

+++++

The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

+++++

=====

Parshat Noach

=====

Latest time for Kriyat Shema – 9:56

HOME ALONE

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Noach just does not quite make it. In spite of the fact that he almost single-handedly saved the world, fed it, and cultivated a new lease on life for an otherwise obliterated planet, he hardly gets the fame and recognition that his antecedents, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob receive. In fact, Noach's biography is summed up in this week's reading, "And He blotted out the entire species from the earth, and Noach remained — alone." (Genesis 7:23) Noach leads the lonely existence of the sole survivor, and his place in history, especially in Jewish history, is hardly monumental. What is the flaw that limits Noach to stature that is much less than patriarchal? Why isn't the sole savior of humanity counted with the great acclamation that is bestowed upon our forefathers. Why isn't Noach considered the first, if not foremost, of our forefathers?

Despite overt differences between Abraham and Noach there is one small incident that would seemingly link the two leaders — they both planted. In Genesis 9:21 the Torah tells us, "And Noach the man of the earth planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk." Abraham also planted. In Genesis 21:33 the Torah relates, "And Abraham planted an eshel in Beer-sheba." Rashi comments that there are conflicting views as to the exact interpretation of eshel. Some explain that Abraham planted an orchard intending to feed hungry wayfarers. Others explain that an eshel is an inn. Abraham built a lodge for travelers to rest.

No matter which interpretation appeals to you, the stark contrast between Noach and Abraham is obvious. Abraham plants for others, Noach for himself. Abraham's goal in life was to educate, nurture, and teach other people about Hashem. Noach, on the other hand, was predicting doom as he built an ark for more than a century, yet he was not able to recruit a single passenger. He leaves the ark and gets drunk — lost in his own world.

One of America's largest kosher confectioners was a major supporter of Beth Medrash Govoah, the Yeshiva and Kollel founded by the late Rabbi Aaron Kotler and led for twenty years by his late son Rabbi Shneur Kotler. At one major national function this industrialist had the occasion to introduce Reb Shneur. He did so in a most unique manner. "Actually," he proclaimed, "both Reb Shneur and I have much in common. We both went to cheder in Europe, survived the war, and now we both run major institutions. We provide the public with an excellent product, one that is both sweet and enjoyable. Many people stand in line to speak to me, and many wait in line to speak to the Rabbi. We both are well known and try hard to help others. "However there is one major difference between us." The magnate paused and smiled. "I make lollipops and Rabbi Kotler makes men." We all produce. The question that we all must ask ourselves is "who are we producing for?" Are we generating fruit that will be used to benefit mankind, or are we providing ourselves with fruit for self-indulgence?

Noach had the opportunity to save many more lives. He could have been the father of mankind and perhaps, as a man who had direct contact with the Creator, could have replaced Abraham as the founder of Judaism.\

Despite his personal greatness, and an ability to overcome the terrible tide of corruption and immorality that condemned his generation, Noach still did not take advantage of a momentous opportunity. He was not able to nurture and save his generation. "And Noach remained alone." He became drunk. Abraham planted an orchard of generosity. He flourished. Abraham made men; Noach made wine.

A HAMAS-LESS WORLD

By Rabbi Heschel Greenberg

Parashat Noach, filled with pairs of animals marching to an ark, a peace-seeking dove, and a righteous family on an epic journey to rebuild the world, is often thought of as the perfect Torah portion to teach to small children. However, there are many more adult elements of this portion that deal not only with the Noah's (relative) goodness, but also with the nature of evil that filled the earth before the flood. At the beginning of the parsha, we learn: וַתִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וַתִּמָּלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס

The Hebrew term, *chamas*, is often used to describe a particularly base form of hatred and depravity. The 11th-century Egyptian commentator Ibn Ezra says that the word *chamas* means “ Theft, oppression and taking women against their will”.

According to Rashi and others it refers specifically to the crime of theft. The Midrash and other sources translate the word *Chamas* also as cruelty, murder, depraved morality.

