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Parshat Noach

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**COMPOUNDED INTEREST**

*By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

We all know the story of the flood. The world was bad – very bad. Hashem was enraged. He decided to destroy the whole world except for a tiny righteous family, the Noachs.

But what was the actual bad that did the world in? After all, something had to have gone mighty awry for the Almighty to destroy his handiwork and begin anew.

And so, the Torah tells us, “Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth had become filled with robbery. And G-d saw the earth and behold it was perverse, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. G-d said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery through them; and behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth” (Genesis 6:11-13).

It seems that there were two main crimes, corruption and robbery. Robbery is self-explanatory, and the commentaries explain corruption as lewdness and licentiousness in addition to idolatry. In fact, it was so bad that “all flesh had corrupted its way”; not only did mankind cavort in adulterous behavior, even cattle, beasts, and fowl did not consort with their own species” (Rashi *ibid.*) But what sealed their fate? There seems to be two defining offenses. The Torah introduces Hashem’s words to Noah with the statement, “And G-d saw the earth and behold it was perverse, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.” Yet what he tells Noah is “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery.” So what was it that brought the Almighty to the fateful decision, robbery or perversion?

Rashi declares in one verse, “wherever you find lewdness and idolatry, punishment of an indiscriminate character comes upon the world, killing good and bad alike.” Yet, later, when the Torah states the sin of robbery, Rashi explains that “their fate was sealed only on account of their sin of robbery.” How did these two very different evils forge together to force the end of the world? In addition, what lesson can we take from it?

*A robber walked into a bank in Oceanside, California, with a gun and a note. He strode up to the teller that looked the easiest target a woman in her fifties with a gentle, grandmotherly appearance. He handed her the note that demanded the money. “Give me all your money or I will blow your ... head off” or something to that affect. She reached for the cash drawer to oblige. Then she looked back down at the note and her teeth clenched. She squeezed her hands into tight fists and turned red. Suddenly, in flash she pulled out the metal drawer entirely. She did not give it to him instead she flung it at him. The she bashed him over the head with it. She hit him once, and again, and again. She began yelling at him in a rage. The money was flying all over the bank. The patrons ran for cover. The dazed thief retreated in fear. Then he ran. Police nearby caught him hiding under a nearby bush. And then they figured out what spurred the heroics of the grandmotherly teller. She was chasing him out of the bank screaming, “Don’t you ever use such a foul word again!”*

Many commentaries explain a difference between judgment and wrath. They are separate issues. Judgment was meted because of the sin of thievery. But that merits judgment, and payback. Perhaps there could have been repentance. Maybe only certain acts would have been judged. It is strong enough to warrant strict judgment. But to a point. Thievery alone, even wanton brazenness is not enough to destroy a world. Alone, it would not have produced such wrath. But when the desire to gain someone else’s property is compounded with the arrogance of lewd licentiousness, depraved morality, and debasing the norms of civilization, then the judgment is meted with wrath.

Often people sin. They even steal. Those crimes have to be dealt with even judged strongly. But when unprovoked vices become integrated with the selfishness of theft and greed, then a wake-up call is imperative. Even if it can ruin your entire world.

## **The Meaning of Noach**

*By Rabbi Berel Wein z'tl*

The rabbis were not so much critical of Noach – as he is paid the highest of compliments, throughout the Torah as a righteous person – but they were wary of him. I have often felt that this attitude is born of the idea that Rashi himself states in commenting upon the origin of Noach's name. Rashi makes a point that the name Noach should not be construed as a derivative of the Hebrew word "nacheim" – meaning to comfort – but rather it is derived from the other Hebrew word "noach" – meaning, rest, leisure, comfortable but not comfort as in consolation.

Rashi attributes this understanding of Noach's name to the fact that he was the father, so to speak, of modern agricultural technological advancement and progress. The iron plow, the first great essential tool for farming developed for humans, enabling settlers to abandon a nomadic existence, was an invention of Noach. This was his great contribution towards the advancement of human technology.

