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בס"ד

Parashat Noah Part III After the Flood

1. "You and Your Wife"

In his instructions to Noah to enter the ark, G-d specified, "you, your sons, your wife and your sons' wives" (Gen. 6:18), segregating the genders. The Midrash understood this to imply that they should refrain from sexual relations in the ark; while the world was being destroyed it would be most inappropriate to seek personal gratification and premature to engage in procreation (*Ber. Rab.* 31:17). G-d's instructions regarding disembarking, as expected, reflected the new situation "Exit the ark, you, your wife, your sons and your sons' wives" (Gen. 8:16), coupling husband and wife, understood as permitting them to resume marital relations. It appears likely that this Midrash expresses the intent of the textual variation.

Concerning their actual entry to the ark, we are informed that Noah and his family did so segregated by gender (7:7, 13), in accordance with instructions. When it came to disembarking, however, surprisingly, we are told that they exited as they entered, segregated by gender (8:18)! What does it imply that they reentered the world in divergence with G-d's directive?

One wonders whether the Torah here implies that an aspect of G-d's aspiration for humankind is for the husband-wife relationship to be the primary family unit, as opposed to the father-son connection, but that it had not yet become the standard. (Indeed, the transformation to it from the patriarchal model required an extensive development process.) G-d had previously declared His intention that the husband-wife relationship be paramount in association with His creation of woman. When presenting her to man – as a natural complement to him – He stated, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and cling to

his wife and become one flesh" (2:24). (This verse also seems to support monogamy as the ideal marriage relationship.)

It is a major innovation to designate wedlock as a turning point in life when a man should become disengaged from parents and bond with his wife to merge into one unit. It stands in opposition to the concept of marriage being essentially defined as a man bringing a woman into the established family order of his father, where she must find her place in the hierarchy, often struggling to achieve self-expression. The primacy of the husband-wife bond implies restriction of the raw, native power of patrimony and parochial custom in favor of the companionship dimension with mutual accommodation and the growth potential latent in the new relationship.

The father-son relationship is fundamentally based on biology with a significant component of self-love while that of husband-wife is expected to stem from sociality with equity. Women's role is immeasurably enhanced as she becomes a partner with her husband, the two investing together in building a family. When married sons remain attached to parents beyond the obligations of honoring, revering and assisting, impinging on their relationships with their wives, the latter may become degraded and relegated to a subservient position. Under such conditions moral education of the young is crimped and adaptation to the varied circumstances that arise in life is limited.

Perhaps this consideration provides some background to the episode of Noah's debasement and dishonor in becoming intoxicated and lying uncovered in his tent and for whatever violation it was that ensued (9:21-24). How was it that he was alone? Where was his wife, his *עֵזֶר כְּנֻגְדּוֹ*, "fitting helper" (2:18), who might

have been of assistance to him in various ways that could have precluded the incident that transpired? We will return to this when discussing Ham's transgression.

2. The New World Order

Upon exiting the ark, Noah's first act was to build an altar and sacrifice *'olot* from the pure animals and birds as thanksgiving to Hashem, a conclusion of sorts to the great undertaking. (A celebratory "thanksgiving" offering of the order of what is described in Leviticus 7 was not relevant since he was not as yet permitted to consume animal flesh.) Noah's extraordinary comportment and dedication to Hashem (in his life's work) found such great favor in His eyes that *וַיִּרְחַח ה' אֶת רִיחַ הַגִּיחָח* ("Hashem smelled the pleasant fragrance") and declared that He will "not again...smite all life" as He had done (8:21). In the previous world order man's widespread disobedience was able to prompt G-d to destroy all life. That was now changed and Divine justice would work differently. Thus, Noah's superlative efforts prompted G-d to affirm a positive principle of life qua life that will set a new direction for the course of human history (see our previous study).

Ongoing regularity in nature was now to be the rule. Henceforth, Hashem declared, "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter and day and night shall not cease" (8:22). These pronouncements constitute a major manifestation of the monotheistic principle, for only a sole, omnipotent and eternal G-d, not ever subject to any other force, can make such promises concerning the various phenomena of nature. His pledge that He will not destroy the world and will maintain constancy in nature constitutes the immediate backdrop for His Covenant with humankind, which is the subject of the following passage. His commitment makes it more feasible for man to appreciate monotheism and commit himself to working toward bettering the world for his contemporaries and progeny in accordance with Divine will. Man now knows that his toil will not be in vain.