The members of the terrorist group Hamas have providentially chosen that name without realizing how well it describes who they are; a G-dless, bloodthirsty. Cruel and deceptive nation!

The first Lubavitcher Rebbe once remarked that a Jew must live with the times, which was interpreted to mean that we must live with the timely reading of the Torah; to learn lessons from the parsha of each week. Since we are required to apply the weekly Torah reading to our own lives, we must search for a positive lesson that will help us put what is presently happening to the Jewish people in perspective and thereby also provide us with the means to bring about our victory and salvation. The Torah states the following: “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 corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. G-d said to Noach, ‘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.’”

When the Torah refers to their corruption, Rashi explains, it relates to their idolatrous practices and their sexual immorality. Yet, the Torah makes it clear that they were being punished because of their sin of robbery. Isn't idolatry and sexual immorality (such as incest and adultery) a more egregious crime than robbery? Why then does the Torah state that they were being punished because of robbery? Rashi, anticipated this question and states, quoting the Talmud: “The decree was sealed exclusively for their sin of theft.”

Rashi seems to be saying that although they were guilty of far more serious transgressions, their fate was only sealed when they engaged in robbery.

This raises an obvious question: Why did G-d consider theft to be a more serious offense that deserved destruction. By the Torah's own standards, idolatry and incest are far more egregious sins than thievery, yet, the decree for their destruction was sealed for the sin of theft exclusively. Why?

Commentators explain that had they treated each other with respect and would not steal from one another, G-d would have spared them because of the power of unity and peace. However, because they didn't treat each other with respect, they were not salvageable. Unity would have been their redeeming virtue and would have saved them. It would have been their shield from punishment. Lacking that armor, they were punished for all their many sins.

The lesson for our time is obvious. The Jewish nation's greatest weakness is their disunity. When we are divided, we are vulnerable. Even the enemy which perpetrated the unspeakable massacres admitted that they took advantage of the disunity of the Israeli population. And conversely, our greatest strength is our unity.

Thank G-d, after receiving such a horrible and devastating blow last Simchas Torah, the Jewish nation is now more united than it has been in decades. Not since the Six Day War have Jews been so unified. Let's hope and pray that it remains this way and gets even stronger. We should not have to experience tragedy to realize our inherent unity.

We therefore beseech G-d to look down at His People and see how, despite our many legitimate differences, we are one, and bring us total victory, with the imminent coming of Moshiach and the Final Redemption.

One may raise another question: Granted that robbery is the antithesis of unity, but it is not the only manifestation of disunity. In fact, murder is a far more egregious sin and negation of unity than robbery. Why was their fate sealed exclusively for robbery?

Commentators explain that there is a general principle when dealing with G-d's punishment for sin. Before G-d inflicts punishment on a sinner's body, He first inflicts punishment on the sinner's money. So, the question now is: why did G-d punish them by destroying them? Shouldn't G-d have first denied them their wealth and only then, if they didn't repent, move to the more harsh punishment of destruction?

The answer is that G-d couldn't take away their possessions because they were all stolen. Nobody legitimately owned anything; everyone stole from everyone else. G-d therefore had no other recourse but to inflict punishment on their bodies. The lesson here is that not only should our unity manifest itself with love for our fellow Jew's lives when they are threatened; we must also express our unity with respect to the more mundane aspects of our lives; even extending to our fellow's property.

When there is an existential crisis as there is today, it reveals our most essential Jewish identity, concerning which we are all one. The Moshiach spark is activated, and we feel as one. The challenge for us is to make that unity spread to all layers of our lives, extending even to the most external and ordinary aspects of our being, such as our money and property. That is a sign that our unity is complete for it has permeated every part of us. It is an indication that the spark of Moshiach that lies at the core of our being has permeated us totally.

