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After the Flood: The relationship between Abraham and Terah

Rabbi David Horwitz

The end of Parashat Noah (Genesis chapter 11) details the Tower of Babel narrative, the generations of the line of Shem, and concludes with a detailed discussion of the family of Terah.

When Terah had lived seventy years, he begot Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai, and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran (Genesis 11:26-32).

The verses at the end of the Book of Joshua states, which ever –so-briefly detail the generations of the patriarchs, explicitly state that Terah was an idolater: The founder of the Israelite monotheistic people was his son, Abraham.

Then Joshua said to all the people: "Thus said the L-RD, the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers- Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor- lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill-country of Seir as his possession, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt (Joshua 24:2-4).

The beginning of Genesis chapter 12, the beginning of Parashat Lech-lecha, describes the departure of Abram from Haran:

The L-rd said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation,

And I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

And you shall be a blessing:

I will bless those that bless you,

And curse those that curse you;

All the families of the earth

Shall bless themselves by you.

Abram went forth as the L-RD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5).

The difficulty one has with the verses at the end of Parashat Noah, which conclude with the death of Terah, in light of all the other verses, is succinctly made by Ramban to Genesis 11:32:

After Abram had left (Haran, as related in Genesis 12, and had come to the land of Canaan), Terah remained alive for many years after that! {Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4), and Terah was seventy years of age when Abram was born (Genesis 11:26, cited above), making Terah 145 years old at the time Abram left Haran. Terah thus lived for sixty more years, as he died at the age of 205! (Genesis 11:32, cited above) Thus, it is mathematically incorrect to assert that Terah died before any of the events that are transcribed in Genesis 12 (which detail Abram leaving Haran at the age of 75) occurred. But that implication is certainly the simple meaning the verse in Genesis 11:32!}

Ramban has reservations about Rashi's two answers to the

problem. Rashi (commentary to Genesis 11:32) writes:

Why then does Scripture mention the death of Terah before the departure of Abram? In order that this matter (his leaving home during his father's lifetime) might not become known to all, lest people say that Abram did not show a son's respect to his father, for he left him in his old age and went his way. (In other words, the Torah purposefully mentioned Terah's death before the actual time of its occurrence.)

Although Rashi does not proceed to write *daver aher*, or some other formulation which usually introduces a second answer, he nonetheless proceeds to give what can be viewed as a separate distinct answer:

That is why Scripture speaks of him (Terah) as dead. For indeed the wicked even while alive are called dead, and the righteous even when dead are called living, as it is said, And Benaiah the son of Yehoiada the son of a living man (2 Samuel 23:20). (In other words, although Terah was still physically alive, spiritually, he was already dead.)

Ramban's objection to Rashi's first answer is the following:

This is the customary way for Scripture to relate the life of a father, his begetting a son, and his death, and afterwards to begin the narration of the son in all generations. This is the usual manner of Scripture.

(Thus it was not a special exception from the general rule, ... in order that this matter (of leaving his home during his father's lifetime) might not be publicized at all, lest people say that Abram did not show a son's respect to his father... that the Torah wrote in this manner; on the contrary, the Torah usually does write in such a manner, even if it is not chronologically exact.)

Ramban rejects the second explanation of Rashi as well.

For the Sages (Bereshit Rabbah 34:4, 38:18) have already deduced from the verse As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace... (Genesis 15:15) that He announced to Abraham that his father would have a portion in the World to Come.

(Thus, it is incorrect to claim that Terah was a wicked man who would be considered "dead." Apparently, Terah was a righteous man who merited a share in the World to Come!)

Ramban first suggests the following approach at harmonization:

Perhaps the intent of the Rabbis was that Terah repented at the time of his death (but not before that!), but he lived all his days in wickedness and therefore was called "dead." In the words of Rashi, "Scripture teaches you that Terah did repentance at the time of death."