Before getting to the Covenant proper, G-d articulated several other details pertinent to the new order. Following His promise of regularity in nature, He blesses man and declares *פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ* ("be

fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" 9:1). In this clause He employs the identical five words He addressed to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, thus alluding to the concept that the new status replaces the original creation. But there are to be significant changes, "concessions" made to man.

The clause that follows the blessing of "be fruitful and multiply..." in Genesis 1 implies that man was to possess tranquil dominion over all creatures: "subdue it [the earth] and rule over" the fish, birds, and all creatures that tread upon the land (1:28). In the new order it is different. Following "be fruitful and multiply..." comes "the fear and dread of you shall be upon all land creatures, upon all birds of heaven, in all that treads upon the earth...[all] are given into your hands" (9:2). The new world is not projected to be as harmonious as might have been hoped for after creation. The idealistic, vegetarian mode of life (1:29-30) is no longer to be the order. It is replaced by permission for man to partake of the flesh of all subhuman creatures, "like vegetation I give these all to you (9:3). (At this point there is no distinction as to species. Such limitations come onto the scene only with the Lawgiving to Israel.) However, there is an important proviso – man must respect the sanctity of life by abstaining from the flesh of living animals and from blood, the symbol of life.

Finally, addressing human life, G-d mandated the principle that man (through a human court) must demand the life of whoever took the life of another human being. In accordance with ancient Near Eastern covenant protocol, with the stipulations in place, the stage was set to contract the essential part of a covenant.

Thus, in addition to substituting a monotheistic world-view for the pagan notions found in the ancient flood stories, the Torah narrative highlights the value of life, the infinite value of human life and human accountability for a just society.

The narrative also subtly addresses an issue of theodicy: How is it that a world often corrupt continues receiving G-d's great bounty and continues living life as usual? A partial answer is that in some areas G-d had decided to be ever-patient with mankind, providing constancy in nature and looking for improvement over the long term.

3. Concerning Ham's Sin

At some point while engaged in agricultural activity, Noah – now described as “man of the soil” – planted a vineyard (9:20). The phraseology **וַיִּזְחַל נֹחַ...וַיִּטַע כֶּרֶם** (“Noah initiated...and planted a vineyard”) appears to be stating that he originated the cultivation of the vine and apparently the attendant production of wine. (This is comparable to the other Genesis attestations of the **ל-ה-ל-ל** stem to signify “beginning” [4:26; 6:1; 10:8; 11:6] and similar to the notations of other initiators [4:20-22].) Hence, presumably not knowing the powerful effects of wine “he drank from the wine and became intoxicated” (9:20) and in this condition fell asleep in his tent in an uncovered state. (We are incidentally taught the severe potential harmful consequences of alcohol and drunkenness.)

“Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness” (**וַיִּרְאֵה...אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו**) and, if we interpret “saw” literally, instead of covering him and keeping the matter to himself, left him uncovered and related what he had seen to his two brothers (9:22). Walking backwards, they respectfully covered their father while averting their gaze. They did not see their father's nakedness.

Ham's reprehensible behavior, intruding into his father's private domain and publicizing the matter, caused great disgrace and humiliation to Noah. It represents a serious rebellion against his authority and leadership and struck a grievous blow against family values and unity. The transgression was particularly egregious considering that Noah was a man dedicated to G-d whose human vulnerability, unintentionally, had been temporarily exposed.

Upon awakening, Noah discovers what transpired. He realizes that one who so behaves could not be given a prominent, independent role in the plans foreseen for his sons. Envisioning a particularly important future situation, he curses Ham's youngest son Canaan, with whom Ham was closely identified – indeed, he was described in this passage and previously as, “Ham, the father of Canaan.” Although the land of Canaan was part of Ham's patrimony, this passage foreshadows the dispersal and subjugation of the Canaanites in favor of a nation that will bring Noah's values to flourish.