We must believe that the tragic events of these last two weeks are the final test we were subjected to before the Final Redemption. Many also believe that the genocidal Hamas is an incarnation of the vile Biblical nation Amalek, the destruction of which is mandated by the Torah. Furthermore, the Talmud states that the destruction of Amalek is a prerequisite to the building of the Bais Hamikdash-the Holy Temple. May this be the final step before Moshiach revealing himself and spearheading the building of the third and Final Bais Hamikdash, which will usher in a Hamas-less world of ultimate peace and holiness!

Bounce Back

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The opening sections of the Torah with which we are currently engaged in studying, deal with one of the central problems of human existence and that is the ability to cope with tragedy, disappointment and frustration. The adjustment of human beings to being driven out of the Garden of Eden is really the entire story of human civilization and of its very bleak moments.

This week we read of the difficulty of Noach and his descendants to cope with the tragedy that they witnessed. There were different reactions to what they had witnessed and experienced. Noach himself forsook much of his spiritual greatness and accomplishment to become a person of the earth, traumatized by the experiences of the past.

The English expression for this type of attitude is that one attempts to drown his sorrows away. As is recorded for us in this week's Torah reading, this attitude and behavior leads to disaster and complete family dysfunction. The opportunity for resilience, and family and national rebuilding is lost and squandered.

There is a strong inclination within each of us to be overwhelmed by challenging circumstances and tragedies. It is not easy to put one's life back together after witnessing an event such as the great flood. Yet, this is exactly what the rabbis pointed out to us as the major difference between Noach and Abraham. Tested ten times, Abraham's resilience never wanes, and he continues to look forward towards accomplishment.

This week's Torah reading indicates another reaction to tragedy with rebellion and an abandonment of principles, beliefs and faith. The generations after the flood, in their anger and despondency over the punishment that Heaven meted out to human kind, rebelled against God and morality by building of the tower of Babel. They knew of God and they knew of the flood, but they rebelled as a sign of their displeasure with what human kind suffered at the hands of Heaven.

It is historically accurate to say that after great wars and tragedies, decades of decadence and immorality suffuse human society. It is this rebellion against what experience should have taught them that leads to further disaster. It is a different symptom of the same malady, the lack of resilience which often engulfs entire societies and, as history has proven, eventually leads to their demise and disappearance.

This description of human behavior is of enormous instruction to us in our time. We are still the generation reminiscent of the sword raised to destroy the Jewish people and endanger the existence of the Jewish national state. Only by our resilience and tenacity in following the lead of our father Abraham are we guaranteed to overcome the challenges that face us.

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

The Torah introduces the descendants of Noach, but then immediately changes the topic and describes his character. Why does the posuk suddenly shift gears? Rashi explains that a righteous person’s primary products are his good deeds, so they are similar to his children. R’ Moshe Feinstein suggests that the Torah compares good deeds to children because just as a person will happily do anything for his child, we should also do whatever it takes to perform a mitzvah without feeling like it is a hardship.

“And God saw the earth, and behold it had become corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth” (6:12)

Even the animals were corrupted through the influence of the negative behavior in the people around them. Even when we sin in private, it creates a negative atmosphere, which though unfelt, impacts everyone around him. The same is true of good deeds as well. Every time a person does a mitzvah, he brings purity to the world and it enables others to do good as well.

“And the rain was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights” (7:12)

When the flood came, it did not begin in full force right away. The Torah initially describes the precipitation as rain and only later calls it a flood. Rashi explains that “when He brought it down, He brought it with mercy, so that if they would repent, they would become rain of blessing. But when they failed to repent, they became a flood.” Even at the last minute, Hashem gave the wicked generation one last chance to change. Sometimes Hashem gives us opportunities but we have to take advantage of them when we notice them. If we let them go by, we may lose out on the ability to change the direction of our lives.

Noach, along with Noach's wife and the three wives of his sons, came to the ark” (7:13)

Why is Noach’s name repeated over and over again in connection with his family members? Could it not just have mentioned “Noach and his sons and his wife”? Rabbeinu Bachya says that constantly reiterating someone’s name is a sign of love for that person, just as we like to use the name of someone we love. Hashem loved Noach because of his righteousness and so the Torah uses Noach’s name again and again.

