

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Noach

Environmental Awareness

INTRODUCTION: A MIDRASH TO MYSTIFY

In Tehillim Chapter Five¹ we read:

תִּשְׁמַד דְּבָרֵי כָזָב... וְאֲנִי בְרַב חֶסֶדְךָ אָבוֹא בֵּיתְךָ

You shall destroy the speakers of falsehood... And I, through Your abundant kindness, will enter Your house.

The Midrash relates these verses to the events of the flood, with the “speakers of evil” in the first verse referring to the generation which was wiped out, while the second verse is Noah speaking about himself. In this light, how are we to translate the opening word “וְאֲנִי”? On a Pshat level, we would translate it as “as for me,” with the letter vav setting Noah apart from those in the first verse. The Midrash, however, proceeds to translate the letter vav in accordance with its primary meaning – “and me” – which serves to link the two:

וְאֲנִי: כִּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ כֵן עָשִׂיתִי. מָה בֵּינִי לְבֵינֵם? אֵלֶּא שְׁנִמְלַתְנִי חֶסֶד וְאָמַרְתָּ לִּי בֵּא אֶתָּה וְכֹל בֵּיתְךָ אֵל הַתִּיבָה

And I: just as they did, so did I. What, then, is the difference between me and them? That you performed a kindness for me and told me “Come you and all of your household to the ark.”

A number of questions arise regarding this Midrash:

1. How can Noah meaningfully equate himself with the wicked people of his generation, to the extent that he sees no difference between them and him other than Hashem’s kindness towards him? The Torah explicitly calls him a tzaddik! Is this simply Noah being humble and ignoring his righteousness?
2. Assuming we accept Noah’s indicting assessment of himself, his question still remains: why was he spared from the flood? His answer was that Hashem performed a kindness for him and allowed him to enter the ark, but the question is why did Hashem perform this kindness for him and not for anyone else?

¹ Verses 7-8.

An additional observation on this Midrash is that it adduces the verse “In Your abundant kindness I will come to Your house” regarding Noah entering the ark. This is most intriguing: We would naturally refer to the ark as “Noah’s house” for that year, yet the Midrash is informing us that it was actually “Hashem’s house.” What is the meaning of this designation and how does it relate to the Midrash’s discussion of Noah?

THE LAWS OF NATURE – AND THEIR RULES

The Beis Halevi prefaces his explanation of the Midrash by asking another question. Chazal inform us that in the generation of the flood, the entire world was corrupt, with even animals mating with other species. How are we to understand the idea of animals acting in a corrupt manner? Animals do not possess free will, they are bound to follow their nature! The answer, says the Beis Halevi, is that when man chooses evil over good and corrupts his nature, this also has a corrupting effect on the nature of his surroundings and all the beings therein. It is true that an animal can only follow its nature, but at that time the nature of animals itself had been changed. In other words, when man became corrupt, the animals became corrupted.²

NOAH AND THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL TRANSPLANT OPERATION

This brings us to Noah himself. Delicately, we ask: if the corruption of mankind’s nature can affect the nature of animals, can it affect the nature of another person? The answer, says the Beis Halevi, is that it can, especially as each person has an animal part to their nature.³ This is the meaning of the Midrash in which Noah equates his behavior with that of his generation. He was not saying that was as wicked as they; after all, as the Torah states explicitly, he was a righteous person. However, he was conceding that he had not remained immune to the effect that their choices had on his nature, making it harder for him to always do the right thing.⁴

This brings us to the ark. It was not just a place where it didn’t rain that year. It was a place that allowed for the rehabilitation of Noah to his full original spiritual capacity! If Noah’s problem was that he had been adversely affected by what had become a bad environment, the obvious antidote was to place him in a good one. The best environment that year was the ark, for it housed not only all the animals, but also the Divine presence itself. This is why it is referred to as Hashem’s house, and that was the kindness which Hashem performed for Noah.

There is a parallel comment of the Midrash which bears out this theme, which applies the verse “שְׁתוּלִים בְּבֵית ה’ – planted in the house of Hashem” to Noah and his family. A tree derives

2 This may also give us insight into a curious group of animals at that time. Rashi informs us that the two of each species which were allowed to enter Noah’s ark were those who had not acted in a corrupt manner. This, idea is now even more perplexing. Having just established that the nature of animals at that had changed, how can we then understand that were a group of individual animals who were somehow immune to this change? Rav Geldalyah Schorr (Ohr Gedalyahu Parshas Noach) explains that if the wicked behavior of mankind at that time affected the nature of animals in general, the specific moral stance of Noah and his family in refusing to choose evil over good likewise affected a sub-group of each species. These were the animals who found their way to Noah’s ark. They were, in a sense, “his” animals.

3 The full implications of this idea is that it is possible for someone to sin to the extent that he makes it harder for another person to resist sinning. In this situation, although the second person bears primary responsibility for his actions, the first person will also bear some responsibility for having facilitated those sins. In this vein, the Beis Halevi explains the expression used by the sages (see e.g. Pirkei Avos 3:1) whereby a person will in the future need to give “דין וחשבון – a judgment and a reckoning.” “Judgment” refers to him being judged for deeds that he committed, while “reckoning” refers to the calculation of his share in the deeds of others.