Reading about an early **בֶּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵה**, a wayward and rebellious son (albeit an adult), we are reminded of the Torah's law regarding a thoroughly disobedient son (Deut. 21:18). There, the Sages saw the Torah hinting at the cause of the son's problems in the circumstances of the immediately preceding passage. When parental unity is lacking and a mother's position is weak – in that case when the father was married to two wives, one loved and one hated and they are vying over the inheritance rights to be accorded the firstborn (v. 15) – children cannot be brought up properly. The result may be a wayward and rebellious son (*Tanḥuma, Ki Tese 1*; although the context is midrashic, this explanation may be *peshat*, for it is very likely that a factor in the sequence of biblical passages may be a “stream of consciousness” connectedness). Is it possible that in the Noah narrative the Torah intimates that the divergence from G-d's plans for the husband-wife relationship played some role in the unfortunate consequences? As pointed out in our previous study, we wonder, where was Noah's wife, his **עֵצֶר כְּנָגְדוֹ**?

There is some textual indication that Ham's sin was not merely having “seen” his father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine, he realized what his young son “did” to him, a verb more consistent with a concrete act than is gazing. The Hebrew term for Noah being uncovered – **וַיִּתְגַּל** – recalls Leviticus 18, where the root “uncover,” as in **לֹא תִגְלֶה עֶרְוַתָּהּ** (“Do not uncover her nakedness”) is part of the standard euphemistic formula for prohibited sexual relations. Perhaps **וַיִּרְאֵה חָם אֶבִי כִּנְעַן אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו** is a euphemistic reference to Ham performing a sexual act on his father. It should be noted that the euphemistic phrase **וַיִּתְגַּל עֶרְוַת אָבִיו גְּלָהּ** (“He uncovered his father's nakedness” Lev. 20:11), refers to a sexual act with the father's wife, an interpretation that does not fit the context here.

It should be borne in mind that in Leviticus 18 the prohibited sexual acts are depicted as the lecherous practice of the Canaanites that defiled the land and because of which the land spewed them out, allowing Israel to supplant them in it.

In the Talmud, Rab and Shemuel disagreed: “One said he castrated him and one said he performed a homosexual act with him” (*b. Sanh. 70a*). Despite the aggadic derivations applied to the dispute, it appears

that they are debating what was the basic negative characteristic of Canaanite society that marked it for displacement by Israel. The former opinion takes the allegory to be positing greed, which led to violence to assure that Noah would not have any additional children to share the inheritance with, as the critical failure. The other opinion considers sexual immorality as having been paramount.

A textual difficulty with these latter interpretations is that when Shem and Japheth cover their father, “the nakedness of their father they did not see” (Gen. 9:23). What they did not see appears to be the counterpart to what Ham did see, implying a non-euphemistic usage of “saw.” This subject requires much further study.

4. The Tower of Babel

Post-diluvian society developed many undesirable characteristics and G-d’s dissatisfaction is expressed in the story of the Tower of Babel.

True, after the Flood, the world did not exhibit the prevalent and blatant wickedness and lawlessness that had prompted G-d to sweep away the old order. Law codes that officially acknowledged the inestimable value of human life and enshrined standards of proper behavior for mankind were in place (Gen. 9:4-6). Judicial systems were established providing society with a degree of law enforcement and a measure of accountability for wrongdoing. However, despite the improvement from what preceded the Flood, and the presence of some great individuals, man in general was developing in a negative manner.

In His blessing to Noah and his sons, as previously was the case with Adam, G-d had expressed His desire that they should “fill the earth.” His will for the proper human society presumably entailed people spreading outward, settling the land and establishing diverse nations and cultures. לֹא תִהְיֶה בְרֵאשִׁית לְיִצְחָק (“He did not create it [the earth] to be a wasteland but formed it to be settled” Isa. 45:18). His glory is to be recognized in all places and locations, מְלֹא כָּל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ (Isa. 6:3). Noah’s sons set such a process in motion as attested in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10).

At some point, when the land was of one language and few words, in a migration from the East, people

settled in the Shinar region (in Mesopotamia, in the fertile plains between the great rivers) and decided to remain there. This is the background presented in the text.

The story of the Tower of Babel appears to be a literary parody that was designed to deride the culture that was symbolized by the construction of vast temple-towers – ziggurats – throughout Mesopotamia. These towers – seen as imitation mountains – soared above the other buildings of their region. The most prominent of them was in the city of Babel (Babylon). They were erected with great effort and technological skill and reflected the beliefs that the summit was the meeting place between earth and heaven and that the gods manifest themselves there. This general information is not mentioned in the Torah but known by the readers of former times.

