

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Introduction to Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT NOACH

Noach – To Be A Man of the Earth

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A. INTRODUCTION

After the widespread tragedy and wholesale destruction of the Flood, the eyes of the Torah turn to the person chosen to rebuild the human race and restore the order that existed on earth before mankind's descent into corruption and degeneracy. Indeed, the Torah, before the Flood, introduced Noach as follows:

These are the generations of Noach. Noach was a righteous man (*ish tzaddik*) and whole-hearted in his generations; Noach walked with God. ([Bereishit 6:9](#))[1]

Our hopes in Noach seem well founded. He is the first person that the Torah labels as a righteous man. Even at birth, he was named with the prayer that "this one (Noach) will provide us relief from our work and the toil of our hands, out of the very soil which Hashem placed under a curse" ([Bereishit 5:29](#)). Lemekh's words echo the hope that, at long last, the Divine punishment meted out to Adam after the Garden of Eden – "Cursed be the ground because of you: by toil shall you eat of it ... by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat" ([Bereishit 3:17-18](#)) – has run its course and an antidote has been found.

After the destruction of the earth and its inhabitants through the Flood,[2] we are given additional reason to hope that Noach is indeed capable of undoing Adam's original sin. Upon leaving the ark, Noach offers sacrifices to Hashem, Whose response is to declare, "Never again will I curse the earth because of man" ([Bereishit 8:21](#)). He blesses Noach with the original blessing to man, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" ([Bereishit 9:1](#)). Commandments are given, the new relationship

between man and animal is delineated, and finally, a covenant is established between God and humanity.

How does Noach respond to this new opportunity? The Torah continues:

The sons of Noach who came out of the ark were Shem, Cham, and Yefet – Cham being the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noach, and of these was the whole earth branched out. And Noach the man of the earth (*ish ha-adama*) began, and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunk; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Cham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren outside. And Shem and Yefet took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done unto him. And he said: Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be their servant. God enlarge Yefet, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be their servant. And Noach lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. And all the days of Noach were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died. Now these are the generations of the sons of Noach: Shem, Cham, and Yefet; and unto them were sons born after the flood. (*Bereishit* 9:18-10:1)

What an ignoble ending! From the lofty appellation of "*ish tzaddik*" – a righteous man, Noach became an "*ish ha-adama*" – a man of the earth.[3] Even here, he fails to rule over his creation, until he is left drunkenly sprawled out uncovered in his tent, where he becomes the unwilling victim of some despicable, reprehensible behavior from his own family. Only the respectful behavior of his other children offers him some modicum of respect. All that is left is for him to curse the perpetrator, and, like the generations that preceded the Flood, he lives and dies, adding nothing meaningful to the course of human history.[4] The Torah continues its account with his children, "And these are the generations of the sons of Noach," while he becomes a footnote in history. What happened? How did this character, filled with the hopes of his generation, descend so rapidly to the state of shame and dishonor that marks his final appearance in the Torah?

B. ALLUSIONS TO OTHER STORIES

In order to answer these questions, we will rely on one of the basic approaches available to the reader, the discovery of literary allusions and connections to other stories, in the hope that we will use them to decipher the cryptic answers encoded within the text in front of us.

We turn first to the planting of the vineyard. Of all the plants available, what motivated Noah to plant grapes? Glancing at other stories in *Tanakh*, we find that the drinking of wine is often accompanied by sexual behavior, often immoral. For example, wine has sexual overtones in *Shir Hashirim* (1:2,4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:2, 9; 8:2). *Eikha* mocks the daughter of Edom:

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom ... you shall be drunken, and shall make thyself naked. (4:21)

In *Bereishit* 19, Lot's daughters use wine to repeatedly seduce their aged father, while David uses wine to get Uriah drunk in a vain attempt to induce Uriah to have intercourse with his wife Batsheva, so David's adultery and her pregnancy could be concealed. What does this suggest about Noah's motivations?

We find, however, that the planting alludes to another event in *Bereishit* – the planting by God of the Garden of Eden. Just as God engaged in planting, so too Noah engaged in planting. If so, then we can suggest that Noah's actions after the Flood mimic God's actions in Creation. Indeed, the entire section contains many parallels to the Creation story, which we will enumerate. This leads one to conclude, that just as the Flood served as the undoing of the original creation, our story of Noah and the vineyard serves to undo the attempt to start Creation again after the Flood.

PARALLELS:

1. Both stories begin with the blessing to "be fruitful and multiply."
2. God planted a garden; Noah planted a vineyard.
3. Both stories turn for the worse when the protagonist(s) consumes some fruit[5].
4. After the eating/drinking of the forbidden fruit, the protagonist's naked state, and the efforts to cover it, becomes prominent details in the story.
5. Curses (and blessings) are distributed at the finale of the story (creating the parallel between Cham and the snake).

That Shem and Yefet are forced to walk backwards to cover their father becomes the symbolic theme of the story: any forward progress made by humanity after the Flood has been reversed. Indeed, their act is the pivot of the chiasmic structure that frames this story.

- A. And Noach drank of the wine and became drunk...
- B. Cham saw his father's nakedness
 - C. and told his two brothers outside (the tent)
 - D. Then Shem and Yefet took a garment...
 - C1. and walked backwards (into the tent) and covered the nakedness of their father...
 - B1. and their father's nakedness they did not see
- A1. And Noach awoke from his wine...

