heavens, man can never be the master of his own destiny. Ultimately it is God that makes all the decisions that involve the distribution of the Divine energy in the

universe and man is always subject to His will.

WINNING WITH HARMONY

Now we understand what the war is about. But we still cannot fathom how man can possibly dream of winning such a war. After all, by definition Divine energy belongs to God, so how can man possibly aspire to control it?

The answer is surprising: Man's weapon against God is the maintenance of social harmony and the establishment of world peace.

To appreciate this we have to realize that world history has a pattern. The Generation of the Dispersal learned how to conduct its war with God from the Generation of the Flood. The Generation of the Flood also rebelled against God's dominion. But the Torah itself informs us that it was not this rebellion that brought on the world's destruction. The immediate cause of the destruction was the oppression of man by his fellow.

Now the earth had become corrupt before God; and the world had become filled with oppression. (Genesis 6:12)

The Talmud learns from here that although the earth was totally corrupted by idolatry and immorality, the fate of the flood generation was only sealed for destruction because of acts of robbery and oppression. (Sanhedrin 108a)

God is endlessly tolerant of man's sins, but He listens to the cry of the oppressed, as we are taught:

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. If you cause him [the orphan] pain ... if he shall cry out to Me, I shall surely hear his outcry. My wrath shall blaze and I shall kill you by the sword, and your wives will be widows and your children orphans. (Exodus 22:21-23)

God's anger must be ignited before He will consent to sit in judgment, and it only blazes when the cry of the oppressed reaches His ears. Once God assumes the seat of justice, He will administer retribution for all of man's sins, but unless He is prompted to do so by the cries of the oppressed, man can, in effect, do as he likes as God will never agree to sit in judgment.

This principle finds its strongest expression in the story of the destruction

of Sodom and Gomorrah, the twin cities who are metaphors for evil and its consequences:

Now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful towards God, exceedingly. (Genesis 13:13)

Yet, despite their evil, God only brought them to justice because of the outcry of an oppressed maiden.

"I will descend and see: if they act in accordance with this outcry, then destruction!" (Genesis 18:21)

The Midrash explains that this outcry, which prompted God to sit in judgment, was the scream released by Lot's daughter Plitas as she was cruelly murdered by the populace for having committed the crime of secretly feeding a pauper. (Pirkei d'R'Elazar, Ch.25)

The same thing had happened in the time of the generation that preceded the flood, and it was this kind of cruelty of man against man that led God to destroy the earth.

A LESSON LEARNED

But mankind internalized the lesson of the flood. The Generation of the Dispersal was exceptional in the excellence of its inter-

personal relationships. The "common purpose" referred to in the verse quoted above is interpreted by the Midrash to imply social unity and harmony. (See Bereishis Rabba, 38,6.) People had learned that as long as they did not oppress others, they could do as they wished. As long as no outcry issued from the oppressed, God would leave them to their own designs.

Indeed, they were substantially correct. In comparing the Generation of the Dispersal with Generation of the Flood, the Midrash finds the former more culpable. Yet God did not destroy them; He merely scattered them. God hates dissension but loves peace. He can never find it in His heart to treat people who are good to each other very harshly. (See Rashi, 11:8.)

Having drawn the broad outlines of the story of the dispersal, let us try to understand some of the motivations involved. A good way to bring the underlying concepts down to earth is to study the current unfortunate situation that prevails in Israel.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN ISRAEL

Israel entered a very risky "peace process" with the Palestinians. It kept offering ever greater concessions in the hope of

achieving such peace over a period of six long years without seriously insisting on any sort of reciprocity from the other side. Just when it seemed at Camp David that a lasting peace was finally in sight, Arafat turned his back on the entire process and began shooting at Israel with the guns that the Israeli government had so trustingly given him. Were the Israeli leaders stupid? What induced them to take such enormous risks and make so many one-sided concessions without any guarantee of return?

The answer is simple.

For the person who does not believe that ultimately, all solutions come from God, it is intolerable to remain in a problematic situation for which there does not appear to be a solution. The Israeli establishment had to believe that there was a rational solution to the problem of coexistence with the Palestinians, a solution they could arrive at by themselves. As this involved making peace with Arafat they forced themselves to believe that he was a credible peace partner despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The alternative to such a belief was to accept the fate of living in a country where there is no foreseeable prospect of peace,

and where the Israeli people will never fully control their own fate. Israel would be forced to place its trust in God. Such a proposition is unacceptable to "modern" man. To tolerate life, he must feel that he is the master of his own fate and is able to solve his own problems.