Then, Ramban gives a powerful second answer:

Perhaps it may be that Terah has a portion in the World

to Come by virtue of his son. And that was the announcement (in Genesis 15:15), for Abraham did not know it until he was informed of it at the time God told him As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

In other words, perhaps Terah never repented. Indeed, he remained a wicked man up until and including the day that he died. But nonetheless, God legitimately announced to Abraham that his father would have a portion in the World to Come. How can that be? To help in understanding the idea, Ramban cites a Midrash:

All kinds of wood were valid for use in the altar fire except for the wood of the olive and the vine (Mishnah, Massekhet Tamid 2:3), for since oil and wine were offered upon the altar, the fruits save the trees. And so we find in the case of Abraham, that he saved Terah, as it is said, As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. (All the aforementioned extracts from the commentary of Ramban can be found in Rabbi Moses Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah: Genesis, ed. Chavel, pp. 161-63.)

The source that Ramban cites can be found in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah VII:2, at the beginning of Parashat Tzav. The Midrash cites Proverbs 10:12:

*Hatred stirs up strife,
But love covers up all faults.*

The Midrash discusses how Moses prayed to God on behalf of his brother Aaron:

'Love' refers to the prayer which Moses offered up for him (Aaron). How did Moses pray for him? R. Mani of Sheab and R. Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi said: From the beginning of the Book (of Leviticus) until this passage, it is written: And the sons of Aaron shall present the blood (Leviticus 1:5) etc., And the sons of Aaron shall put fire, etc. (ibid., 1:7), And the sons of Aaron shall lay the pieces, etc. (ibid., 1:8). Said Moses to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Can it be that the well is hated while its water is beloved? You have accorded honor to trees for the sake of their offspring, as we have learnt in the Mishnah (Tamid 2:3): 'All trees may be used for the altar fire, except the olive and the vine.' Will You then not accord honor to Aaron for the sake of his sons? The Holy One, blessed be He, answered, "By your life, for your sake will I reinstate him; moreover, I shall treat him as the chief, and his sons as secondary" (as it is said), "And the L-RD spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons..." (Leviticus 6: 1). {Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus translated into English by Rev. J. Israelstam [London, Soncino Press, 1939], p. 90.}

Although the Talmud (Tamid 29b, and the Rambam (Hilkhot Issurei Mizbeah 7:3) write that the reason why one does not bring twigs of the olive tree or of the vine to

the ma'arakhah (of the altar) is because of Yishuv Eretz Yisrael (the economy of Israel needs those twigs to produce grapes for wine and olives for olive oil), Ramban, following the Midrash, understands that there is a profound symbolic significance to the law. Moreover, he expands upon the Midrash's application of the matter. True, the Midrash applies God's treatment to certain trees in consideration of the role that their future fruits would play to the case of human beings whose sins are forgiven because of their children (their "fruits"). But whereas the Midrash only applied it to Aaron and his children, Ramban introduces this idea with respect to Terah and Abraham as well.

Perhaps one can add that according to Ramban, the analogy to twigs upon the altar is especially appropriate. Terah was saved from the fires of Gehinnom, and accorded a

place in the World to Come, precisely because of the deeds of Abraham. Just as the fruit of the olive tree and the vine saves the trees from being burnt (on the altar in the Mishkan, and subsequently in the Temple), Abraham's good deeds saved Terah from the fires of hell.

This beautiful explanation of the Ramban had special resonance in our own days, when so many younger Jews are more religiously observant than their parents. How do the two generations relate? How can they relate? In general, must observant Jews feel that their non-religious relatives are spiritually lost forever?

Ramban's notion provides a novel way of looking at this phenomenon. Abraham did not have to feel that his father Terah was doomed to perdition. He knew that his actions could (and did!) save his father. Indeed, fruits save the trees.

The Significance of Ararat

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

In this week's parasha, the Torah details the numerous preparations Hashem commanded Noach to perform in anticipation of the Mabbul (Flood). Noach is commanded to build the Teivah (Ark), to bring the various animals into the Teivah, to collect various plant life for food, etc. When the Mabbul finally ended and the water began to recede, the Torah tells us, the Teivah lands on Harei Ararat (the mountains of Ararat). Why is this detail, seemingly minor and irrelevant, so important to share? Why must it be recorded in the Torah, for all generations to know?

