

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Noah Part I Concerning The Flood

### 1. Overview

“Hashem saw that man’s wickedness on earth was great, and that every plan devised by his heart was just evil all the day long” (Gen. 6:5). Man had corrupted himself and had transformed the world into an incorrigibly evil place. G-d regretted having created man and decided to blot him out from the face of the earth, together with all the animals and lower creatures. The latter received their meaning and purpose from man, the crown of creation. Furthermore, in the Torah’s metaphor describing conditions in that prehistoric state, man’s behavior set the tone for the lower creatures. Accordingly, all flesh, including non-human, corrupted its way upon earth (v. 12, see *b. Sanh.* 108a) and G-d’s regret extended to them (vv. 6-7).

In *Parashat Bereshit*’s final verse, however, we read, “But Noah found favor in Hashem’s eyes” (v. 8)! How was G-d, in His righteousness, going to resolve this matter?

Many have asked a theological question: How can we understand G-d having regret for something He did if we assume He has foreknowledge of what is to occur? This is a variation of the question how can human free will be reconciled with G-d’s foreknowledge? The Torah’s basic position on this matter, albeit unspoken, is clear. Man’s free will is a fundamental feature in the design of creation; it is an axiomatic principle that gives meaning to life and to G-d’s purpose in commanding man and holding him accountable to abide by His will. Whatever must necessarily be assumed to support man’s free will should be assumed. To the extent that G-d’s foreknowledge would contradict man’s free will, it is His foreknowledge that must be acknowledged as restricted. Thus, many have posited that in His act of

creation, G-d restricted the scope of His foreknowledge as a necessary corollary of man’s free will. Of course in metaphoric contexts, in which the focus is on bringing out a lesson and side details are irrelevant, the question does not apply.

As to the issue of G-d having regret for His actions and becoming saddened, as well as the whole range of human-like emotions attributed to Him throughout the Torah, we may invoke a principle that the Sages apply in many contexts, *דִּיבְרֵיהּ תוֹרָה כְּלָשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם*, the Torah speaks in the language of man (*b. Ber.* 31b etc.).

Our *parasha* opens with a description of Noah’s outstanding righteousness, followed by further elaboration of the pervasive corruption of the world (Gen. 6:9-12). The repetition reflects the utter hopelessness of the situation as well as G-d’s dilemma with that one blameless man. Finally, G-d informs Noah of His decision to bring the great Flood. He instructs him to construct an ark to save himself, his immediate family and a male and female representative of each living species (seven pair of pure species apparently to accommodate eventual sacrifice) so that he may make a fresh start for life on earth.

The vessel of salvation is termed a *tebah* and is attested in only two biblical contexts, here and with regard to the receptacle in which the baby Moses was placed and saved (Exod. 2). This highlights a correspondence between these two great cases of salvation from water. (The miracle of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea did not require a vehicle.) It is noteworthy that the pre-Torah Mesopotamian flood stories, which bear many resemblances to the biblical narrative but which contain many crucial differences, speak of a regular ship, requiring boatmen, and denote that vehicle with the word that translates as *aniah* in

Hebrew, a word that is here apparently intentionally avoided.

An important element in the narrative is that Noah is the tenth generation from Adam. Ten generations represents a full measure of time, an adequate period for G-d to allocate to an enterprise before deciding if it is deserving of being allowed to continue. Similarly, the ten generations following Noah culminate with Abraham. At that point G-d decided that the world required another major intervention, albeit in a totally different manner. With these symmetrical blocks of generations He subtly transmits the message that He is in charge of history, that He has a program for the world that interacts with human free will and decision-making and that He is patient, but one way or another He will further His goals.

Unlike the cases with Abraham and Moses when becoming aware of G-d's intent to destroy a sinful people, we are not informed of any supplication Noah may have made on behalf of the imminent victims of the Flood. Perhaps there was no hope for the world as then constituted beyond the saving of those who would enter the ark. A prayer must have integrity. When Abraham prayed that Sodom be spared, he did not request that it should be spared regardless of there being a minimum number of righteous individuals in it (Gen. 18:23-32). It is understood that there must be a core of worthy people to provide the necessary merit and possibility for reform. When Moses prayed that Hashem spare Israel, he cited the *hillul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem's name) that would ensue from the destruction of Israel as well as the oath to the patriarchs concerning their progeny (Exod. 32:11-13), concepts not applicable in Noah's case.

The Flood narrative makes a number of fundamental principles crystal clear. One G-d controls all nature. He profoundly cares about human righteousness and justice and is deeply saddened by man's evil behavior (Gen. 6:6). His decision to destroy His creation was caused by man's abundant and ongoing sinning and by that alone, there being absolutely no capriciousness or fickleness on His part. The meaning and purpose of all creation is voided if society is corrupt beyond reform. Noah is saved only because he is righteous and G-d-fearing (7:1), not because of any of the other characteristics people admire in men.

