

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

I once had the opportunity to ask the Catholic writer Paul Johnson what had struck him most about Judaism during the long period he spent researching it for his masterly *A History of the Jews*? He replied in roughly these words: "There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasised the individual -- like the secular West today. And there have been others that placed weight on the collective -- communist Russia or China, for example."

Judaism, he continued, was the most successful example he knew of that managed the delicate balance between both -- giving equal weight to individual and collective responsibility. Judaism was a religion of strong individuals and strong communities. This, he said, was very rare and difficult, and constituted one of our greatest achievements.

It was a wise and subtle observation. Without knowing it, he had in effect paraphrased Hillel's aphorism: "If I am not for myself, who will be (individual responsibility)? But if I am only for myself, what am I (collective responsibility)?" This insight allows us to see the argument of Parshat Noach in a way that might not have been obvious otherwise.

The parsha begins and ends with two great events, the Flood on the one hand, Babel and its tower on the other. On the face of it they have nothing in common. The failings of the generation of the Flood are explicit. "The world was corrupt before God, and the land was filled with violence. God saw the world, and it was corrupted. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth" (Gen. 6:11-12). Wickedness, violence, corruption, perversion: this is the language of systemic moral failure.

Babel by contrast seems almost idyllic. "The entire earth had one language and a common speech" (11:1). The builders are bent on construction, not destruction. It is far from clear what their sin was. Yet from the Torah's point of view Babel represents another serious wrong turn, because immediately thereafter God summons Abraham to begin an entirely new chapter in the religious story of humankind. There is no Flood -- God had, in any case, sworn that He would never again punish humanity in such a way ("Never again will I curse the soil because of man, for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth. I will never again strike down all life as I have just done", 8:21). But it is clear that after Babel,

God comes to the conclusion that there must be another and different way for humans to live.

Both the Flood and the Tower of Babel are rooted in actual historical events, even if the narrative is not couched in the language of descriptive history. Mesopotamia had many flood myths, all of which testify to the memory of disastrous inundations, especially on the flat lands of the Tigris-Euphrates valley (See Commentary of R. David Zvi Hoffman to Genesis 6 [Hebrew, 140] who suggests that the Flood may have been limited to centres of human habitation, rather than covering the whole earth). Excavations at Shurruk, Kish, Uruk and Ur -- Abraham's birthplace -- reveal evidence of clay flood deposits. Likewise the Tower of Babel was a historical reality. Herodotus tells of the sacred enclosure of Babylon, at the centre of which was a ziqqurat or tower of seven stories, 300 feet high. The remains of more than thirty such towers have been discovered, mainly in lower Mesopotamia, and many references have been found in the literature of the time that speak of such towers "reaching heaven".

However, the stories of the Flood and Babel are not merely historical, because the Torah is not history but "teaching, instruction." They are there because they represent a profound moral-social-political-spiritual truth about the human situation as the Torah sees it. They represent, respectively, precisely the failures intimated by Paul Johnson. The Flood tells us what happens to civilisation when individuals rule and there is no collective. Babel tells us what happens when the collective rules and individuals are sacrificed to it.

It was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the thinker who laid the foundations of modern politics in his classic *Leviathan* (1651), who -- without referring to the Flood -- gave it its best interpretation. Before there were political institutions, said Hobbes, human beings were in a "state of nature". They were individuals, packs, bands. Lacking a stable ruler, an effective government and enforceable laws, people would be in a state of permanent and violent chaos -- "a war of every man against every man" -- as they competed for scarce resources. There would be "continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Such situations exist today in a whole series of failed or failing states. That is precisely the Torah's description of life before the Flood. When there is no rule of law to constrain individuals, the world is filled with violence.

Babel is the opposite, and we now have

important historical evidence as to exactly what was meant by the sentence, "The entire land had one language and a common speech." This may not refer to primal humanity before the division of languages. In fact in the previous chapter the Torah has already stated, "From these the maritime peoples spread out into their lands in their clans within their nations, each with its own language" (Gen. 10:5. The Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:11, 71b, records a dispute between R. Eliezer and R. Johanan, one of whom holds that the division of humanity into seventy languages occurred before the Flood).

The reference seems to be to the imperial practice of the neo-Assyrians, of imposing their own language on the peoples they conquered. One inscription of the time records that Ashurbanipal II "made the totality of all peoples speak one speech." A cylinder inscription of Sargon II says, "Populations of the four quarters of the world with strange tongues and incompatible speech... whom I had taken as booty at the command of Ashur my lord by the might of my sceptre, I caused to accept a single voice." The neo-Assyrians asserted their supremacy by insisting that their language was the only one to be used by the nations and populations they had defeated. On this reading, Babel is a critique of imperialism.