4 The Beis Halevi explains that it is in this regard that certain sages compare Noah negatively with Avraham. Avraham also lived in a generation whose deeds corrupted his surroundings. However, unlike Noah, Avraham did not allow this to affect his own behavior even to a small degree.

its nutrition from the soil in which it is planted. When something is transplanted, its nutrition changes in accordance with its new setting. This was a crucial theme within Noah's time in the ark, transplanting him from a corrosive setting to a place where he would receive positive nutrition.

An idea of which we have become increasingly aware over recent decades is that of environmental awareness, namely, the profound affect a person's actions can have on their surroundings, even though they might not be directly interacting with the things they are potentially damaging. This is an idea the Torah itself is alerting us to in our Parsha, whereby a person's moral choices have moral reverberations, sometimes far-reaching. Together with this idea, the experiences of Noah also remind us of the affect one's surroundings can have on himself. If Noah, whom the Torah itself calls a tzaddik, was not immune to his surroundings, we hardly likely to be. This should encourage us to seek the most positive environment for ourselves and our families. This, too, is part of environmental awareness.

However, there is a third piece to this discussion which can also be gleaned from Noah's ark.

THE ARK AS HASHEM'S NAMES

The verse in Mishlei⁵ reads:

Hashem's name is a tower of strength, the righteous shall run toward it and be saved.

The Zohar states that this verse refers to the ark built by Noah. The connection between Hashem's name and Noah's ark is demonstrated in a fascinating way by the Malbim.⁶ As we know, the dimensions of the ark were: three hundred amos (cubits) long, fifty amos wide and thirty amos high.⁷ What is the significance of these dimensions? Lest we be inclined to respond simply that this is the size required in order to house all the animals and birds, the Ramban⁸ demonstrates conclusively that there is no way an ark of that size could naturally house a pair of every type of animal and bird. Rather, says Ramban, the ability of the ark to contain all the creatures within it was miraculous. Noah's job was to make an ark of a certain size, and Hashem would see to it that all the animals and birds fit in. This being the case, we ask again, given that there was no way the ark was naturally big enough for its task, why these specific dimensions?

The Malbim explains: The name of Yud-Hei-Vav-Hei represents Hashem as creator of the world. The name Aleph-Dalet-Nun-Yud represents His ownership and control of the world. Since the ark was the vehicle through which Hashem would begin the world anew and guide its destiny, these two names formed the dimensions of the ark. Both of these names have four letters. The product of multiplying the letter of one name with the corresponding letter of the second name will give us the dimensions of the ark, as follows:

- ▶ The first letters of each name are yud and aleph, which have the numerical value of ten and one respectively. Ten times one equals ten, which is the height of the top story of the ark, where Noah and his family lived.
- ▶ The second letters of the two names are hei and dalet, which have the numerical value of five and four. Five times four equals twenty, the height of the lower two floors.
- ▶ The third letters are vav and nun, which equal six and fifty, the product of which is three hundred, the length of the ark.

5 18:10.

6 Bereishis 6:15.

7 Bereishis Ibid.

8 Commentary to Bereishis, ibid.

- ▶ The fourth letters are hei and yud, which equal five and ten; the product of which is fifty, the width of the ark.

We would like to suggest that by Hashem giving Noah an ark comprised of His names, He was essentially giving him two types of arks, each one capable of protecting him from a different type of flood. Environment is not just about one's physical surroundings, for there are corrosive ideas which can permeate any wall that surrounds a person, a phenomenon to which we are witness in our times more than ever before. The only environment which can effectively protect a person against such toxins resides within him. This concept is expressed by R' Elazar Ezkari with the words: "בלבבי משכן אבנה – I my heart I will build a sanctuary." Let us consider a classic example of "inner environment" in the story of Yosef.

WINDOWS OF THE SOUL

The Gemara⁹ relates that in the final day of the year spent in Potiphar's house, Yosef's resistance to Potiphar's wife was waning and he was in danger of succumbing:

At that moment, his father's image appeared to him in the window, and said, "At some point in the future, your brothers' names will be engraved in the stones worn by the kohen gadol. Do you want your name to be missing from among them?"

Upon hearing these words, Yosef's resolve was strengthened, and he was able to resist temptation on that final occasion.

There are a number of observations regarding this appearance of Yaakov to Yosef in the window:

1. First, we may ask, is it "cheating" for Yosef to receive this visit from his father? Most people would similarly refrain from sinning after such a visit, and yet they are left to work it out themselves! Why was Yosef able to receive this extra help?
2. Second, on what level was Yaakov able to give this message to Yosef when in fact he had no idea where Yosef was — or even if he was alive?

The commentators explain that when Yosef sees "the appearance of Yaakov in the window," it is because he had absorbed and internalized his father's message and values. Even though they were separated by time and distance, Yaakov remained the primary influence on Yosef. In the ultimate sense, therefore, Yaakov was Yosef's environment! This vision was a tribute to the level at which Yosef had absorbed Yaakov's lesson. It was not "cheating" for him to receive the vision; rather, it was the product of Yosef's efforts to remain connected to Yaakov wherever he went.

This is the lesson from Noah's Ark(s):

- ▶ When the flood consists of water, an ark made of wood coated with pitch that surrounds you will protect you.
- ▶ When the flood consists of ideas that can go through wood – and any other material, for that matter – the only ark that will protect is Hashem's name that resides within you.

Even as we strive to choose the best physical environment for ourselves, we should at the same time be developing and nurturing the environment which "envelopes us from within" – the Sanctuary of Hashem's name inside our hearts.

9 Sotah 36b.