The proposition of entrusting one's fate to God was no more acceptable to ancient man. He also was unwilling to lead an existence that he couldn't completely control. Hence his desire to wrest the control of the heavens out of the hands of God.

THE MISSING PIECE

But there is still a missing piece here. Modern man is truly unable to rely on God, as he has been taught not to believe in Him, but ancient man went to war with the God he recognized not only as the creator of his world but the supplier of all the energy that it takes to run it. Why didn't this belief make a difference?

To fully understand, we must learn some more human history.

In the prelude to the flood, the Torah contains the following passage:

And it came to pass that when man began to increase upon the

face of the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of Elohim saw that the daughters of man were good and they took themselves wives from whomever they chose. (Genesis 6:1-2)

The commentators explain this title the "sons of *Elohim*" in various ways; this is the interpretation offered by Nachmanides:

Following the sin of Adam, who was himself fashioned by the hands of God personally, and his banishment from the Garden of Eden, there were two types of offspring in the world. The members of Adam's immediate family and their descendants retained an aspect of godliness about them, but the rest of mankind were all ordinary human beings. This aspect of godliness retained by the sons of Adam inspired such awe among the rest of mankind that no one dared to oppose these godlike beings, and consequently these people did as they liked until they were all destroyed by the flood.

When Noah, the sole survivor of the flood emerged from the ark, the Torah describes him thus:

Noah, the man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard. (Genesis 9:20)

Noah was a "man of the earth." There were no more sons of *Elohim* on the planet. There was nothing godlike about Noah. He was a man of the earth. Contrast this with the Torah's description of Moses:

And this is the blessing that Moses, the man of God, bestowed upon the children of Israel (Deut. 33:1)

THE TURNING POINT

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, in his work *Derech Hashem*, "Path of God," explains that the turning point in history over this issue happened at the time of the Generation of the Dispersal. Until then it was possible for anyone to choose to be a man of God, and return to the original lofty level upon which Adam was created. Whoever chose to do so would have descendants who were also men of God.

All of the seventy families of mankind had this option open to them. Until the dispersal, they were all able to climb out of the Noahide status of being "men of earth" and could all become "men of God." This was the heroic age of human history,

the age of archetypes and patriarchs and the door was open to all.

But only Abraham chose this path. In Genesis (14:13) he is referred to as *Ivri*, a word that means "bank" or "side" in Hebrew, because the entire world was on one side and he was on the other. (See Bereishis Rabba, 42,8.)

Had others chosen this path, all of humanity would have been treated by God in exactly the same manner as the descendants of Abraham, God's Torah would have become the legacy of all human beings, and all human offspring would have been born into a flourishing God-man covenant.

In fact, the unity achieved by mankind prior to the dispersal was precisely over this question of choosing to be "men of the earth" and not "men of God." Mankind was unified by its universal desire to wage war against God.

TWO KINDS OF BELIEVERS

Belief in God does not shield one from becoming a "man of the earth." There was no greater believer than Noah himself who was the first to bear this description. To be a man of God, one has to decide to live with God, to base one's life around the

God-man relationship. But one whose life is based on such a relationship is never the master of his own fate.

There is little difference between the modern thinker who is skeptical of God's existence and the ancient believer who rejects the idea of basing his life around forming a relationship with God. Such a believer wants to consign God to remote history shrouded in the mists of creation and consequently make Him irrelevant, or to the distant future when the Messiah will finally proclaim the coming of a new world order, and therefore make Him not yet relevant. Bottom line: this kind of believer wants the world of the present that he inhabits to be totally under his own control.

World history was fixed by the dispersal. When the seventy nations were frozen into the mold of "men of the earth," God withdrew His presence from them. Lacking the opposition to the common enemy -- which God's presence had represented -- they no longer had a focus for their unity and so they split apart into their natural divisions. They differentiated into the seventy human families that were always destined to descend from Adam, and being "men of the earth," they each

went their own way and found their own spot on the planet.

The key to human unity and world peace was left in the hands of Abraham, the only human of that time who elected to become a "man of God."