The Torah goes on to record the genealogy from Noach to Avraham. In the middle of this family tree, the Torah interrupts to relate the story of Migdal Bavel (the Tower of Babel). Why does the Torah squeeze the story of Migdal Bavel in here, instead of dedicating giving it its own section elsewhere? Why is it included as part of the chain of generations from Noach to Avraham?

The generation that built Migdal Bavel said, "Havah nivneh lanu ir u'migdal, Let us build a city and a tower..." (Bereishit 11:3). While we generally interpret the issue to be with the tower, the Torah here indicates that the city itself was also problematic. This is also clear from a later passuk, in which Hashem descends to see "the city and the tower"

(11:5). But what is the problem with their building a city? On the contrary, building a city is something that brings people together!

When HaKadosh Baruch Hu created Man, the Torah says, "Zachar unkeivah bara otam, Male and female He created them" (1:27). This is in fact the first time the Torah uses the terms "male" and "female," despite the fact that these terms apply to animals as well. (In fact, the Torah applies these terms to animals several times in our parasha. For instance, the Torah describes the animals coming to Noach "shnayim shnayim ... zachar unkeivah, Two by two... male and female" (7:9).) Why, then, are these terms used for the first time by Adam and Chavah, rather than by the animals created before them?

The reason is that when HaKadosh Baruch Hu created Adam and Chavah, He created them with the intent that "ya'azov ish et aviv v'et imo v'davak b'ishto, a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife" (2:25). The root davak appears elsewhere in the Torah as well: "V'atem hadveikim baShem Elokeichem chayim koolchem hayom, And you who cleave to Hashem, your L-rd, are still alive this day" (Devarim 4:5), suggesting that everything a person does in this world, even the most physical of actions, should be done with kedushah and taharah, living the life of Truth.

But Man instead corrupted his actions and the world, to the point that the Mabbul was necessary. When the Teivah came to rest on Harei Ararat, the dove brought Noach an olive leaf. Chazal ask in Midrash Rabbah where the dove obtained an olive leaf, considering that everything was destroyed in the Mabbul, and answer that the dove got it from Har HaZeitim, because in Eretz Yisrael there was no Mabbul. Essentially, the dove was reminding Noach through the olive leaf that in building a new world, the goal should be to reach Har HaZeitim, Har HaMoriyah, and Yerushalayim, where man was created. The entire world should have this as its destination, even if it takes hundreds of years to arrive there. Right now, as you sit in the Teivah at the highest point in Turkey, with a view of the entire world, you should spot your destination and lead the world in that direction.

Noach accepts this legacy, and his descendants as well, until the Torah suddenly says, “Vayehi kol ha’aretz safah achat udvarim achadim, And the entire world spoke one language, of one mind” (Bereishit 11:1). They all had the same destination in mind – Yerushalayim and Har HaMoriyah – until Nimrod arose and sparked a revolution. “Havah nivneh lanu ir umigdal, Let us build a city and a tower,” he said. The Beit HaMikdash is called “Migdal oz shem Hashem, Tower of the strength of the name of Hashem” (Mishlei 18:10), surrounded by Yerushalayim. Nimrod invented an alternative – Bavel. As the midrash comments: “And they scorned the land of desire’ (Tehillim 106:24) – this refers to that which is written: ‘And as they traveled from the East, they found a valley in the land of Shinar’ (Bereishit 9:2).” They rejected

Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim, and the Mikdash, choosing instead to create a New Israel, an alternative in Bavel.

This is why HaKadosh Baruch Hu descends to see the city as well. It is not just a city with a tower in it, but a rejection of Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim. This is the reason the Torah interrupts the genealogy of Noach with this incident. The world had been heading towards Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim, and Har HaMoriyah, until this incident. Only one person ultimately arrived at the destination of Har HaMoriyah – Avraham Avinu. From the power of Avraham, we, his descendants, have the strength to follow in his footsteps.