Noach therefore becomes the source of human technological progress which grants us leisure, eases our physical workload and gives us many physical comforts in life. However, technology alone with all of its attendant blessings does not guarantee us any sort of mental, spiritual or social comfort. It does not console us in our hour of grief nor does it strengthen our spirit in our moments of self-doubt and personal angst.

If Noach could have achieved these goals then Rashi points out that his name would have been Menachem – the one who brings true consolation and comfort to troubled souls. Hence Noach is viewed in tradition as being incomplete – technologically advanced but spiritually wanting – in short a pretty accurate description of our current human society.

The Rabbis of the Talmud taught us that if "one tells you that there is wisdom, knowledge and skills present amongst the nations of the world you should believe him." However, if one tells you that there is Torah amongst the nations of the world, then do not believe him." Judaism and Jewish society has no basic argument against the advance of technology. We are not the Amish nor are we willing to be consigned a back seat in the drive to physically improve the human condition of life on this planet. Yet Judaism realizes that true psychological and spiritual comfort cannot be found in the newest iPhone or the latest version of ChatGPT.

Noach's technology can be enormously beneficial in a society that adopts Avraham's values and beliefs. But bereft of any spiritual focus or restraint, technology run wild makes our world a more fearful place to inhabit and forces many to yearn for the good old, less technologically advanced, eras that preceded us. Noach's grand technology could not save the world from the ravages of evil that brought upon humankind the great flood described in this week's parsha.

Avraham's grand values and holy behavior almost saved the seat of world evil, Sodom. The world is Noach's world but its survival is dependent upon the survival and eventual triumph of Avraham's children, ideas and beliefs.

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## **See Something, Do Something**

*By Sheldon Stern*

The Parsha begins by telling us that Noach was perfectly righteous in his generation. Rashi remarked that some of our Rabbis saw this in a positive light and aver that had Noach lived in a generation which boasted a plethora of Tzaddikim he would have been all the better for it. On the other hand, others view this to his detriment and assert that had Noach been a contemporary of Avraham he wouldn't have even registered a blip. This latter comment seems difficult. The Halacha states that when one has a Chazakah of righteousness, people must judge him Lkaf Zchus, so how could anyone, much less our vaunted Sages, demean the individual whom G-d chose to repopulate the world?

The first part of Rashi's statement makes complete sense. Chazal teach that Kinat Sofrim Marbe Chachnah, literally the "jealousy" of the "bookmen" increases wisdom. When there's a Rashi, a Rabbeinu Tam, Ritva, Rashba the list is endless won't be far behind. And so we can rest assured that Noach would have made it a point to attend Avraham's Shiurim whenever possible, and he would've become exponentially greater. Rav Elchanan Wasserman ZT'L achieved legendary status when he returned to Europe expecting to die with his Talmidim, but there's something else he did that should not be forgotten.

The man who wrote "Ikvisa D'Moshicha" gave up his position as Rosh Yeshiva in Amtshsislav in order to study under the Chofetz Chaim. No, there is no ego, when it comes to our Torah giants, they simply look to serve Hashem as best they can, but we still must deal with Rashi's latter comment. Not long after I started attending Rabbi Friedman's Yeshiva I met the Skelener Rebbe ZTL. To put it simply, he blew me away. A few days later I returned to the Yeshiva and related my experience. Someone in attendance said the following, "Ah. You think he's something? You never met his father. That was true greatness." I found that riposte totally off-base. He could've just said, "Yeah he's amazing, but his father was even greater."

