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PARASHAT NOACH

Consolation for the Land

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As often happens in the cycle of weekly Torah readings, this week's parasha – Noach – starts in the middle of a story.

The last four verses of Parashat Bereishit are unquestionably an introduction to the story of the Flood:

"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the land... and God repented for having made man in the land... And God said: I shall wipe out man whom I have created from the face of the earth... but Noach found favor in God's eyes".

However, it seems that the story of Noach begins even earlier. When Noach is born to Lemekh, a descendant of Shet, we read (5:29):

"He called his name Noach, saying: This one shall comfort us (yenachamenu) for our work and the toil of our hands caused by the ground, which God has cursed" (5:29):

It seems clear that Lemekh refers here to the curse dating back to the sin of Adam (3:17-19):

"And to Adam He said: Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree concerning which I commanded you, saying, You shall not eat from it,

Cursed is the ground for your sake.

In sorrow shall you eat of it all the days of your life, and it shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken; for you are dust, and you shall return to dust".

Indeed, during Noah's lifetime the curse of the ground is nullified (8:21:(

"God smelled the sweet savor, and God said in His heart: I shall not again curse the ground for man's sake, for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor shall I again smite all life, as I have done"....

Thus, God's promise here, in the wake of the sacrifices that Noah offers after leaving the ark, represents the realization of Lemekh's hopes in naming his son "Noach".

However, upon closer inspection, the connection turns out to be less simple. There are actually two separate curses. The curse of the land, imposed at the time of Adam, concerned agricultural labor. It meant that growing produce would involve great effort and difficulty, and that the ground would yield "thorns and thistles." The curse that was revoked following Noah's departure from the ark, on the other hand, concerns the annihilation of man from the face of the earth. To which of these two curses, then, was Lemekh referring?

The linguistic parallels would appear to support both exegetical options. At the same time, each has its difficulties. If Lemekh is referring to the curse from the time of Adam, why does the Torah describe the revoking of the curse, when Noah leaves the ark, in language that recalls Lemekh's declaration? Furthermore, we would expect some continuation of this story: either a fulfillment of Lemekh's words with the cancellation of the curse of the land imposed at the time of Adam, by means of some sort of agricultural progress, or some explanation as to why his words were not fulfilled. However, the Torah goes on to devote no attention at all to the cancellation of the curse, "In sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life." Thus Lemekh's words seem to represent no more than a wish, with no implications or connection to the rest of the story, and it is not clear why the Torah records them at all.

Rashi understands Lemekh's declaration as referring to the curse of Adam, and he views it as a sort of prophecy which comes to be realized. Basing his explanation on the Midrash (Tanchuma Bereishit 11), Rashi (commenting on 5:29) "fills in" that which the text omits in

the story of the realization of Lemekh's words by supplying the agricultural enhancement: "Until Noach's time, people had no plowing instrument, and he made one for them. The land (until then) had produced thorns and thistles when sowed with wheat, because of Adam's curse, but in the days of Noach the land was comforted".

The plain text, however, contains no hint of this development.

Some of the later commentators have gone even further and locate the fulfillment of Lemekh's words in the story of Noach, a man of the ground, planting the vineyard (8:20). According to this view, "wine makes man's heart glad," and this gladness is the comfort for the sorrow of toiling over the ground. In Mishlei (31:6-7) we read: "Give strong drink to one who is about to die, and wine to those of bitter spirit; let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his toil no more." Similarly, in Yirmiyahu (16:7) we find the concept of the "cup of consolation".

However, none of this answers the question of why the Torah chooses to describe the revoking of the curse, after Noach leaves the ark, in language that is reminiscent of Lemekh's declaration.

On the other hand, if we propose that Lemekh's words are realized in God's promise not to annihilate man ever again, we must ask why such a scenario would have occurred to Lemekh at all, prior to the Flood. And what sort of consolation would Noach then have brought, relative to the situation at the time of his birth, when the idea of the Flood had not yet arisen? Furthermore, how do we then explain the significance of the linguistic parallels to the curse of Adam?

Ibn Ezra ignores the linguistic parallels and asserts that Lemekh's words are realized in the fact that it is Noach who gives life to the land, by reviving the world after the Flood. To Ibn Ezra's view, the reference to Noach as a "man of the ground" is connected to this idea. In order to answer the question of how Lemekh would relate to this possibility, Ibn Ezra proposes that this was a real prophecy, conveyed by a real prophet (Adam) to Lemekh, or derived himself "through wisdom" (apparently, he refers here to astrology). However, all of this supporting theory is likewise absent from the text. Furthermore, while it addresses the technical question of how Lemekh could have known what would happen during Noach's life, it does not explain how this "prophecy" was relevant during Lemekh's time.

It seems that Lemekh must have been referring to the curse of the land from the time of Adam. From a literary perspective, the reader – at this stage of the narrative – is aware only

of that original curse; hence, the meaning of Lemekh's words, viewed in context, is the expression of a wish or prayer that his son Noach would somehow bring about some comfort from the curse upon the land from the time of Adam. We must therefore seek the significance of the linguistic connection further on, after Noach leaves the ark, and also explore the fate of Lemekh's wish .