Today, as we watch the events around us unfold, we find the world in a state of upheaval and confusion. We witness horrible natural disasters – the tsunami, earthquakes, hurricanes – rendering hundreds of thousands dead and millions homeless. How can we survive in such a world? In two ways. We must remember our destination – Eretz Yisrael, the most secure place for Am Yisrael – and we must remember the lesson taught by the dimensions of the Teivah. The Torah tells us that the Teivah was 30 amot high, 300 amot long, and 50 amot wide. In gematria, this represents the letters lamed, shin, and nun, forming the word lashon, tongue. With our lashon we create teivot, words. We have the ability to create teivot that will protect us from the upheaval of the world. If we remember how to use our lashon properly, using dibbur as we should in our interpersonal interactions, we can create one teivah after another to protect us and carry us to Eretz Yisrael.

Visiting the Zoo

Rabbi Michael Taubes

After announcing to Noach His intention to destroy the world and to save him and his immediate family, Hashem instructs Noach to take two of each living species into the Ark that he was building so that they would survive the coming flood (Bereishit 6:19-20). It was to be Noach’s responsibility to care and provide for all these creatures while in the Ark (see Rashi to 7:23, s.v. ach), making him the first large-scale animal keeper. In modern times, the largest collections of living creatures concentrated into one place are in zoos and wildlife preserves. While such places are popular among visitors of all ages, and indeed

are often destinations for family and school trips, there are a number of Halachic issues to consider when going to the zoo.

To begin with, it should be noted, as stated by the Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah (10:7) that all of Hashem’s creatures were created with a purpose in mind, even if we human beings don’t readily see it. The Gemara in Shabbat (77b) and the Yerushalmi in Berachot (9:2) provide some utilitarian functions of even various insects; Tiferet Yisrael to Pirkei Avot (4:3, #19, 20) likewise documents this idea that everything created has a purpose. The Chovot HaLevavot (Shaar HaYichud chapter 7) discusses the wisdom apparent

in the creation of every living thing, and the Rambam, in his Moreh Nevuchim (III:13), posits that this obvious intent inherent in creation proves that the world was indeed created and did not result from some random series of events. The Kav HaYashar (chapter 83) notes that it is thus improper to kill any living creature other than if necessary to prevent injury or harm, while the Chazon Ish (Emunah U'Bitachon 1:7) writes that all living creatures contribute to the beauty of the world. Visiting a zoo may thus enable a person to gain greater appreciation of the wisdom and majesty of Hashem's creation.

The Gemara in Berachot (58b) teaches that one must recite a berachah concluding with the words "shekachah lo be'olamo" upon seeing beautiful creatures and a berachah concluding with the words "meshaneh es haberiyos" upon seeing certain unusual creatures; specifically singled out are elephants and monkeys. The Gemara in Rosh HaShanah (31a), as explained by Rashi (s.v. shebara), indicates more generally that one should praise Hashem as the Creator upon seeing unusual birds. These rulings are codified by the Rambam (Hilchot Berachot 10:12-13) and by the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 225:8, 10), who states that the berachah upon unusual creatures is actually "meshaneh haberiyos." The Chayei Adam (63:1) writes that the current practice is not to recite the berachah upon seeing beautiful creatures because we are more accustomed to seeing them on a regular basis; the Mishnah Berurah (ibid. #32) accepts this position in principle, but adds that one should in fact recite the berachah, but without mentioning the name of Hashem. In the Shaar HaTziyun (ibid. #33), he explains that perhaps the berachah was instituted only in conjunction with seeing especially beautiful creatures, and it is difficult to determine which creatures Chazal had in mind.