“But the dove could not find a resting place for the sole of its foot and she returned to Noach, 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 Noach extended his hand to bring the dove back inside the teivah? Or HaChaim explains that Noach 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, Noach leaned out the window to grab the bird and help it back inside. By describing this action of Noach, the Torah emphasizes Noach’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.

“One who spills the blood of man, by man his blood shall be spilled; for in the image of Hashem, He made man” (9:6)

Hashem decreed capital punishment for a murderer because man is created in the image of Hashem and every human being has G-dliness within him. This point is something that we should consider when we deal with other people. Do we focus on this special aspect which is inherent in every person that we encounter or do we talk down to people who we consider to be lesser than ourselves? We should always remember that every person has something of the Divine inside of him and should be treated respectfully in accordance with his special status.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The "Righteous" Noah

by Rabbi Ozer Alport

Noah, the namesake and focus of this week's parsha, seems at first glance quite contradictory. On one hand, the Torah explicitly testifies in the beginning of the parsha that Noah was perfectly righteous, and he alone merited to be saved from the destruction which befell his contemporaries. Everyone alive today is descended from him and exists only in his merit.

On the other hand, Rashi points out that some Sages question how pious Noah truly was. The verse emphasizes that he was righteous in his generation, which can be read as implying that if he had lived in another generation, such as that of Avraham, he wouldn't have been considered unique or special in any way. This is difficult to understand. If the Torah explicitly praises Noah, why do the Sages minimize his greatness, and why do they specifically compare him to Avraham?

Further, Noah wasn't righteous enough to be completely exempt from the pain and suffering which was meted out to the rest of his generation. He was forced to survive the flood by spending a year in cramped quarters together with the rest of the animal kingdom, and he enjoyed no rest as he was constantly busy feeding each animal at the time when it was accustomed to eat. If he was indeed so righteous, why wasn't he simply told to escape to the Land of Israel, which according to one opinion (Talmud - Zevachim 113a) was miraculously protected and spared from the flood until the waters subsided?

Furthermore, after Noah survived this difficult experience, he received permission to exit the ark and was given a promise that God would never again destroy the world. Noah responded by planting a vineyard, getting drunk, and debasing himself (Genesis 9:20-21). How could he have fallen so far so quickly?

The answer to these apparent contradictions lies in the Zohar (Vol. 3 15a), which questions why the Haftarah (Isaiah 54:9) refers to the flood as "*Mei Noach*" - the floodwaters of Noah. Since Noah was the righteous *tzaddik* who was spared from the destruction, why is the flood named for him, implying that he was somehow responsible for it?

The Zohar answers that God commanded Noah (Genesis 6:14) to make an ark to save him and his family from the impending flood. During the 120 years that Noah was busy doing so, he neglected to pray for his contemporaries to repent their sins and be spared, and as a result, he was held accountable for the flood which may have been prevented through his prayers.

The Zohar teaches us that although Noah was personally righteous, he was content with his own individual piety to save himself and his family without being properly concerned about the welfare of his contemporaries. The Midrash compares Noah to a captain who saved himself while allowing his boat and its passengers to drown. With this insight, we can now appreciate that Noah's spiritual level was indeed complex and somewhat contradictory. He withstood the tremendous temptation to join the rest of his sinful generation and remained uniquely pious, yet at the same time he could have done much more on behalf of others.

This explains why he is specifically denigrated in comparison to Avraham, who was the paragon of *chesed* and whose entire life was focused on helping others. When Avraham was informed by God about the impending destruction of Sodom, he didn't content himself with the fact that he wasn't endangered, but repeatedly beseeched God to overturn the decree and spare them from destruction.