In this case, the use of chiasm reflects the text's desire to contrast the differing reactions of Noach's children to his predicament.

The precise nature of what Cham did while in the tent remains obscure. According to Radak, his offense was solely to see his father uncovered (and his willingness to share that information with his brothers). *Chazal* in the Gemara went much further than what is explicit in the text: they suggested that in fact either Cham castrated Noach, or that he engaged in homosexual relations with Noach (an alternative form of "uncreation"), and then castrated him.^[6] The failure to interpret Cham's offense as simple voyeurism (itself a serious misdemeanor), and the interpretation that something more drastic occurred is supported by from the verse "And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done unto him." Clearly, something beyond simple peeking had to have occurred.

We may suggest that Cham in fact committed an incestuous act with Noach's wife (his mother). The rationales for this interpretation are several. First, the wording of "uncover nakedness" is only used in *Vayikra* to describe heterosexual incest, not the homosexual act. More specifically, *Vayikra 18:8* equates "the nakedness of your mother" with the "nakedness of your father." As well, if Cham engaged in incestuous sex with his mother, the text's emphasis on his son Canaan becomes clear. Canaan is the product of this incestuous union, as Moav and Ammon are the product of Lot and his daughters. That is why the text consistently identifies Cham as the "father of Canaan," and why Noach chooses to curse Canaan upon awakening. The Torah also alludes to the possibility that this occurred in Cham's mother's tent. As Rashi notes, the written word (*the ketiv*) "the tent" in v 21 has the feminine possessive suffix, "her tent," although we read (*the keri*) the word as "his tent." Cham's act of sleeping with his mother would therefore be seen as an act of rebellion against

Noach's authority (as seen later with Reuven with Bilha, Avshalom with David's concubines, and Adoniyahu's attempt to claim Avishag as his rightful bride from Shlomo). We could suggest that this was *Chaza's* intention in interpreting his act as castration – the ultimate removal of the father's creative power.

C. NOACH'S MOTIVATION

Whatever despicable act that Cham committed, we return to the question of Noach's motivations – was his drinking motivated by his desire to fulfill the directive to "be fruitful and multiply," to replant the world around him (just as God planted a Garden for man to live in); or was it the desperate act of a man who chose not to engage in the new reality around him? A careful reading of his exit off the ark may provide us with the answer. When God commanded Noach and his family to enter the ark before the floodwaters would arrive, God stated:

On that very day entered Noach, and Shem, and Cham, and Yefet, the sons of Noach, and Noach's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark (7:13).

However, when God commanded them to exit the ark, he stated:

Go forth from the ark, you, and your wife, and your sons, and your sons' wives with you (8:16).

Rashi notes the change in the order of the command, and comments that while on the ark relations between men and women were forbidden (hence the text's separation between Noach and his sons/his wife and daughters-in-law). However, they were permitted to resume regular marital life upon exiting the ark (therefore, the text states Noach and his wife/his sons and their wives). However, if we examine the text closely, we see that Noach did not obey the Divine directive. Instead, he left as follows:

And Noach went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him (8:18).

In direct opposition to God's wish to repopulate the desolate earth, Noach chooses to refrain from bringing new life forth. Perhaps this is a delayed reaction to the severity of the destruction around him; perhaps he did not feel equal to the task. Instead, he chose to avoid his destiny, to drown himself in his own handiwork. Whatever the interpretation of Cham's behavior, they all share Noach's new state of sterility – his inability to continue to produce. Sadly, the impression of the old, decrepit, infertile Noach is the last glimpse that the text allows us to view. What had begun with such high hopes and

promises turned out to be another failed episode in God's attempts to find someone with whom God could create a lasting relationship and covenant. That would have to wait another ten generations.

[1] There is an argument among the medieval commentators as to the meaning of the Hebrew word *toledot*, which we have translated here as meaning generations. In *Bereishit*, the word can introduce either a genealogical list or the events that occur to a particular person. See Rashbam 37:2 for a fuller discussion of this issue, and R. Menachem Leibtag's article in the *Bereishit* archives at www.tanach.org.

[2] See R. Michael Hattin's article "Creation and Dissolution: A Study in Contrasts?" at the VBM Introduction to Parasha archives for a discussion of how the story of the Flood serves as a thematic and literary undoing of the work of Creation.

[3] *Midrash Tanchuma, Bereishit*, ch. 13. "Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rabbi Shalom said: In the beginning he was a 'righteous man,' and now he is a 'man of the earth.'

[4] Indeed, the words "And Noach began (*va-yicha*)" echo the story of Enosh who "began (*va-yeicha*) to call in the name of Hashem," which rabbinic thought identified with the beginning of idolatry and the spiritual descent of man (see Rashi 4:26, the beginning of Rambam's Laws of Idolatry).

[5] Rabbinic thought strengthens the parallel further. *Berakhot 40a* – "It was taught: Rabbi Meir said, The tree that the first man ate from was a vine, as there is no food that brings more curses upon man than the grape (wine)." *Sanhedrin 70a* – "What is the meaning of 'a man of the earth'? Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Noach, 'You should have taken heed from what happened to the first man, whose downfall was through wine.'"

[6] If Cham had relations with his father, than the incestuous Lot/daughters parallel builds on this episode.