In thoroughly frustrating the builders of *Migdal Babel*, Hashem repudiated the theology that stood behind the society whose norms were antithetical to those promoted by the Torah. The capital city, Babel, came in for exceptionally sharp ridicule. The Torah expounded its name as derived from being the scene of the debacle where Hashem confounded their language, בִּי שָׂם בְּלִל הָ שִׁפְתַי כָּל הָאָרֶץ, as opposed to acknowledging its meaning as *bab el* the “gate of god,” as the Babylonians took it.

The Torah reveals that the great engineering feat of the Tower illustrated that man was devoting his energy and continuously advancing skills to self-aggrandizing human enterprise. The edifice illustrated man’s overweening pride and arrogance; it demonstrated that he was enamored of his own self-importance. Man was unwilling to separate himself from the materialistic lifestyle he had established with its emphasis on the primacy of the pursuit of glory. In doing so, man exploited religion to serve his selfish goals. The builders aspired to have the Tower’s “head reach the heavens” such that it should advance their “reputation” or be a monument to themselves – בְּנֵי שָׂם – all at the expense of consciousness of G-d’s sovereignty and His will that entails a commitment to a righteous and just society.* G-d saw that it was necessary to upset their plans and humble their misguided ambition, and so He confounded their language and scattered them over the earth. Abraham soon comes onto the scene and begins another

opportunity for mankind.

The nine-verse Tower passage manifests extraordinary artistic features. The first segment (vv. 1-4), which contains man's plans, and the second segment (vv. 5-9), which comprises Hashem's response, possess an unusual degree of symmetry and literary correspondence. They contain a substantial chiasmic structure (AB–B'A') of eight pair of correlating components that surround a central statement plus literary strings in straightforward order of corresponding word usages (similarity or reversal). A significant degree of assonance and other types of word play are also present.

The chiasmus is comprised of the following:

1. Verse 1 begins with “all the land” while verse 9 ends with “all the land.”
2. “One language and few words” of verse 1 is contrasted with “Hashem confounded the language” of verse 9.
3. “Shinar” of verse 2 is paralleled with “Babel” of verse 9.
4. “They settled there” of verse 2 has its undoing in “Hashem scattered them from there” in verse 8.
5. “A man said to his fellow” of verse 3 has its opposite in “a man cannot understand the speech of his fellow” of verse 7.
6. The *הִבְנֵה* of the builders in verse 4 is answered by Hashem's *הִבְנֵה* of verse 7.
7. “Let us build for ourselves” of verse 4 is associated with “that man had built” of verse 5.
8. “A city and tower” of verse 4 is paralleled by “the city and tower” of verse 5.

“Hashem came down” of verse 5, which begins the passage's second portion is also the chiasmus center. Thus, His reversal of man's designs is reflected within the skeletal structure of the passage.

The Tower of Babel narrative immediately precedes the selective genealogy of Shem's sons that delineates the line that leads to Abraham (then called Abram), thus highlighting the linkage to him. The Torah then proceeds with the latter's story. The tower builders wanted to *נַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ שֵׁם* (“make a name for ourselves”), promote their personal glory. The mighty antediluvian *nefilim* who were basically destroyed with the Flood were *אֲנָשֵׁי הַשֵּׁם* (“men who possessed the name” [Gen. 6:4]), individuals of great prominence. But it is Noah's son *שֵׁם*, progenitor of Abraham and Israel, whose descendants truly succeed and it is to the righteous Abraham that G-d grants the blessing *וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ וְאֶשְׂמְךָ*, “I will make your name great” (Gen. 12:2). Shortly thereafter, Abraham builds an altar and calls *בְּשֵׁם ה'*, “in the name of Hashem” (12:8), the opposite of the tower builders who really cared only about their own names.

Endnote

* Isaiah reveals such inner thoughts of vanity in his parody of the king of Babylon: “You thought in your heart ‘I will ascend to the heavens, I will set my throne above the stars of G-d, I will sit on the mount of assembly (of the gods)...I will be comparable to the Most High’” (Isa. 14:13-14).

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