As far as why this was in fact the case, Rabbi Nachum of Horodna explains that Noah was born into a pious family. His grandfather was the righteous Methushelach, who lived to the age of 969 and for whom the flood was delayed until the end of the week of mourning after his death (Midrash Rabba 32:7). As such, Noah was content to follow in the righteous ways of his family and felt no need to focus his energies elsewhere. Avraham, on the other hand, was raised in an idolatrous environment which he forcefully rejected. Because his life circumstances forced him to discover God on his own, he was more naturally inclined to work to disseminate the knowledge of God to others.

Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch writes that this explains why Noah was forced to endure such a difficult and exhausting year in the ark, instead of living peacefully with his family in the Land of Israel. Even though Noah was deemed sufficiently righteous to be saved and to repopulate the earth, he was found lacking in the area of feeling compassion for others. In order to teach this lesson, God required him to spend the duration of the flood engaged in continuous *chesed*, feeding the various animals around the clock, each with its own unique menu and eating time. The Midrash adds that Noah was so busy feeding the animals that he was unable to sleep that entire year in the ark, and when he once brought the lion's food a little late, it responded by biting him (Rashi, Gen. 7:23).

Still, although it is important to do acts of kindness for others, the Meshech Chochmah points out that one might assume that one nevertheless loses out in the process, as the time and energy dedicated to others come at the expense of investing in his own growth and development. However, he quotes a Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 36:3) which points out that precisely the opposite is in fact the case. Although Noah is initially introduced as an "*ish tzaddik tamim*" - a perfectly righteous man, his lifelong focus on himself caused him to fall and be transformed into an "*ish ha'adama*" - a man of the earth (Genesis 9:20).

In contrast, Moses, who dedicated his entire life to the welfare of others, was originally described (Exodus 2:19) as an "*ish mitzri*" - an Egyptian man who was forced into exile - but through his efforts on behalf of the Jewish people he elevated him to the pinnacle of perfection and was called (Deut. 33:1) an "*ish ha'Elokim*" - a man of God. This teaches that a person never loses out by doing *chesed* for others.

Opening and Closing the Floodgates

By Sheldon Stern

Some years back I was at a particular shul on Shabbos Parshas Noach. The Rabbi began his Drasha, "We all know that the events of Parshas Bereishis are allegorical, and we also know that when the Torah begins speaking about Avraham it's factual, but what about Noach?" After a pregnant pause he continued, "There was no flood. We know this because there's no accompanying historical record." This Rabbi is a good guy and a Yirei Shomayim, but I beg to differ with his approach to understanding the Torah. Most of us are still gorged from the Simchas Torah Kiddushim that culminated the holiday season. Growing up on the East Side it wasn't like that at all. Everyone in the shul I attended received ONE piece of herring and ONE piece of sponge cake after his Aliyah. Interestingly, the real highlight was Tashlich. Thousands of Jews of all stripes came to the East River Drive to "throw" out their sins. As Seinfeld said, "It was a scene man." Wall-to-wall Jews for blocks. But alas and alack those days are gone. For one thing, there are no longer thousands of Jews in the neighborhood. But the bigger problem is that the East River Drive as we knew it is no more. In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy the poobahs in City Hall decided that the "drive" had to be refigured with the barrier walls raised. I would suggest that the East River Project sheds light on what happened some "thousands?" of years ago.

I'm convinced that there was a terrible devastation so much so that the movers and shakers, led by Nimrod, felt that a repeat event had to be averted at all costs. But this leads us to ask why their project failed. We have a principle that in Judaism there's strength in unity and seemingly those involved in building that colossus were of like mind. Verse 11:1 states, "The people were of one tongue(Hebrew according to the Midrash) and unified purpose." But let's take a closer look. The term for one language is Safah Achas. Okay, that works. But for a unified purpose, it's Devarim Achadim. That's plural so what gives? Avos gives, as its example of the dispute that's not for Heaven, the contretemps between Korach and his cohorts. But weren't they all on board? Well, yes and no. The rebels all agreed that Moshe had to be removed, but the various factions had their own agendas. Shevet Reuvein wanted to regain its first-born status while Dasan and Aviram hoped to rid themselves of their nemesis. We can suggest a similar dynamic in our Parsha. For public consumption, everyone spouted the same cliches, "We need the Tower to protect our families in the future." But behind the scenes, a different reality emerged. The various contractors vied to have their bids accepted. Chicanery and skulduggery were likely the order of the day and Nimrod came out on top as the consummate politician. We can imagine that the losers took the "next train for the coast." realizing that they were now persona non grata. The Midrash teaches that Hashem confused the peoples' languages which led to strife. Rambam teaches us not to view Hashem as doing "hocus-pocus." I would therefore propose that as the groups dispersed to greener pastures distinct languages developed.