Before addressing these questions, however, let us first examine the brief unit that is located in between Lemekh's wish and the continuation of the story of Noach – the story of the "distinguished men" (benei ha-elohim, literally "children of gods" or "children of judges") and the daughters of man.

The verses read as follows (6:1-4):

And it was, when man began to multiply upon the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them,

That the distinguished men saw that the daughters of man were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves from all whom they chose.

And God said: My spirit will not forever strive on account of man, for that he also is flesh; and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.

There were Nefillim in the land in those days and also after that, when the distinguished men came to the daughters of man, and they bore children to them; these were the mighty men of old; men of renown.

The first two verses of this unit describe two groups: the "distinguished men" and the "daughters of man." Whether the "distinguished men" here are regular mortals or not, it is clear that the "daughters of man" certainly are. In these verses the "distinguished men" are active, while "man" (Adam) and his daughters are the passive victims.

God's words in verse 3 are open to various interpretations: they may be meant as an expression of reconciliation, or the opposite – an expression of punishment or retribution. In any event, it is clear that God is talking here about "man," in the wake of some unworthy behavior on his part. This is puzzling, since in the preceding verses, as pointed out above, mankind is the passive, injured party. Even if, in the formal sense, the "distinguished men" are included within the category of "man," from a literary perspective the differing usages of the word make for very confusing reading, and serve to break the literary flow.

Apparently, this unit combines two separate levels of meaning, or "aspects".

We adopt here the exegetical methodology known as the "shitat ha-bechinot," developed by my Rav and teacher, Rav Mordekhai Breuer. (Rav Breuer sets out his approach, and the commentary in which he implements it, in his books *Pirkei Mo'adot*, *Pirkei Bereishit*, and *Shitat ha-Bechinot Shel ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*.) According to this approach, God writes the Torah in layers, with narratives or halakhic units that parallel one another – different "aspects" – each of which is able to stand alone and to be read in its own right, such that sometimes they appear to contradict one another. Often, these aspects are intertwined, creating a complex or multi-layered unit. This complex unit blurs the points of transition between one aspect and the other, but highlights the difficulties inherent in these transitions. Each story expresses its own independent content, which is important in its own right; however, there is some relationship between them, which justifies their integration into a single text. By delving into the difficulties that arise from the joining together of the two aspects – such as repetitions or contradictions – we are able to expose the two independent "aspects," and thereafter to explore their significance .

Aside from the local division of this unit into "aspects," we may divide *Sefer Bereishit* in general into two aspects. The one refers to God only as "Elokim," while the other uses (also) the Tetragrammaton. Obviously, there are also further stylistic and thematic characteristics that differentiate between the two aspects.

The story of the "distinguished men and the daughters of man" is usually categorized under the aspect that uses the Tetragrammaton to refer to God. However, in light of the difficulty that we have indicated above, it may make more sense to divide this unit. In verse 3 we find the Tetragrammaton, and therefore the categorization of this verse is clear. Verses 1-2, which represent a single unit which does not continue on to verse 3, would appear to belong to the aspect that is characterized by the name Elokim. Verses 4-5 mention explicitly the events referred to in verses 1-2, and therefore they too belong to the aspect of Elokim.

We shall not discuss here the meaning of the verses belonging to the aspect of Elokim, nor the significance of the merging of the two aspects into a single textual unit. For the purposes of our discussion, we shall focus only on the aspect characterized by the Tetragrammaton.

Verse 3 is the only portion of unit that falls into this category. Clearly, this verse cannot stand alone; it must be read as the continuation of some previous verse. Hence, we must seek the last preceding verses belonging to the same aspect.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the "generations," as evidenced by its introduction, style, and structure. For various reasons, which we shall not analyze here, such genealogical chapters are usually categorized under the name Elokim, even where they contain no Divine Name at all. In chapter 5, however, there is one verse that deviates from the otherwise fixed structure and which uses the Tetragrammaton. We refer here to the verse cited above, describing how Noah received his name: "And he called his name Noah, saying: This one shall comfort us for our work and the toil of our hands caused by the ground, which God has cursed." Had the Tetragrammaton aspect stood alone here, the Torah would have presented Lemekh and the fact of Noah's birth in accordance with the style of that aspect. However, since the text interweaves both aspects, the fact that a son is born to Lemekh belongs exclusively within the aspect of Elokim. The aspect of the Tetragrammaton covers only his name and its meaning .

Hence, within the Tetragrammaton aspect, verse 3 of chapter 6 should be read as a direct continuation of verse 29 of chapter 5:

"And he called his name Noah, saying: This one shall comfort us for our work and the toil of our hands caused by the ground, which God has cursed.

And God said: My spirit will not strive forever on account of man for that he is also flesh; and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years".

Thus, the verse must be understood as referring to the curse of Adam. Accordingly, the word "yidon" (strive) is meant in the sense of judging and punishing; i.e., "I shall not continue to argue with man and punish him by cursing the earth".