There is even a hint of this in the parallelism of language between the builders of Babel and the Egyptian Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites. In Babel they said, "Come, [hava] let us build ourselves a city and a tower... lest [pen] we be scattered over the face of the earth" (Gen. 11:4). In Egypt Pharaoh said, "Come, [hava] let us deal wisely with them, lest [pen] they increase so much..." (Ex. 1:10). The repeated "Come, let us... lest" is too pronounced to be accidental. Babel, like Egypt, represents an empire that subjugates entire populations, riding roughshod over their identities and freedoms.

If this is so, we will have to re-read the entire Babel story in a way that makes it much more convincing. The sequence is this: Genesis 10 describes the division of humanity into seventy nations and seventy languages. Genesis 11 tells of how one imperial power conquered smaller nations and imposed its language and culture on them, thus directly contravening God's wish that humans should respect the integrity of each nation and each individual. When at the end of the Babel story God "confuses the language" of the builders, He is not creating a new state of affairs but restoring the old.

Interpreted thus, the story of Babel is a critique of the power of the collective when it crushes individuality -- the individuality of the seventy cultures described in Genesis 10. (A personal note: I had the privilege of addressing 2,000 leaders from all the world's faiths at the Millennium Peace Summit in the United Nations in August 2000. It turned out that there were exactly 70 traditions -- each with their subdivisions and sects -- represented. So it seems there still are seventy basic

cultures). When the rule of law is used to suppress individuals and their distinctive languages and traditions, this too is wrong. The miracle of monotheism is that Unity in Heaven creates diversity on earth, and God asks us (with obvious conditions) to respect that diversity.

So the Flood and the Tower of Babel, though polar opposites, are linked, and the entire parsha of Noach is a brilliant study in the human condition. There are individualistic cultures and there are collectivist ones, and both fail, the former because they lead to anarchy and violence, the latter because they lead to oppression and tyranny.

So Paul Johnson's insight turns out to be both deep and true. After the two great failures of the Flood and Babel, Abraham was called on to create a new form of social order that would give equal honour to the individual and the collective, personal responsibility and the common good. That remains the special gift of Jews and Judaism to the world. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“**T**hese are the generations of Noach...” (Genesis 6:9) The story of Noach is framed by two major disasters. The parsha starts with notice of the impending Flood that will destroy the world's population, except for those saved in Noach's ark. It ends with the building of the Tower of Babel, an act that destroys the world's single language. Although the link between these two destructions may not be obvious at first, I think that if we examine Noach's ark on a symbolic level, we can establish the intimate connection between these two milestones of human history.

God commands Noach to build an ark (tevah), yet the Zohar points out that the Hebrew word *tevah* is primarily to be translated as 'word'. Consider the verse, 'And the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence' (Genesis 6:11). Very often acts of violence are preceded by words of violence. The methods of the silent sniper -- those distant, aloof characters poised on top of high towers -- are the exception and not the norm. Incarceration for violence -- even between husband and wife -- can be traced back to verbal insults and verbal abuse. Had the violent language been nipped in the bud, everything may have been different. Therefore, it might be reasonable to assume that if we change our vocabulary and treat language with respect, then we will have a far greater chance of creating a peaceful world around us. This helps us to appreciate how the biblical usage of the term 'tevah' for 'ark- word' offers another perspective on protecting ourselves from violence. In a world where even the animals had violated their innate natures by cohabiting with other species, Noach escapes into an

'ark-word' where God's directions prevail. Noach's word is a very select place where pure animals are taken in groups of seven males with seven females and impure animals can only arrive in pairs. According to the Talmud (Pesachim 3a), the Torah doesn't refer to the latter as 'tamei' (impure), but rather describes them as 'einena tehora' (not pure) (Genesis 7:8), in order to impress upon the reader the importance of purity of speech.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, complements the literary theme of Noach's Word by examining its measurements: it was 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high (Genesis 6:15). He demonstrates how the actual physical dimensions of the ark reflect the essence of language as the letters representing the numeric value of each of these dimensions are shin (300), nun (50), lamed (30), which spells the word l-sh-n (or lashon), meaning 'language.'

Taking this symbolism one step further, we can connect the beginning and ending of Noach. When Aristotle called the human being a 'social animal' he was echoing an idea introduced by Targum Onkelos, who translated the final two words of 'Then the Lord God formed the human of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and he/she became a living soul (nefesh haya)' (Genesis 2:7) as 'ruah memalehah' – a speaking spirit. The term 'social animal' reminds us that if not for the ability of speech, the human being would be an animal on two legs. The ability to communicate, to socialize and to share language with other creatures, defines our humanity. If we were to be deprived of language or the ability to communicate, we would be reduced to the level of animals.

