

What Did Ham Do?

Noah, the man of the land, started [rebuilding after the flood] by planting a vineyard. He drank of the wine, became inebriated, and exposed himself naked in his tent. Ham, Canaan's father, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside the tent. Shem and Yephet took the robe on their shoulders, walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness. [Unlike Ham] they faced backward and therefore did not see their father's nakedness. (Gen 9:20-23)

The Torah could not have been clearer when describing Ham's sin, yet the commentators refused to accept the Torah's words at face value. Maybe they felt that seeing one's father naked does not deserve a mention in the Torah, or maybe because Noah's reaction, an eternal curse cast upon Canaan, Ham's youngest son, would seem exaggerated if Ham only walked in on him:

When Noah woke up from his drunkenness, he knew what his youngest son did to him. He said, cursed be Canaan, let him be a slave of slaves to his brothers. He said, blessed is YHWH, the God of Shem, and let Canaan be his slave. May God widen the boundaries of Yephet and may he dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be their slave. (Gen. 9:24-27)

So, what did Ham do? Rashi says that he either castrated his father or violated him. The first is a Midrashic commentary, and the second is Rashi's own, based on the assumption that Noah was in the tent with his wife, and that Ham interrupted their actions (Sifte Hakhamim, *ibid.*).

Thank God, my elementary school teachers were wise enough not to teach every single Rashi commentary. Not so my middle and high school. We studied and were tested weekly on all Rashi's commentaries, and I was deeply upset by this one (and numerous others, especially in Genesis, which would be more at home in Canterbury's Tales). So, before offering an interpretation, a word of advice to parents: please make sure you know what your children are taught in Hebrew school. Make sure it is age appropriate, and that if it is a Torah commentary, the teacher made an effort to choose one which can benefit the students, and did not just follow obediently one commentator.

Now to the text. The Torah went out of its way to say that Ham saw his father naked. That's it. He saw him naked and his brothers did not. The Torah emphasizes that the brothers did not do

what Ham did, and the only way to read it is as suggested here, since other readings will render the phrase, and the praise, illogical. Let us replace Ham's undefined act with Rashi's two commentaries:

Ham castrated his father... Shem and Yephet did not castrate their father...

Ham violated his father... Shem and Yephet did not violate their father...

See? It does not make sense! What makes sense is that Noah was devastated after the flood. He understood that he was callous and selfish in not caring for humanity. He did not ask for mercy or pardon, and simply built his little lifeboat to survive the flood in his own bubble. Upon emerging from the ark, he was not welcomed by rolling hills and fragrant vegetation but rather by scenes of destruction, death, and decay. The first thing he wanted to do, which became also his lasting legacy, was to get drunk and drown his agony. But you don't just pluck wine off the vine, so for years Noah toiled for no other purpose than produce that jug of wine which will help him forget how selfish he was, and how every person he has ever known is dead. He probably realized that the future of humanity does not lie with blind obedience to God alone, and that it must be paired with deep love and respect towards others. He might have also contemplated the method in which God saved him from the flood, and understood that God punished him. For not caring enough about others, God made him spend a whole year with eight other humans. A yearlong road trip, with no rest stops or scenic byways.

Into this picture steps Ham. He saw his father rolling on the ground, with little dignity, and he made fun of him. He might have even shouted from within the tent to his brothers outside "come see the old man – what a disgrace..." Shem and Yephet, upset as they were with what their father did, understood his predicament and did not want to further embarrass him, so they took care not to see him at all. When Noah woke up, he realized what had happened, as well as that he miserably failed in educating his youngest son. He was not able to deliver the message of respecting humanity and caring for others. And so, Noah loses it. He wants to blame someone, to curse someone, but he knows it's his fault and that anyone whom he chooses to curse will be his direct relative. He finally settles on cursing the youngest son of his youngest son, to make the curse as remote from him as possible, but still, he curses himself.

It is a scary story. A story of the failure of humanity, the failure of education, and the failure to show self-control. It serves for us as a cautionary tale, to constantly strive to do good not only towards God, but towards others as well.

Shabbat Shalom