If this is the case, then the verse is indeed meant in a spirit of appeasement, and the rest of the verse should be understood as proposed by Ramban, in accordance with Tehillim 78:38-39–

"For He is compassionate, forgiving sin, and not destroying; often turning away His anger and not stirring up all of His wrath; He remembers that they are mere flesh; a wind that passes and does not return".

Here, in the wake of Lemekh's prayer, God declares that He will indeed turn away His wrath from man and no longer judge him according to the strict demands of the Attribute of Justice. Man is in need of the Attribute of Mercy, for he is mere flesh and blood – a mortal who departs from the world after a brief hundred and twenty years.

According to the exegetical direction that we are now taking, Lemekh's wish does receive due attention. God accepts his prayer, in principle, and declares that through Noach consolation will come to mankind for the curse of the earth.

We must now re-read the concluding verses of Parashat Bereishit (6:5-8) which, as noted above, are actually the introduction to the story of the Flood:

"And God saw that the wickedness of man (ha-adam) was great in the land, and all the inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. And God repented (va-yinachem) for having made man (ha-adam) in the land, and He was grieved to His heart. And God said: I shall wipe out (emcheh) man (ha-adam) whom I have created from the face of the earth (ha-adama) – both man (me-adam) and beast and crawling things and birds of the sky, for I repent (nichamti) that I made them. But Noach found favor (chen) in God's eyes".

There are repeated expressions involving the root a-d-m; as well as regret/comfort (nechama), wiping out (mechiya) and favor (chen), and expressions of action (a-s-h) and of melancholy (itzavon). These alliterations serve to link these verses to the words of Lemekh: "This one will comfort us (yenachamenu) for our work (mi-ma'aseinu) and the toil (itzavon, literally – "melancholy") of our hands, because of the land (adama) which God has cursed".

Man is a transitory creature; he passes on and does not return, but his wickedness has already become a matter of enormous scope and proportion. Man's evil inclination admittedly arises from the fact that he is mere flesh, but this inclination of his heart is only evil, all the time. For this reason, corresponding to "zeh yenachamenu" ("this one will comfort us") we find "va-yinachem Hashem" (God repented), and corresponding to "me-itzvon yadeinu" ("for the toil of our hands") we find "va-yit'atzev el libo" ("He grieved to His heart"). God would like to comfort man and relieve him of the melancholy of his heart, but the situation has reached a point where man's wickedness is grieving God and causing Him to regret having created man in the world. This being the case, God decides to wipe man off the face of the earth. Instead of "nechamat ha-adam min ha-adama" (comforting man for the melancholy of the cursed ground), God brings about "mechiyat ha-adam min ha-adama" (wiping man off the face of the earth.)

God's direction of the world balances two considerations. On the one hand, man's weakness requires a measure of compassion, a "sweetening of the verdict." On the other hand, it is specifically his importance in God's eyes that causes God to be so grieved by his actions, and intensifies the severity of His retribution. At the time of Lemekh's prayer, the former

consideration prevailed. In the wake of the behavior of the generation of the Flood, the latter consideration came to take precedence.

However, this change in approach does not nullify Lemekh's wish completely. Along with the Divine decree comes a note of hope: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of God." Noah may still bring about some sort of comfort and consolation.

Ultimately, Noah leaves the ark, builds an altar to God, and offers up his sacrifices. Then the text tells us (8:21):

"God smelled the sweet savor, and God said in His heart:

I shall no longer curse the ground (adama) for man's sake (ba-avur ha-adam), for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor shall I any more smite all of life, as I have done. For as long as the earth remains, sowing and harvest and cold and heat and summer and winter and day and night shall not cease".

Noah, through his sacrifices, "reminds" God that there is good in man, too. The consideration that "the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth" is similar to God's statement at the time of Lemekh's prayer: "For that he also is flesh; and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years." Man's fundamental weakness arouses God's compassion, and He is reminded of His decision not to "strive" with man forever. On the other hand, man's increasing evil apparently makes it impossible to return to the situation prior to Adam's sin and to cancel his curse. Instead, God decides to fulfill Lemekh's prayer, but in a different way: through nullifying the possibility of absolute melancholy and the eradication of man from the face of the earth.

Thus, both Lemekh's prayer and God's promise – "My spirit shall not forever strive on account of man" – are realized literally, but not as intended. Noah brings a certain consolation in that there will not be another annihilation of man from the face of the earth. However, along with this promise comes the assertion that the punishment of "by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread" will not be cancelled; rather, "sowing and reaping... will not cease".

Above, we rejected the possibility that Lemekh's words are fulfilled in Noah's planting of the vineyard. However, the vineyard may yet be connected to this story. Seemingly Noah, who grew up imbibing the prophecy of his father, was deeply disappointed by God's assertion that "sowing and reaping... will not cease." Out of despair and disillusionment, Noah tried

to single-handedly bring about a nullification of the curse, by providing the consolation of wine. However, Noah's attempted evasion of God's decree was also a flight from reality. Its results were shame and humiliation, instead of the joy and comfort that he had intended.

Translated by Kaeren Fish