As for the berachah upon seeing unusual creatures, Rav Ovadyah Yosef (Sefer Yalkut Yosef, Volume 3, 225:21) rules that it should be recited with the name of Hashem upon seeing an elephant or a monkey. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Sefer Halichot Shlomo, Tefillah, 23:35) writes that it is recited when seeing any unusual animals, not just elephants and monkeys; he also rules (ibid. note 135) that the blessing should be recited just once when one enters the zoo and encounters the first such animal, having in mind that the berachah will cover any others that he may see. (For an interesting discussion relating to why elephants and monkeys may be in a unique category, see Melechet Shlomo to the Mishnah in Kilayim 8:6, s.v. hapil vehakof, who asserts

that at the time of the flood, certain people were turned into these specific animals. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 109a makes a similar statement about people from the generation of Migdal Bavel; see the Chidushei Aggadot of Maharal there s.v. veamar zo, the Chidushei Aggadot of Maharsha there s.v. nivneh, and Margaliyot HaYam there #6. See also Meiri to Berachot 58b s.v. haroeh pil and to Eiruvin 31b s.v. hamishnah hashelishit.) In view of this requirement to recite a berachah upon seeing at least certain animals, a visit to the zoo presents one with this opportunity that he might otherwise not get; it is reported (Sefer Orchot Rabbeinu Baal HaKehilat Yaakov, Volume 1 p.94, #116) that the Steipler Gaon took his children to the zoo in Ramat Gan in order to see the monkeys and recite the appropriate berachah there. In a similar vein, the Minchat Elazar writes (Nimukei Orach Chaim 225, note 5) of his own visit to a zoo (and an aquarium) in Berlin where he recited this berachah as well.

In spite, however, of the discussion up to this point from which it seems that not only is it permissible to visit a zoo, but that it may have some positive benefits, there are those who rule that visiting a zoo may in fact be prohibited by the Halachah. The Gemara in Shabbat (149a), as explained by Rashi (s.v. katav), teaches that it is forbidden to stare at a statue of either a human being or an animal. This idea is based on a Posuk in the Torah (Vayikra 19:4) and the concern is that one may come to worship this statue. Rav Moshe Greenwald of Chust (Shu"t Arugat HaBosem, Orach Chaim #39) contends that if one may not gaze at the statue of an animal, one may certainly not gaze at an animal itself, effectively precluding one from going to the zoo to see the animals. Although according to Tosafot in Shabbat there (s.v. vedeyukeni) the entire prohibition to gaze at statues relates exclusively to statues that were made expressly for the purpose of idolatry, which would then have no bearing on looking at live animals, there is another opinion which emerges from Tosafot to Avodah Zarah 50a (s.v. hachi garsinan) according to which the prohibition applies even to statues which were not made expressly for idolatrous purposes; this view is in line with the Arugat HaBosem's strict position.

Many authorities, however, assert that the former position is the one accepted as the Halachah; the Shach, for example (Yoreh Deah 142:33), permits looking at statues made for decorative, as opposed to idolatrous, concerns. The Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim 307:23) adds that even according to the stricter opinion, the prohibition is only to

stare or gaze, but not to look in a more casual manner, but he likewise indicates that the common practice in any case follows the lenient view that one may look at a statue as long as it was not designated for idolatry; the Mishnah Berurah (Biur Halachah *ibid.* s.v. *ve'over*) concurs. Rav Ovadyah Yosef (Shu"t Yabia Omer Volume 4, Orach Chaim #20; see also his Shu"t Yechaveh Daat Volume 3 #66) demonstrates that this is indeed the majority opinion; there would then be no basis to forbid looking at animals in a zoo which, it can be assumed, are not designated for idolatry. It may be noted that the Chida (Birkei Yosef to Yoreh Deah *ibid.* #15, and in Shiutei Berachah #3) writes that it is admirable to be stringent and avoid gazing at even statues not made for idolatrous purposes, but Rav Ovadyah Yosef (*ibid.*) notes that this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it is likewise wrong to gaze at live animals, a contention he supports by asserting that the Chida himself visited a zoo in London, as documented in his *Midbar Kedemot, Maarechet Beit* #22.