We see then that there's a tendency to put, even great people, down, when praising someone greater, but Rashi was referring to our Gedolim and they'd never do such a thing, so again, "What did our foremost commentator mean?" To answer this we have to look at the difference between Avraham and Noach. Noach was G-d's faithful servant. When told to build the Ark he did so, no questions asked. However, he didn't take that next step and try to dissuade Hashem from carrying out His threat. In contrast, Avraham Avinu spoke out on behalf of the people of Sodom. We can explain this criticism away by positing that Noach was an FFB while Avraham was a Baal Tshuvah, albeit at an extremely tender age.. Having never sinned, Noach couldn't relate to those who fell prey to their Yetzer Hora and so he was unable to muster a defense for his landsmen. Avraham, on the other hand, saw things as Joni Mitchell wrote, "From Both Sides Now." He understood what it meant to violate G-d's words, having been raised by an idolater, but he also knew that one can repent and, in his great humility, believed that others could also follow suit. I would suggest, however, that where Noach came up short was not before the Mabul, but after. Verse 11:1 tells us that the world was united in its mission to build the Tower of Babel. Now we understand why the leaders were out in front. This was a chance to solidify their positions of authority. As Tears for Fears Sang, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." And it's not hard to visualize the masses being on board.

Today we see how easily the world is turning against the Jewish people. As the late great comedian George Carlin quipped, "Never underestimate the power of stupid people to do stupid things." The point is that people follow "herd mentality" and can easily be manipulated. But why didn't Noach and/or his family protest? The conventional wisdom of the time was that catastrophes like the "Great Deluge" were cyclical and would occur every 1,656 years. The Tower, then, was protection, against "Mother Nature". But Noach knew better. He understood that the Mabul wasn't due to some ersatz form of climate change. He should have been railing against the people for failing to learn from the past. Instead of spending immeasurable fortunes and years on this, ultimately worthless, project, the people should've been warned about the consequences of sin. And this time, they would've at least given Noach the opportunity to speak. In 1968, Jerry Jeff Walker recorded Mr. Bojangles, "He looked to me to be the eyes of age." While Nimrod had no qualms about doing away with a young whippersnapper like Avram, it's highly unlikely that he would have messed with such an august figure as Noach and so the latter's silence was deafening. So why didn't the Real Slim Shady, I mean Noach, please stand up, please stand up? (Not big on rap, but I do respect Eminem) In any event, the answer comes from my former Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Friedman. When I started at the Yeshiva he gave me a lot of his precious time particularly on Friday afternoons after shiur. On one occasion he told me that there's an essential difference between modern Gedolim and Biblical figures. Today's Gedolim, and he mentioned Rav Pam and Rabbi Miller, are basically one-dimensional. Rav Pam is always sweet, and Rabbi Miller is always tough. In contrast, Shmuel Hanavi was able to rise to the occasion, and do whatever was called for. Despite being totally engrossed in Torah and meditation, when King Saul spared Agag's life, Shmuel didn't waste a moment. He took a sword and cut the Amalekite king to ribbons.

So now we can answer our question. Noach was unquestionably great, just as Rav Pam and Rabbi Miller were giants, however, none of them transcended their limitations. For Noach, piety was a personal matter. He worked on himself and his relationship with Hashem but it was insular, he never crossed the line of reaching out to others. As for what Rashi meant, with his apparent insult, "Noach would have been universally recognized as an icon, but not if Avraham was also on the world's stage, because Avraham would've demonstrated that next level of righteousness, the ability to go beyond one's natural boundaries. Avraham was truly a "Man for All Seasons" while Noach, unquestionably great, in comparison was a "One Trick Pony." Let's elaborate on this idea. Imagine that Avraham never came on the world's stage. Noach would have been revered as well he deserved. He'd be seen as an early day Dalai Lama, if you will. Perched in some mountainous retreat divorced from worldly concerns. Not a bad role model at all, but Avraham introduced us to the person who is at once in touch with his physical and spiritual selves. And they mesh seamlessly. I once heard a story about Rav Moshe, "Someone visited his apartment in the Grand St. Coops and complimented its appearance. The Gadol Hador didn't miss a beat, "Thank you so much for your kind words. Now let me show you the whole layout." It's called normalcy. The ability to relate to anyone and everyone on their level. So the Sages who gave short shrift to Noach didn't intend to malign him, they were merely pointing out that Avraham's Avodas Hashem was infinitely greater because the masses could let their hair down, relax and thus interact with our Patriarch. This enabled him to produce so many converts to Monotheism. Noach, in contrast, was detached from the world and so he didn't impact on others.