This explains why solitary confinement is such a powerful instrument of torture. One of the great strengths of Natan Sharansky was his ability to survive, and even thrive, through the long years of solitary confinement imposed upon him by the Soviet prison system. Gifted with a power to concentrate, he was able to create an inner world through books, chess games, inner dialogues, and his tiny book of Psalms. His body may have been in solitary confinement, but his inner world of words and ideas allowed him to maintain his dignity as a human being. In a sense, Sharansky is a modern-day Noach, the survivor of the Deluge that ultimately brought Soviet Russia to its knees.

Toward the end of Parashat Noach, we confront another aspect of language where '...the whole earth was of one language and of one speech' (Genesis 11:1), resulting in the building of the Tower of Babel.

The Midrash tells us that in their zeal to build the tower, if a brick would fall from the top of the tower, everyone would mourn, but if a human being would fall, the event would pass unnoticed. Their unity was deceptive for it didn't enable human communication and didn't allow for individual opinions or individual personalities. The process of building the Tower of Babel left no room for the diversity of ideology or discrepancy

of thought. A word (tevah) requires at least two letters or two separate characters communing together; the 'single language' of the Tower of Babel precluded discussion or communication between two respected people with differing but respected views who were sharing their individualized uniqueness with each other – the real purpose of communication.

And so, God punished them 'measure for measure' with multiple languages where they really could not understand each other or conduct even the most minimal conversation. They were destroyed by the very words that they had used – not as a means of sensitive communication but rather as an instrument of materialistic violence.

So far, we have only considered how Noach's tevah-ark-word was a positive development. However, some commentators feel that Noach and his tevah were incomplete expressions of true religiosity. After all, the tevah only saved Noach and his family. The goal should be to produce not only a tevah-word, but rather a Torah-book, in order to save all of humanity! Noach only understood the importance of God's word to save himself and his family from violence and corruption. He did not see beyond his own immediate responsibilities.

The Zohar goes on to maintain that Moses was a repair (tikkun), a necessary and therapeutic improvement, upon Noach. There are at least two interesting similarities between these two personalities: while Noach saves himself in the tevah, Moses is also saved by the tevah (an ark of bulrushes made by his mother and sister) that floats down the Nile; while Moses lived to be 120 years old, Noach, according to the Midrash, spent 120 years building his tevah, enduring sarcastic remarks from cynical onlookers.

But there is one major difference between the two: when God declares His plan to destroy the world and to save only Noach, Noach silently acquiesces to God's plan and constructs the tevah. But after the Israelites worship the golden calf, and the Almighty is ready to destroy the nation and start anew with Moses alone, the prophet of Egypt cries out: 'Erase me from your book...[but save the nation]!' (Exodus 32:32).

The letters of the word 'erase me' (mem, het, nun, yud), the Zohar tells us, can be rearranged to spell out 'the waters of Noach' (mei Noach). In effect, Moses is telling God that he is not like Noach. He cannot countenance his safe journey when humanity is drowning. 'Destroy me, please' said Moses 'but save the people!'

Noach constructs a tevah – a word; Moses transmits a Torah – a book. It is a book which spells out the name of God, a book which will ultimately bring peace and redemption – sensitive communication and concord – to the entire human civilization. Moses is a tikkun for Noach; and the Sefer (book of) Torah is a tikkun for the tevah (word). As the prophets declare, our ultimate vision is for the Book of Torah to emanate from

Jerusalem, teaching that 'nation shall not lift sword against nation and humanity shall not learn war anymore' (Isaiah 2:4). © 2017 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## **Wein Online**

**T**he concluding portion of this week's Torah reading deals with the society that built the great Tower of Babel, and the beginning of the lifetime, and accomplishments of our father Abraham. To me there is a relevancy and immediacy to this theme as it appears in this week's Torah reading.

What is described in the Torah is the creation of a totalitarian society, ruled by dictatorship, fear, and imposed thought and speech control. The Torah text itself sums up the entire situation in its prophetically profound, concise description -- "and the society itself spoke only one language and the few same words." Here you have a description of the destruction of minority opinion, freedom of speech and the right to be different and individualistic. In short, you have the description of North Korea, communist China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nazi Germany, and the former Soviet Union. You have George Orwell's book "1984," paraded before us as biblical literature. In such a society, truth, faith and optimism can never flourish. Faith itself is based upon freedom of choice and the worth of the individual. When the state or the government controls the speech, language, and culture of the society that it governs, then there is very little room for the advancement of faith and for societal growth generally.

One need only look at the wreckage wrought by the forces of thought and speech control that promised the utopian future of the 20th century, This only brought misery to well over 100 million people, without achieving any hint of that utopia being actualized.

The words that the Torah uses to describe the society of the Tower of Babel are striking in their simplicity and accuracy -- "one language and the same few words." It reflects the inability to tolerate other opinions and different words. It is the reason that Abraham is thrown into the 'furnace of fire' simply because he dares to be different and to expound the idea of monotheism in a society of enforced paganism.