These elements stand out as a vigorous protest against the concepts illustrated in the Mesopotamian flood stories that were formulated in pagan mythology. Although the Torah narrative contains numerous literary parallels to those compositions, many Torah details are clearly directed to counter objectionable features of those legends. All of the Mesopotamian stories without exception depict a multiplicity of gods with their own personal needs and desires, gods who inhere in nature and are limited by it. In those stories, the gods are petty and capricious; they are hostile to humanity or, at best, indifferent. They brought about the flood because they considered the proliferation of humankind a disturbance or threat to them. In the Mesopotamian flood tales the hero brings along workers, friends and relatives; it is only in the Torah that the renewed mankind stems from one righteous and identifiable human individual, thus promoting the goals of equity and universal brotherhood.

At the Flood's conclusion, G-d instructs Noah to leave the ark and build a new world. Noah's first act upon disembarking was to construct an altar and offer sacrifices to G-d, obviously as an expression of gratitude. Upon smelling the pleasing fragrance G-d makes a commitment: "Never again will I curse the earth because of man, since the devisings of his heart are evil from his youth – and so I will never again destroy all life as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). We will elaborate on G-d's new approach in the coming study.

## 2. Symbolism and Intertextual Literary Linkage

"When Lamech had lived 182 years he begot a son. He called his name Noah, saying, 'This one shall comfort us from our doings and from the pain of our hands which comes from the ground which was cursed by Hashem'" (Gen. 5:28-29). Lamech named his son Noah, which derives from the root meaning "rest" and "pleasing" (נח) and connected it with the concept of *yenahmenu*, a term derived from the root meaning "giving comfort" (נחם). This reflects an aspect of the literary system employed in the Torah wherein meaningful associations are often indicated by assonance and alliterative word plays.

What is the Torah informing us about, indeed highlighting, by quoting this father's prayer, formulated in the form of a regular prophecy, in which he names his son in accordance with the hope that he

should be a great benefactor to mankind?

It is widely attested in ancient Near Eastern literature that the number seven was a most prominent number; it and its multiples represented completion and perfection. The Torah adopted symbolism of the number seven and applied it to many cases particularly when referring to pre-Covenant matters. Subsequently, the number eight became the Covenant-signifier while the number seven was retained for certain contexts (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*).\*

Lamech lived a total of 777 years, clearly a significant number. At the time Noah was born, he was 182 years of age, or 7 x 26 and he subsequently lived 595 years, or 7 x 85, expiring shortly before the Flood. It appears noteworthy that Adam, whose total years are 930, lived until 56 years (7 x 8) after Lamech's birth, and that Noah is the first person in the Genesis genealogy table born after Adam's death. Presumably, Lamech was an individual of the highest spiritual caliber, one who deeply cared about the welfare of mankind, but who could not directly address the immense problems of society himself. He invested his energies and hopes in his son, whose birth and naming the narrative treats distinctively by altering the literary format from that of the previous generations. \*\*

The first words Lamech utters regarding his son's future benefaction strikingly correspond to the narrative's words shortly afterwards that portray Hashem's regret and sorrow at having created man. Once again we see the same root letters given another meaning in a related context. Lamech said, *יְבַחֲמֵנו מִן הָאָדָמָה* (Gen. 5:29) while Hashem's remorse is described as *אֶת כִּי עָשָׂה אֶת הַיְנֻקָּה ה' כִּי עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם בְּאֶרֶץ* followed by *וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל לְבוֹ* (6:6). The word *וַיִּנְחָם*, which here means "regretted," is in contrast to the previous use of the same root letters meaning, "will give comfort," while *וַיִּתְעַצֵּב*, which translates as "was grieved" or "had sorrow," parallels Lamech's usage of that root, which means "pain." Lamech's words are also linked to Hashem's words of the verse that follows (v. 7): *כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִים*.

The second part of the above-quoted statement of Lamech, which refers to the land that Hashem had cursed (in connection with Adam's transgression),

corresponds to Hashem's declaration after the Flood to never again curse the earth. Lamech said: *מִן הָאָדָמָה לֹא אֶסְיֵר לְקַלֵּל עוֹד* (5:29) while Hashem said *אֶת הָאָדָמָה* (8:21), *qll* being a synonym for *arr*.

It appears that Lamech's prayers, which were intended to be a corrective for Adam's transgression and the curse placed upon the earth because of it, contributed to creating the antidote to G-d's decree. Lamech may have been aware of the extent of society's corruption and realized that his only option to ameliorate the situation was to pray and beseech G-d for His intervention. The Torah reveals that his sincere efforts played a major role in setting the stage for the righteous Noah to save mankind from extinction.