But this leads us to ask, "What lesson is there for us to learn?" When Moshe Rabbeinu handed over the reins to his prized disciple Yehoshua he made it a point to tell him that the Jewish people can be pains in the Tuchus. And I think we all know that from our experiences. On two particular occasions I had dealings with Orthodox Jews who cheated me. Both times I spoke to great Rabbis and asked them to intercede, and my requests were rebuffed. What's interesting is that for my adversaries it wasn't about the money. I'll explain with a Moshol which is perhaps apocryphal. There was a gathering of renowned Rabbis and they wanted to decide on a leader. The elder statesman spoke up, " You should pick me. I'm old so I have no Yetzer hora to cloud my thinking." Someone responded, "You have the greatest Yetzer hora, Gaavah." In one case, my opponent had no money claim at all, while in the other, it was a relative pittance for him. So why did they fight so hard to deprive me of my rights? To answer that question consider why, as Traffic sang, "You're living beyond all your means." So many go deep into debt to live in the "best" neighborhoods, with the "best" schools and drive the "best" cars. One of the reasons that President Trump is so popular with Orthodox Jews is that he appeals to those who want to view themselves as winners. Unfortunately, the Yetzer hora shows up and convinces them that they must win at all costs even if they have to distort the Torah. In both cases I simply wanted the Rabbis to explain to them that they were under the control of Satan, but it wasn't to be. Yes, I was disappointed, but I realized that in fact the Rabbis involved were great men, and more importantly good men and I don't hold their inaction against them. On the other hand, Rashi is teaching us that to achieve true greatness one must go beyond his natural inclination and do what's right. As George wrote while with the Beatles, "When you've seen beyond yourself then you may find. Peace of mind is waiting there. And the time will come when you see we're all one, and life flows on within you and without you." "Yesterday When I Was Young" a great song from the 60's, there was a popular joke that Moshiach will be the one who makes peace between the Satmar and Lubavicher Rebbes. My candidate is someone who will be moved when he sees injustice and tries to do something about it.

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### **Parshat Noah – “It’s the end of the world as we know, and I feel fine”**

*By Jacob (Yankie) Goldman*

God tells Noah something really big: that God is going to destroy the world. And Noah’s reply to the end of the world as we know it: silence. God instructs Noah to build a big ark in order to save himself, his wife, sons and daughters-in-law. This ark building was to be a huge task: complete with 3 levels, so big that it would house representatives of all the species of the animal and bird kingdoms.

Noah’s response: strict adherence to God’s word. As the Torah says, Noah did “everything God commanded him.” Before and after the flood, God spoke to Noah seven times. And Noah matched each of those communications from God with apparent silence.

The Torah portion starts with saying that “Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation.” What made Noah “righteous” was that he listened to God – something that the rest of the world did not do. Noah listened, he obeyed. In fact, the Torah twice writes that Noah complied with everything God commanded him. What Noah did not do, or try to do, was save the world or anyone else, including, for example, his father Lamech or grandfather Methuselah, or any cousins or other relatives.

Compare this to Abraham actions in next week’s Torah’s portion. There Abraham goes to war against five kings (who had already defeated four kings) only in order to save his nephew, Lot. And when God shares that He will destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham urges – indeed argues – with God to save them. Abraham was willing to do what was physically and verbally needed to save a life.

Moses was willing to do the same. Moses, a prince of Egypt, killed an Egyptian who was striking a Jewish slave. This act caused Moses to be a fugitive, leave the palace that he grew up in and live in exile. Repeatedly, Moses advocated – successfully – to literally save the Jews in the desert when they did not listen to God.

There are sinners. They are the ones whom God destroyed in the flood. Then, there are people who listen to God, like Noah. And they get saved. Then there are those who fight – even “fight” with God – to save others. They are leaders

**“These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, faultless in his generation; Noah walked with God” (6:9)**

The Torah refers to Noah as a righteous man in his generation. No two generations are exactly alike because each one has its own challenges that were never experienced by those who came before. A person is expected to perfect himself in his own generation, in the time period and circumstances into which he was born. What made a person righteous in a previous generation might not work for the next one. In every new era, people must adapt to the challenges brought about by the changes over the years and determine how to address new temptations. For example, the major challenge of our times is technology. The attitudes toward technology and protective measures that were accepted in previous generations no longer suffice today. We have to recognize that things are no longer the same and change our approach to achieve the right outcomes for our generation.

