

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Noach

### Who by Water

#### INTRODUCTION: MEASURE FOR MEASURE

The first half of our parsha deals with the flood that destroyed the generation of Noach that had descended into an abyss of evil and corruption, with only Noach and his family being saved in the ark. The present discussion begins with a simple question: Why, of all things, was the punishment Hashem chose for that wicked generation a flood of water? Surely there are other ways to punish the wicked which would have been quicker, less dramatic – and less cataclysmic! A simple plague would have ended the entire matter in moments. We know that Hashem's punishments are *middah keneged middah* – measure for measure; how was water deemed the appropriate response to their deeds?

Let us consider two approaches to this question.

#### FIRST APPROACH: OF FORM AND FORMLESSNESS

If we reflect on the appalling moral decline into which that generation had sunk, we could sum it up by saying that they had lost their **form** and **distinction**; they had abandoned their Divinely-oriented qualities and characteristics known as *Tzelem Elokim* – the Divine Image. All the sins which are associated with that time – robbery, violence, being steeped in immorality and vice – speak of a generation who acted no differently than animals.

Water represents formlessness. It has no form of its own and, moreover, can wear away the form of other things with which it comes into contact.<sup>1</sup> The most dramatic expression of this idea can be seen in the Flood at the time of Noach. The Hebrew word for flood is “מבול.” One of the interpretations offered by *Rashi* for this word is that it relates to the word “מבלה – to wear away.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the waters of the Flood wore away the form of everything that was in the world at that time. In other words, having abdicated their distinctly human form, that generation was punished by a flood of water which erased the form of the face of the entire world.

It is most interesting to note in this regard that one of the first things which Hashem communicated to Noach upon leaving the Ark was the permission to eat from the meat of animals,<sup>3</sup> something that was forbidden prior to the Flood. What changed now? Apparently, the prohibition against eating the meat of animals was misinterpreted as saying that animals are equal to human beings in every sense; an

<sup>1</sup> See Maharal, *Gevuros Hashem*, chap. 18

<sup>2</sup> *Bereishis* 6:17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 9:3.

equation which, if stated backward, means that human beings are no different than animals. This error contributed to the climate which enabled the Generation of the Flood to sink to the depths that it did; hence, to help disavow them of this notion, man was now permitted to consume the flesh of animals. Moreover, that permission was followed by and contrasted with the prohibition against murdering another human being,<sup>4</sup> as that verse concludes: “for in God’s image He created man.” Hence, the first message they received immediately upon leaving the Ark to start anew was: Man is not an animal!<sup>5</sup>

## **SECOND APPROACH: DILUTION VS. DEPRAVITY**

After Noach and his family exited the ark and offered korbanos to Hashem, Hashem declared that He would never again bring a flood upon mankind. The verse reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל לְבוֹ לֹא אֶסֶף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה בְּעֵבוּר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעֻרָיו וְלֹא אֶסֶף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל חַי כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי

*Hashem said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the impulse of man’s heart is evil from his youth, and I will never again smite all of life as I have done.”<sup>6</sup>*

Let us ask:

1. What is the meaning of this declaration? The flood was brought upon mankind as a punishment for their corrupt ways. Given that man has free-will, is it not conceivable that the world could become corrupt again, in which case a flood [or some similar punishment] would be likewise appropriate?
2. The reason Hashem gives for this commitment is “the impulse of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” How is that reason not to bring another flood? The matter is all the more puzzling when we recall that it was the evil of man that was the reason for bringing the flood in the first place, as stated in the end of Parshas Bereishis, “וַיֵּרָא ה' – Hashem saw that the evil of man was great upon the earth and every impulse of thought was continually turned solely to evil”.<sup>7</sup> How can the reason for something happening then become the reason it will never happen again?

## **MIDRASH: FINDING A MATE FOR FALSEHOOD**

There is a most astonishing account in the Midrash concerning Hashem’s instructions that all should enter the Ark in pairs:

*Each kind entered with its mate. Then, Falsehood came and wanted to enter. Noach said to it, “You cannot enter unless you bring a mate in with you.” Falsehood then went in search of a mate, whereupon it met Greed, who asked: “From where are you coming?”*

*[Falsehood answered:] “From Noach. I went to ask him to admit me into the Ark and he wouldn’t let me in without a mate. Would you like to be my mate?”*

*Greed said: “And what will you give me?”*

*Falsehood replied: “I will arrange with you that everything that I amass you can*

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4 Verse 6.

5 See, regarding this, *Sefer Ha’Ikarim*, Maamar 3 Chapter 15.

6 Ibid. 8:21.

7 6:5.

*then take.”*

*They arranged between them that everything that Falsehood would bring in Greed would then take, and thus they entered the Ark together.*

It is actually difficult to even know where to begin when contemplating this Midrash – it is very simply a riddle from beginning to end! Let us see if we can unravel it and access some of its message.

