

The Flood and Its Aftermath

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

After Noach and his family leave the ark, Hashem both blesses them with the promise of offspring (9:1) and commands them to procreate (9:7). In between the blessing and the command, Hashem also prohibits murder. Why are these the essential commandments at this juncture of human history? On the simplest level, a destroyed world needs rebuilding so populating the world becomes an essential priority. From the same perspective, murder would undermine the new society. Furthermore, Noach and his children, representing humanity, received permission at this very time to kill animals for food. As humanity moved from a comprehensive prohibition on taking the life of all creatures to a more limited prohibition, God saw fit to emphasize that killing a human being remains a horrible crime.

On a deeper level, the blessing of "peru u-revu" echoes the same blessing given to Adam and Chava to signify the opportunity for a fresh beginning. While humanity's initial attempt to establish a worthwhile society ended in disaster, the possibility for a more successful endeavor begins following the flood. As Rabbi David Kimchi writes (commentary to 9:1), "even though they were already blessed at the beginning of creation, it is now akin to a new creation."

Immediately after commanding these mizvot, Hashem makes a covenant with humanity to never destroy the world as He did in the deluge. The sign that represents this covenant is the rainbow. Many commentaries attempt to explain why the rainbow specifically serves as the symbol for this message. Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor (9:13) connects this usage of the rainbow with the rainbow as an image of the Divine presence in [Yehezkel \(1:18\)](#). The appearance of the Divine manifested in the rainbow reveals that God still favors humanity and has not given up on them. If He intended to destroy humanity, he would not shine his countenance upon them.

Ramban explains that the rainbow represents the bow employed as a weapon that is now turned around as sign of peace. The arc of the bow faces toward heaven to indicate that God no longer intends to fire His arrows at humanity and annihilate the world. Ramban maintains that turning one's weapon around served as a sign of peace on the battlefield. Hizkuni, Rav Hirsch and others offer additional suggestions. Perhaps we can offer our own explanation as to the rainbow's symbolism.

An additional striking element in this passage of the covenant is the constant usage of Elokim and absence of the

tetragrammaton. To be sure, the name of Elokim does dominate the entire parasha of Noach and not just this passage. However, there might be a specific reason to anticipate the tetragrammaton in this chapter. If we assume the traditional structure in which Elokim represents the sterner aspects of the Divine, that Divine name seems out of place here. Surely, God's promise to refrain from such punishments reflects the attribute of compassion more than the attribute of justice? After all, the world could conceivably deserve destruction.

A few pesukim after the covenant (9:21), Noach drinks wine and becomes intoxicated. While his father is inebriated, Cham does something of a serious nature to his father. Although the initial description (9:22) mentions only that Cham looked at his father's nakedness, it would seem from a later verse (9:24) and from the vehemence of Noach's reaction that something more sinister occurred. The gemara in [Sanhedrin \(70a\)](#) raises two possibilities: either Cham castrated his father or he had sexual relations with his father. What is this gemara driving at?

Thus far, we have noted the following four questions; 1) Why are the commandments to bear children and not to murder given right after Noach leaves the ark? 2) Why is the rainbow the sign for a covenant in which Hashem promises not to eliminate our world? 3) Why does he name Elokim appear consistently in the covenant of the rainbow? 4) What motivated Chazal to suggest castration and homosexuality as possible sins of Cham? Looking at one final issue will enable us to offer an approach to the above questions.

In the preceding chapter (8:16), God explicitly tells Noach to leave the ark. The need for this distinct directive raises the question of whether or not Noach could have decided to leave the ark on his own once he discovered that the water had receded. Perhaps the Divine command to enter the ark remained in force until another command from the same source canceled the earlier mission. Alternatively, the call to leave the ark may convey encouragement more than command. According to one midrash ([Bereishit Rabba 34:6](#)), Noach incredulously asks "Should I go out and propagate the world only to see it destroyed?" Hashem needs to reassure Noach and convince Noach to emerge and once again begin the building of a world. Accordingly, God is not commanding Noach to exit, but is encouraging him.