I readily concede that this model is likely far from what took place, but it's an attempt to stay faithful to the text. The novelty is that the future can shed light on the past. And there's a precedent. The Gemara tells us that Queen Esther was a Neviah, but if we read the Megillah it just seems like a remarkable story worthy of turning into a movie. That changed less than 100 years ago. Some Rabbis at Aish Hatorah noted that three letters in the section of Haman's 10 sons who were hung stood out, Shin, Tav, and Zayin. The numerical values yielded the year 5707, 1946 if you will, when 10 of Hitler's "sons" were hung. But wait there's more. Rashi, our foremost commentator, generally relies of Gemaras, Midrashim, and transmitted teachings for his comments, but there's a notable exception. In describing the Ephod, one of the Kohen Godol's vestments, he said, "Libi Amor Li" as Sir Paul once sang, "I've Got a Feeling." Rabbi Pesach Krohn once analyzed a verse from "Ashrei" Poseach Es Yodecha Umasbia Likol Chai Ratzon. He asked why the Psalmist added the word Ratzon and answered, "Hashem not only provides our needs but He fulfills our desires." For Rashi, all he wanted was to complete his mission. In our time, we have the story of Rab Chaim Kanievsky and the grasshopper.

Still, one loose end remains. I've suggested one approach to understanding the Parsha while that Rabbi has another, so why do I think mine is preferable(I don't say correct, because no one can definitively say that he's figured out any part of the Torah.) There's an interesting exchange near the end of Sefer Shemos in which Moshe Rabbeinu and his protegee Bezalel "argue" as to whether the walls of the Mishkan or its implements should be made first. Betzalel said it's the walls because this is the normal way that buildings are made. What we learn from this is that normalcy always has primacy. Therefore when we look at each Sefer of the Torah it must have the structure of a book, a beginning, middle, and end. To that point, we should be able to discern threads that run throughout. One such theme begins with Noach. The Midrash tells us that the two precipitating factors for the Mabul were theft and illicit relations. If we go through the Sefer the latter issue is prominently featured. When Avraham travels to Egypt and the land of the Philistines he tells Sarah to "lie" for his sake and say she's his sister. Why so? Having relations with a married woman was verboten, but killing the husband not so much. When Yehuda thought that Tamar had strayed, judgment was swift and severe. And when Yaakov criticized Shimon and Levi for wiping out Shechem their response was straight and to the point, "Such a thing isn't done." Finally, when Yosef passed his test with Potifar's wife it was like his Akeidah and his merit gave Jews the strength to endure the interminable exile. So why did theft get short shrift? It's common to attach a single cause to enormous events. When Rabbi Miller "explained" the Holocaust it was attributed to Chillul Shabbos. And when I was growing up Anne Frank was the face of the Holocaust. But it's more than this. Many don't view stealing as a sin, rather they think it's the normal way of doing business. On the other hand, it was easy to sell immorality, "It rained for 40 days Midah Kineged Middah for the illegitimate fetuses that were formed." became a permanent rallying cry.. If we recognize how fully this was ingrained we must look for its inception and, of course, it's the Flood. So one should think twice before dismissing the first two chapters of the Torah. As for that Rabbi's history argument, "Absence of proof isn't proof of absence."