### **REINING IN EVIL**

One of the classic *drush* (homiletic) works of the eighteenth century, the Afikei Yehuda,<sup>8</sup> explains as follows. Hashem created evil for a purpose, as without evil man cannot exercise his free will. The problem with the generation of the flood is that evil had broken free of all boundaries and become a fixation and ideology in itself. Thus the verse mentioned above says that “every impulse of thought was continually turned solely to evil,” indicating that people became dedicated to evil *for its own sake*. This is illustrated in the fact that the cross-bred all the species of animals that existed, even though no conceivable benefit would come from it. Clearly, this pathologically corrupt system could not be allowed to endure. On the other hand, evil itself in some measure is a necessary component of creation to allow for moral choices on the part of man. In addition, the drives of physicality are necessary for the continued existence of the physical world.

This brings us to Noach’s Ark.

With the world around it being destroyed, everything that was to exist in the world after the flood was brought into the Ark. We now appreciate that this includes Evil, too – as a necessary component of the world. Hence Evil, represented in the Midrash as “Falsehood”, approached Noach and requested to be allowed to be admitted into the Ark. However, it could not be allowed to enter “without a mate,” i.e. as evil alone with no context or constraints, since this was what led to the destruction in the first place. Thus, Evil set out in search of a “mate” that would define and contain it. The mate Evil found was Greed, meaning that evil would continue to exist, not for its own sake, but for some perceived gain, thus leaving it up to the individual to exert his free-will, either succumbing to greed or overcoming it. This is the meaning of the arrangement described by the Midrash whereby “everything that Evil would bring in Greed would then take.” Having been defined within the context of allowing for meaningful moral life after the flood, Evil, together with its mate Greed, were granted entry into the Ark.

Thus, when the world was established anew after the flood, Hashem declared that He would never again bring another flood, “for the impulse of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” In other words, unlike the Evil which was initially pursued for its own sake and which led to the flood, the evil which exists now is purely that which derives from one’s physical existence; and while people will yet have their victories and defeats in dealing with this form of evil, it is not something which will lead to another flood that will destroy the world.

### **OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

One question, however, remains: What measures were taken to ensure that the same form of unconstrained evil that brought about the Flood would not itself resurface at some later stage?

The answer is: The Flood.

When Hashem informed Noach of His intention to destroy mankind, He said: “הֲנִי מִשְׁחִיתֶם אֶת־”

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8 R’ Yehuda Adel of Slonim, *drush* 5.

הָאָרֶץ.”<sup>9</sup> Rashi, explains these words to mean “and behold, I will destroy them together with the earth.” The Midrash,<sup>10</sup> which is the source of Rashi’s comment, elaborates upon the idea of the earth being “punished” together with Man:

*This may be compared to a king’s son who had a teacher. If the son sours, his teacher will [also] be punished... So too, said the Holy One, Blesses is He, “Behold, I will destroy them together with the earth.”*

In what way was the earth considered the “teacher” of man such that it bore some responsibility for his mistakes? The Afikei Yehuda explains that initially, the physicality of the earth was of extremely high potency, which then became imparted to man as he partook of the world. This was expressed, for example, in the much longer life-spans people had before the Flood. Ultimately, however, this level of physicality proved too much for man to control and ended up controlling him. In this light, we return to the verse where Hashem surveys the evil of Man prior to the Flood, we note that it states, “that the evil of Man was great *on the earth* (בָּאָרֶץ),” i.e., his relationship with the earth had resulted in an uncontrollable level of evil.

The response to this situation was not only to punish man, but also to address the cause of his corruption. To this end, Hashem brought a flood on the earth, which not only wiped out that generation, but also deluged and “watered down” the earth’s potency, thereby diminishing the level of physicality it would impart to man. Thus, Hashem said after the Flood, “I will never again curse the ground because of man,” i.e., the ground will never again be implicated as a cause of man’s failings, for its potency has now been tempered, so that the evil that remains is “*the impulse of man’s heart [that] is evil from his youth,*” and is his responsibility alone to contend with.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, with evil having been modified in this way, although each person bears responsibility for his sins, mankind will never again incur the cataclysmic destruction of the Flood: “and I will never again smite all of life as I have done.”

And so, we have seen two approaches as to why a flood, specifically, was chosen by Hashem as the fitting punishment for that generation. According to the first approach, the punishment was intended to fit the crime, while according to the second, it was intended to prevent a repeat of a crime of that magnitude. Both ideas should serve to give us further insight into the post-Flood world in which we live – both in terms of understanding the challenges that we face, as well as the way of living we should be aspiring to attain in order to rise above them.

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9 Bereishis 9:13.

10 Bereishis Rabbah 31:7.

11 [Although it is still possible for a person to choose a path of “evil for evil’s sake,” for this too is within the range of his free-will choices, nevertheless, given the diminished physicality of the world such a choice remains an anomaly.]