Notice that the midrash does not have Noach say "Should I go out and plant trees and build houses only to see them destroyed." Rather, it is specifically with regard to bearing children that the dilemma hits with all its force. The midrashic choice of children may simply reflect the obvious point that the death of a child is far more painful than the destruction of a house. Yet, there may be a different reason why the midrash focuses on having children.

Another source also links calamity with reluctance to bear children. The final gemara in the third chapter of Bava Batra (60b) relates the pained response of Jewish groups to the destruction of the Temple. One reaction was to claim that marriage and child rearing must cease in light of the new horrible reality. Overwhelming destruction calls into question the meaning, purpose, and value of human life. Doubts regarding the worth of life could motivate a person to desist from having children. Indeed, why bring more people into a cold world of suffering devoid of meaning. Thus, Jews who witnessed the Temple's destruction and Noah who experienced a worldwide calamity were unsure about the need to propagate. It is for this reason that the midrash has Noah question children more than houses and orchards.

We can now explain the suggested crimes of Cham according to the gemara in Sanhedrin. I believe that this aggada explores a number of possible responses to catastrophe. Witnessing the moral degeneration of a world until its creator destroys His own creation calls for a response. Noah's descent to the bottle reflects the response of escapism. When a person can not face the overwhelming ugliness about, he can always take refuge in a variety of mind numbing sedatives. The gemara's two approaches to Cham's transgression represent two additional strategies: nihilism and hedonism. The hedonist decides that if the world will remain "nasty, brutish and short," one might as well experience as much sensual pleasure as possible. Conventional sexual relations do not suffice and one must explore alternative sexual endeavors such as homosexuality. Alternatively, a person could decide that life isn't worth it to begin with. The most powerful expression of such nihilism is the decision to not bear children reflected in castration.

Conversely, the decision to bear children at such a time declares that despite the pain and suffering, life has meaning and is worth pursuing. If so, another layer of meaning emerges for the command regarding procreation following the flood. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk explains (commentary to 9:6) that the juxtaposition of the murder prohibition with the command to bear children conveys this very notion. Even though human cruelty includes acts of murder, this remains enough capacity for good in the world to justify bearing children. The commandment and blessing of "peru u'revu" powerfully endorse a positive affirmation that eschews the easier and escapism, hedonism and nihilism. Indeed, later responses to disaster repeat this theme. Rabbi Meir Simcha points out that Yirmiyahu also (Yirmiyahu 29:6) calls for establishing families. Despite the trauma of exile to Babylon, this prophet still affirms the meaning and value of life.

This idea also explains the covenant of the rainbow. The simplest explanation for the symbolism of the rainbow is that "in the midst of overcast threatening clouds, it announces the presence of light" (cited by Rabbi Hirsch, 9:15). More important than the shape of the rainbow is the fact that it engenders fresh optimism after the gloom of a rainstorm. If so, the rainbow not only symbolizes that God will not destroy the world. It also calls for humanity to remain optimistic despite the ominous clouds hovering above. Perhaps this covenant is not just a promise from God but also makes demands of man in terms of mandating the proper response to life's difficulties.

From this perspective, the usage of Elokim also takes on added resonance. Radak points out (9:16) that the rainbow relates to a time when man's obedience to God falters and he deserves punishment. According to his view, the name Elokim indicates the potential punishment that is only mitigated by the covenant of the rainbow. We can add that it also relates to the perspective of human experience. Even when mankind experiences the Elokim aspect of the Divine, they must commit to looking for the rainbow among the clouds. Only the name Elokim connotes the correct atmosphere for such a covenant.

One twentieth century thinker writes of a different response to our absurd world. Albert Camus argued that life is meaningless and the heroic deed is to struggle despite the absence of meaning. Thus, Sisyphus's heroism consists of continuing to roll the rock up the hill although he knows full well that his efforts are futile. As Camus writes, "there is no fate that can not be surmounted by scorn." According to Rabbi Meir Simcha's approach as developed here, the Torah categorically rejects the pessimism of Camus. The biblical version of Sisyphus does not accept the notion that the rock's descent is a foregone conclusion. Rather, he remains hopeful that the rock may yet stabilize at the peak. In place of scorn, our Sisyphus, though well aware of life's difficulties, retains enthusiasm and optimism.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>