In fact the Midrash (in Bereishis raba, 38,6) points this out in a most dramatic way. The rabbis understand that the commonality of purpose referred to was directed against the other principles of unity -- God and Abraham. Against Abraham they declared, "There is no need to concern ourselves about him. He is obviously a sterile mule. He presents no danger as he has no future. His ideas will die along with him." Against God they declared war using their own unity as explained above.

Well this sterile mule has managed to make a great noise in the world after all. The line of the "men of God" he established is still flourishing. If only it could manage to unify as well.



The Fruits of Indulgence

What exactly did the people of the Generation of the Flood (*Dor Hamabul*) do to deserve such a dreadful fate? The Torah is quite explicit on this point. "And the earth was degenerate before the Lord, and the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis, 6:11). They were corrupt, degenerate, violent. They reached the outer limits of perversion, affecting even the animals and the land itself. We can well understand when society becomes so depraved and incorrigible, it is time to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh start.

But the Midrash tells us something entirely different (*Bereishis Rabbah* 32:2). The men of the Generation of the Flood used to take two wives. One was designated to bear children, the other to keep her husband company. The first was forced to live in seclusion, in a state of virtual widowhood while her husband was still alive. The second was given medications that would make her barren. She would sit beside her husband, heavily made up, and entertain him. This is inferred from the verse in *Iyov* (24:21), "He

encourages the barren woman that does not give birth, but he gives no benefit to the widow." Rashi quotes this Midrash in *Bereishis* (4:19).

Now, we would certainly not argue that this sort of practice reflected the highest levels of spirituality. In fact, it was certainly an indication of a high level of self-indulgence. But was this such a terrible sin that virtually the entire human race had to be wiped out? Was this such an abysmal level of human corruption that the world had to be inundated and obliterated by the Flood?

The answer is that this Midrash is not providing a picture of antediluvian society in its final degenerate form. Rather, it is revealing to us the root cause of the precipitous decline of society. How does society fall so low that it is defined by pervasive degeneracy, theft and violence? By making the unchecked pursuit of personal pleasure the ultimate value.

Eat, drink and be merry. Have a good time. Enjoy yourself. Live for today. Self-indulgence. Gratification. When these are the values of society, when the moral compass goes haywire, the road leads straight down. Today, people may limit themselves to made-up, barren pleasure wives, but tomorrow they will inevitably expand their horizons. Eventually, they will turn their greedy eyes to unexplored illicit indulgences and all sorts of other acts of perversion and immorality. It is only a matter of time before it happens. The two-wife system led to the "degenerate world filled with violence" that triggered the Flood.

Unfortunately, we have a vivid illustration of this process in our own times. Look at what has

happened in the past few decades. As soon as the society opened the door to permissiveness and self-indulgence, it went into a sharp downward spiral. Morality has become a thing of the past. Family life is disintegrating. Respect for authority and civic responsibility are just about nonexistent. Drugs and alcohol take over at a very young age. All that matters is a good time. People measure the value of their lives by the number of pleasure buttons they have managed to push.

This insight allows us to understand a rather puzzling passage in the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 36:3). The Torah tells us (9:20) that after the Flood, "Noach, the man of the earth, profaned himself and planted a vineyard." The Sages observe that Noach, who had originally been described (6:9) as "a righteous and perfect man in his generations," was now described as a lowly "man of the earth." In contrast, Moshe was originally described (2:19) as "an Egyptian man" and is eventually described (*Devarim* 33:2) as "a man of the Lord." Moshe went up, while Noach went down. And all because he planted a vineyard.

What is so terrible about planting a vineyard? All right, it would have been better to plant some wheat or string beans to provide some basic levels of nourishment. Noach was probably off the mark in choosing to start with a vineyard. But how did Noach "profane himself"? Was planting a vineyard such a dreadful crime?

Indeed it was. By planting a vineyard before anything else, Noach showed that he had not fully learned the lesson of the Flood. He saw the end result of many long years of degeneracy - the



Noach (Genesis 6:9-11:32) *advanced compendium*

perversion, the immorality, the violence - but he did not penetrate to the root causes. He failed to see the whole picture. He did not recognize that it had all begun with some supposedly harmless self-indulgence. He did not recognize that the vineyard, the self-indulgence of intoxicating wines, was the symbol for the downward spiral that led to the Flood.

If there was one thing he should not have done after such a Flood, it was to plant a vineyard.

**Get more great parsha
content:
[aish.com/weekly-
torah-portion](http://aish.com/weekly-torah-portion)**