**“The earth was corrupt before Hashem and the earth was filled with wrongdoing” (6:11)**

Why does the Torah first say that “the earth was corrupt before Hashem” before stating that the land was “full of robbery”? R’ Dovid Feinstein explained that at first, the people began to lose their fear of Hashem. At that point, the corruption was in their hearts and only visible from Hashem’s vantage point because the people still acted properly. But as time went on, without Hashem at the center of their lives, the people began to act immorally and eventually the world was filled with thievery. With the two parts of this posuk, the Torah shows us that if a person is not G-d fearing, his morals and interpersonal behavior will deteriorate. Without fear of Hashem, he will find a way to rationalize and justify any bad behavior that appeals to him. Another cause of this degeneration is when people are focused on fulfilling all of their desires without trying to rein them in at all. The pursuit of pleasure is never-ending because a person can never truly satisfy all of his desires, so he must constantly seek bigger and more sinful pleasures. This describes the generation of the flood, which was focused on fulfilling their desires, and unfortunately also seems applicable to the world that we live in today. We must be very careful to avoid this attitude.

**“Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make the ark with compartments and cover it from within and without with pitch” (6:14)**

Hashem told Noah: “Make an ark for yourself,” indicating that this instruction was for the benefit of mankind. Hashem had many ways to save Noah, so why did He choose to have Noah build a teivah to be his rescue vehicle? The point was to assign a massive construction project that would take decades to complete and would attract a great deal of attention. When people would see Noah at work, they would ask why he was building such a massive structure. He would then explain about the impending flood and urge the people to change their wicked ways. This took 120 years, giving the world a very long reprieve and ample opportunity to turn things around, which was a great kindness from Hashem. In the end, despite Noah’s best efforts, his words fell on deaf ears. Even when we try to help others improve, their actions are not within our control. We can only make our best effort to show people the right way, but we cannot force them to do what Hashem wants. Noah did the best he could in his attempts to change the world even if he was ultimately unsuccessful.

**“But the dove could not find a resting place for the sole of its foot and she returned to Noah, to the ark, because water was on the face of all the earth; he sent out his hand and took her and brought her to him, to the ark” (8:9)**

Why does the Torah include the details of how Noah extended his hand to bring the dove back inside the teivah? Or HaChaim explains that Noah realized how tired the bird must have been after flying all around in search of dry land. He was concerned that the dove would run out of energy and would not have the stamina to fly back inside on its own. To make sure that the dove did not fall into the water, Noah leaned out the window to grab the bird and help it back inside. By describing this action of Noah, the Torah emphasizes Noah’s compassion for the bird and the importance of this attitude. If that is how considerate we are meant to be for a bird, then certainly we should also be this sensitive to the needs and feelings of other people.

**“These are the descendants of Terach. Terach fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot” (11:27)**

The Midrash says that anyone whose name is mentioned twice in a row in the Torah is a righteous person who earned a share in the World to Come. How can that be if Terach’s name is doubled? The Midrash answers that Terach did teshuvah at the end of his days. The Torah did not have to go out of its way to tell us that Terach was a tzadik, but it makes special mention of it to teach us that as long as a person is still alive, he still has the opportunity to change. If we see elderly people who might not be living a proper life, we cannot write them off because as long as people are alive then they can still change. We should try to help older people just as we have programs to bring young people closer to Hashem. Nobody is too old to study Torah and do mitzvos and improve themselves.

*By Rabbi Mayer Friedman*

## The Symbolism of the Rainbow

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Following the *Mabul* [Great Flood], Hashem gave a sign that He would never again flood the entire world. That sign, as we all know, is the rainbow. Rav Meir Shapiro, *z"l*, gives a beautiful comment as to why specifically the rainbow was made the Heavenly sign that the *Ribono shel Olam* would never again destroy the world with water.