The verse that immediately follows Hashem's statement of regret of *כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִים* – which informs us of His reason not to destroy all mankind but to allow the enterprise to continue through Noah – states *וַיִּנְחָם אֶת הָאָדָם* ("And Noah found favor in Hashem's eyes."). The word *וַיִּנְחָם* – a reversal play on the *נ* and *ח* letters of Noah's name – seems to be a reflection of the contraindication.

After the Flood, upon smelling the pleasing fragrance of Noah's sacrifices, Hashem declares that He will never again destroy the world as He did (8:21). The Hebrew phrase for pleasing fragrance is *רִיחַ הַבְּיָחָה*, apparently chosen (possibly originally coined) as a reference to Noah. Scholars have not found the phrase or its semantic cognate in pre-Torah literature.

In the case of the golden calf apostasy, Hashem said to Moses *וַיִּנְחָם לִי* ("leave Me...and I will destroy them" [Exod. 32:10]), speaking of destruction while hinting that a prayer was called for. One wonders: Does that unusual phrase – Hashem utilizing the *נ* and *ח* letters to hint that He was awaiting Moses' consent to act – recall the merit of Noah? After Moses' prayer it states *וַיִּנְחָם ה'* ("and Hashem changed His mind from the destruction He had intended to bring"), again using the key letters.

### **3. *Ma'aseh Abot Siman LeBanim*: Association of the Narratives of Lamech and Noah with Jeremiah**

The Sages interpreted Scripture with a principle that the doings of the fathers may foreshadow events in the lives of their descendants, smoothening the way for

them, a notion later coined as מְעֵשֵׂי אָבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים. Whatever the fuller meaning of that concept, it does appear that there is a case in *Tanakh* that the Noah narrative is particularly relevant to, that of Jeremiah and his generation.

G-d continually complained to the prophets about Israel's rampant disobedience and made it clear that unless the people repented He intended to destroy them. Jeremiah was a central figure in those events.

Hashem said to him, regarding a time before the prophet was conceived, "Before I formed you in the stomach I selected you; Before you came forth from the womb I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5), obviously referring to his highly devoted parents, a case comparable to that of Lamech. To some degree it is in his parents' merit that Jeremiah was given the opportunity to save the nation, if not from destruction then from extinction.

Although Jeremiah valiantly tried to bring the nation to repentance and prevent the exile, the die was virtually cast. He envisioned the undoing of creation:

I looked at the earth, it was תְּהוֹ וְנִבְהוּ, and at the heavens, their light was gone, I looked at the mountains, behold, they were quaking...I looked, and behold there was no man and all the birds of the heavens had fled, I looked and behold, the fertile land was desert and all its cities were in ruin... For thus Hashem said: "The whole land shall be desolate yet I will not make a complete end of it" (Jer. 4:23-26).

Jeremiah's mandate was to oversee the comprehensive destruction and build a foundation for a revived nation: לְנָתוּשׁ וּלְנָתוּץ וּלְהָאָבִיד וּלְהָרוֹס לְבָנוֹת וּלְנָטוּעַ ("to uproot and to break, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" [Jer. 1:10]). As G-d contracted a Covenant with Noah to assure a future for mankind, He promised Jeremiah that He would contract a Covenant with Israel in the rebuilding stage that will assure it a future of great spiritual heights (31:30). Jeremiah's successful achievement of his assignment

is reminiscent of the case of Noah.

## Endnotes

\* Prominent examples in our *parasha* of the use of the number seven besides those associated with Lamech are the taking of seven pair each of the pure species of animals, G-d's informing Noah that "in seven days I will begin the rains" (Gen. 7:4), the ark coming to rest in the seventh month (8:4) and Noah thrice waiting seven days before sending forth the dove (8:10-12). There are also a number of elements of covenant symbolism in our *parasha*. Upon informing Noah of the upcoming flood (Gen. 6:18), G-d had announced His intention to establish a covenant with him. Although that statement appeared to refer merely to the rescue of Noah and representatives of all species, it does foreshadow the post-diluvian Covenant. In the Covenant passage itself (9:8-17) there are seven attestations of the *berit* (covenant) stem, which modern commentators consider significant, since seven represented wholeness and completion in the ancient Near East. However, it appears more likely that the *berit* attestation in 6:18 should be included with the seven others, yielding a total of eight, symbolic of the Covenant. G-d declares the sign of the Covenant to be the קֶשֶׁת (rainbow). In *gematria* (a system wherein each letter of the alphabet has a number value), *qeshet* has a value of 800, apparently a reference to the Covenant that may also be symbolized by decimal multiples of eight. The number of individuals saved on the ark is eight – Noah, his three sons, and their four wives.

\*\* The number seven is also prominent in regard to the first Lamech, the seventh generation from Adam in the line of Cain. Whereas to protect Cain from a blood-avenger that might kill him G-d had declared, "sevenfold will it be avenged," Lamech said that in the case of his slaying, "If sevenfold Cain would be avenged then Lamech seventy-seven" (Gen. 4:24).