Another concern raised by the Arugat HaBosem is based on an earlier Gemara in Avodah Zarah (18b) which

derives from a Posuk in Tehillim (1:1) that it is improper to hunt animals for sport (see Rashi *ibid.* s.v., *kinigon*); he derives from there that even watching animals perform in other ways is also prohibited, and that it is thus possible to extend this prohibition to watching animals in a circus. Even if one would then wish, however, to extend it further to include going to a zoo, as does one authority cited by Rav Natan Geshtetner (Shu"t LeHorot Natan Volume 4 #68), this is not at all the consensus view, as most hold that the prohibition rooted in that Gemara is limited to activities in which animals are treated in a cruel manner and are made to experience pain and discomfort as part of a sporting event. This would therefore have no bearing on visiting a zoo to watch animals engage in their normal activities; it should be noted, though, that the Gemara in Avodah Zarah 20a states that one should not gaze at animals when they are mating. In light of all of the above, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of authorities do not prohibit visiting a zoo and indeed assert that there are benefits to such an excursion in terms of recognizing the beauty of the world which Hashem created and blessing Him accordingly.

Why Were the Fish Spared?

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

Although the Mabul (Flood) obliterated all earthly life, save Noach and his family, and the Medrash records that even the top layer of ground was subject to destruction (v. Rashi on Bereshis 6:13), the Gemara notes that marine life was not harmed by the Mabul. (Sanhedrin 108a, quoted by Rashi on Bereshis 7:22)

Why is this so? Chazal explain that the world became so corrupt such that even beats and fowl were interbreeding, each with different species within its respective general category. (Rashi on Bereshis 6:12) Were marine creatures somehow different than land-bound wildlife, resulting in the marine creatures being spared?

I think that we can answer this question by analyzing exactly how the world became corrupt, precipitating the Mabul.

The first record of societal sin appears with Enosh, in whose generation idolatry commenced. (V. Targum Yonasan

ben Uziel on Bereshis 4:26.) We later read about mass licentiousness (Bereshis 6:1-5), and then about pervasive robbery (*ibid.* v. 11).

There is a pattern to these aveiros (transgressions). First came the denial of an omnipotent, infinite, noncorporeal, single God, as the result of the emerging belief in various deities, to which were attributed physical forms and limitations. Once deities were envisioned as limited, they could be defined, crafted and manipulated by humans, such that they had no "authority" to which humans were compelled to surrender. This allowed for a society of unrestricted freedoms such as licentiousness, as the deities were defined by the people rather than the people being subject to divinely-imposed statutes and standards. Once people became acclimated to being unfettered and unencumbered by restrictions imposed by any "higher authority", there was nothing to prevent them from acting against each other, i.e. robbery.

In other words, society was overtaken by all-encompassing and wide-ranging corruption through a gradual process of sin which unfolded and expanded, likely without the people realizing the extent and long-term effects of their actions. Things were getting out of hand in a manner never imagined by those who, in the generation of Enosh, merely accorded undue honor to celestial bodies, eventually leading to the worship of these bodies and other physical forms. (V. Rambam Hil. Avodah Zarah 1:1-2.) The initial erroneous beliefs seven generations prior evolved and snowballed into total societal degradation by the time of the Mabul.

Furthermore, one must note the pervasive manner by which the aveiros spread. The Rambam (ibid.) writes that the scholars of the generation were the ones who promoted the beliefs and actions that led to avodah zarah (idolatry); widespread licentiousness was initiated by the leadership and nobility (Rashi from Medrash on Bereshis 6:2); the Torah mentions this immorality as first committed by humans (ibid.), and we later find that it had spread to wildlife (ibid. v. 12, in Rashi [from Medrash]). A single sin of a select few expanded into a group of sins by the masses, encompassing all life, as the qualitative and quantitative influence of corruption enveloped all that was exposed to it. Everything in the sphere of those horrific aveiros became tainted by them.