Rav Meir Shapiro comments on a question that many people ask. It took Noach 120 years to build the *Teiyva* [Ark]. During that entire period, he apparently did not have an effect on anyone in his entire generation. The only people that were saved were his immediate family. He had an extremely unsuccessful career as a “*kiruv* worker.” After 120 years, for not even one person to become a believer in the Almighty and the principles of universal morality is a dismal career in “outreach.” Many commentaries take note of this and try to explain why this was the case – particularly in terms of trying to reconcile that with the Torah’s description of Noach as “*Tzadik, Tamim*” [righteous and perfect]. Such people usually **do** have an impact on their generation.

Rav Shapiro speculates as to why in fact Noach was **not** successful. He suggests that Noach believed that the people of his generation were beyond salvation. He had no faith in the people and felt that they sank to such a low level of spiritual darkness that there was no hope for them. In any endeavor, a person must believe in what he is doing and believe in his ability to have an effect. If, in his heart of hearts, a person does not believe that he can have an effect, then he cannot make the case. For this reason, Noach was never successful in bringing anyone “under the wings of the *Shechina*.”

Rav Shapiro says that with this hypothesis, we can understand why the Divine sign that the world would never again be totally destroyed by flood was the rainbow. As we all know, a rainbow occurs when there is a beautiful day and suddenly it becomes terribly cloudy and terribly dark. There follows a downpour, and shortly after the downpour, the clouds dissipate. It becomes light again, it becomes bright again, and when the sun hits the rain, a rainbow is formed, which is a beautiful multi-colored illumination in the heaven. The message of the rainbow is that no matter how dark the world may be, after the darkness, the light can shine and can in fact make a beautiful image that brightens the world.

This was the pointed message to Noach: Your assessment of your generation — that they are living in such darkness that light cannot help – is wrong. The rainbow is a metaphor which teaches that this is not necessarily the way things work. The message to Noach was to never give up on people. No one is beyond redemption. Every single *neshama* is pure at its base. There is a “*pintele Yid*” or a “*pintele* of spirituality” in every single person. As a result of that, there is hope for seeing the light of the rainbow at the end of the period of darkness.

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## People In Brick Houses Shouldn't...

By Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

“... ‘Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.’ And the brick served them as stone, and the lime served them as mortar.” (11:3)

The Torah introduces the episode of the building of the Tower of Bavel with a description of the building materials which were used. Rashi comments that since Bavel was a plain, having no mountains and rocks, the inhabitants of the area were forced to manufacture their own bricks. Of what significance is this information to the overall understanding of the entire episode?

Prior to the advent of bricks and building materials, buildings were constructed using stone hewn from a quarry. There is a crucial difference between living in a home constructed of bricks and one constructed of stone; when inhabiting a stone building, a person senses that he is living in Hashem’s world, for he is surrounded by materials which come directly from nature and are relatively untouched by man. When a person bakes bricks, using them to construct his home, he may have the feeling that his abode is separate from Hashem, for he himself has processed the materials used to construct it.

Rashi comments on the verse “*u’devarim achadim*” – “of common purpose” that the inhabitants of Bavel conspired against the “*yichudo shel olam*”, the notion that Hashem is the sole power over the entire universe. It was their perception that the world was theirs, devoid of Divine authority, and they conspired to attack the authority that resided in the heavens. The reason for the emphasis on the brick being used as a building material is succinctly captured by the Ibn Ezra who comments on the verse “*vatehi lahem haleveina le’even*” – “and the brick served them as stone”, saying that they used bricks instead of stone. Their preference for bricks reflected their perception that they were living in a world which they themselves created. They deluded themselves into believing that Hashem no longer exercised His authority over this world.

All too often, we ourselves become blinded by mankind’s technological advancements. As man progresses in his technological pursuits, he becomes more prone to losing sight of the fact that Hashem is the ultimate authority in this world.