The Psychology of Noach

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

After one hundred and twenty years of building and preparing, the time has finally come. The rain is falling, the flood waters are rising, and as a result, “Va’yavo Noach u’vanav ve’ishto, u-neshei vanav ito el ha-tevah mipnei mei ha-mabul” (Bereishis 7:7), Noach and his family enter the protective cover of the ark.

At first glance this pasuk seems unremarkable, perhaps even superfluous – of course Noach entered the ark – and yet, Rashi cites an astonishing Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 32 #6) which sees great significance in the final words of the verse. According to the Midrash, Noach only went into the ark “mipnei mei ha-mabul,” when he was finally forced (“mipnei”) into it by the waters of the flood. However, until

What was not in the sphere of influence of the corrupt society? Marine life. Marine life exists in its own biosphere, impervious and immune to what transpires on land. Land life cannot survive in the water, and aquatic life cannot survive on land. These two classes of creatures do not and cannot exist in the same realm; hence, marine life was unaffected by the pervasive corruption that had spread on the earth, and was therefore spared from the Mabul.

On a philosophical level, the message that comes forth is reminiscent of the Rambam’s mandate for one who lives in a sinful society: he must flee from that society and dwell far away - in solitude if need be. One who is surrounded by corruption is bound to be overtaken by it and may not stay put; the negative influences cannot be kept away permanently. Marine life was not influenced by the Dor Ha-Mabul (Generation of the Flood) and was thus spared because it was cut off from what was happening “on the ground” due to the natural border that keeps the land and aquatic biospheres apart.

Although the Torah does not encourage people to live as hermits, if one finds himself in the midst of a corrupt environment, the Torah dictates that he may not remain there. Such an individual must become a Noach and escape to a taivah (ark) if that is the only locus where he can live free of deleterious influences.

that moment Noach had refused to enter the ark because, “mi’katnei emunah haya, ma’amin v’eno ma’amin she’yavo ha-mabul,” he lacked complete faith and didn’t really believe that there would be a flood.

Many subsequent commentators have struggled to explain this shocking statement of the Midrash. After all, is it conceivable that Noach, who is described by the Torah as a “tzaddik tamim,” lacked emunah in Hashem and His promise? Could it be that Noach spent all that time and extended all that effort to build an ark for a flood that he didn’t really believe would happen?

R. Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev (Kedushas Levi) offers a novel explanation and suggests that the Midrash is actually asserting that Noach lacked faith in himself. He was

“mi’katnei emunah” not because he didn’t believe in God’s promise, but in the sense that he lacked self-confidence and didn’t fully believe in himself. R. Levi Yitzchok further suggests that this is the reason that Noach never challenged Hashem about the decree to destroy the world. Many sources are critical of Noach’s silence – especially in contrast with Avraham’s attempts to save Sedom – but R. Levi Yitzchok explains that this wasn’t because Noach was apathetic or self absorbed, but rather because he lacked the confidence to do anything about it. After all, it takes a lot of confidence – and perhaps some chutzpah as well – to argue with Hashem and Noach was simply too insecure about his worthiness to do something that audacious.

Apparently what started out as self-doubt “snowballed” into almost paralyzing insecurity. By the time the flood waters began to rise Noach had reached the point where he

was no longer sure whether he even deserved to be saved; Noach was “ma’amin v’eno ma’amin” about his own virtue.

The Torah, of course, extols the virtue of modesty, but we must be aware that the line between modesty and self-doubt is often faint and easy to miss. And as evidenced by Noach, self-doubt can be exacerbated by pressurized situations and, over time, can even be paralyzing. To pass life’s most demanding tests one must possess a healthy degree of self-confidence. Rarely – if ever – are people who lack self-confidence successful. In all areas of life, whether in the board room or the Beis Midrash, to achieve greatness first one must be “mi’gedolei ha-emunah,” believing fully in their own capacity for greatness.

Or, as Samuel Johnson articulated so matter-of-factly, “Self-confidence is the first requisite to great undertakings.”