The forces that ruled at that time could not tolerate even one voice of dissent and difference. The main problem that the Jewish people have faced over their long history is that they are basically different -- in speech, dress, outlook, belief, and worldview. Even within the Jewish people there are forces that wish to stifle the faithful minority and to eliminate them from political and social influence and power.

It is interesting to me to note that those who shout the most loudly about individual rights and freedoms rarely are willing to extend them to others who may differ from them in ideology, and social customs.

It is not for nothing that we pride ourselves in being the children of Abraham and willing to stand up alone even against the so-called majority of the current Jewish world. This world has unfortunately lost its way in the name of false gods and bankrupt ideals. It has become totalitarian in its attitudes and behavior towards religion and the Orthodox Jewish world.

But just as our father Abraham persevered and overcame the society of the Tower of Babel, I am confident that this will be the future result in our Jewish world regarding our current situation -- of political correctness, cancel culture and coercive behavior. © 2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**erach, Abraham's father, is often viewed in the Midrash as an evil man and nothing more than an idol worshipper (Bereishit Rabbah 38:13). A review of the literal text indicates otherwise.

First of all, Terach's son, Haran, dies during Terach's lifetime. The Torah's description of his demise -- "in the face of his father Terach" -- may express Terach's deep pain, which is certainly understandable (Genesis 11:28). After all, the way of the world is that children sit shivah for parents, not the reverse.

Second, Terach acts with great responsibility toward his family. Rather than leaving Haran's child Lot to be raised by others, Terach takes him in. This is truly a noble deed, especially considering the pain Terach felt upon losing his own child. Notwithstanding this suffering, Terach has the inner strength to raise his grandchild as his own (11:31).

Third, Terach seems to understand the importance of the land of Israel. Years before Abraham is commanded by God to go to the Holy Land, Terach decides on his own to do so. He instinctively recognizes the centrality of Israel (Sforno, 11:31).

Finally, Terach must have been a man of considerable spiritual energy, as all the patriarchs and matriarchs descend from him. Abraham, his son, becomes the first patriarch, followed by Isaac and then Jacob. A second son, Haran, is Sarah's father (Rashi, 11:29). And Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah descend from Nachor, Terach's third son. Note, too, that Lot fathers Moab, from whom Ruth and King David are born, and from whom the Messiah will one day emerge.

Of course, Terach was no Abraham. God does not speak to him. He sets out for the land of Israel but never arrives. Still, the Torah, as it begins the narrative about Abraham and Sarah, seems to underscore the contribution that Terach makes to the development of the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, it is too often the case that

successful children forget the roles their parents played in shaping their personalities and careers. It shouldn't be this way. Children should always be aware of the contributions – too often taken for granted – made by their parents and grandparents.

Thus, it is important that we appreciate Terach, the father of the Jewish People. He seeded Am Yisrael. Hence his name, Terach – from the word ruach (spirit) – suggests that we should remember his spirit, which continues to animate the Jewish people. It was from Terach, whose name begins with the letter taf, which grammatically denotes the future, that Am Yisrael would be born and the world blessed. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Hot Springs of Tiberias

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"All the fountains of the deep opened" (*Bereishit* 7:1). This is how the Torah describes the beginning of the flood. However, at the conclusion of the flood the Torah states: "And the fountains of the deep closed" (8:2), omitting the word "all." Our Sages derive from this that not all the fountains of the deep were closed. Those which benefit humanity, such as the hot springs of Tiberias (*Chamei Teverya*), were left open (Rashi).

When Jewish law speaks of cooking, it is limited to cooking over a fire or any derivative thereof. This is true whether the subject is cooking on Shabbat, roasting the Paschal lamb, or cooking milk with meat.

Since the Torah prohibition of cooking on Shabbat is limited to cooking with fire, one is not liable for cooking with the hot springs of Teverya or the sun (Rashi on *Shabbat* 39a). If we could harness the sun's heat to cook on Shabbat, normative *halacha* might permit it (*Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchetah*, chapter 1, note 127).

Some say that if a non-Jew uses *Chamei Teverya* to cook food, it may still be eaten by a Jew. Since the heat source is not fire, the food is not considered to have been cooked by the non-Jew (and thus it is not forbidden on the grounds of *bishul akum*). Nevertheless, all agree that if non-kosher food is cooked in a pot using *Chamei Teverya* as the heat source, both the pot and the food become forbidden. Does this mean that the people of Teverya can save on their electric bills by using *Chamei Teverya* to *kasher* their kitchen items before Pesach? Not necessarily. Some maintain that if a pot absorbed the taste of prohibited food while on the fire, it can be rid of it only by fire, following the principle of "*Kebol'o kach polto*" ("An item 'spits out' absorbed food in the same way that it absorbed it"). If so, *Chamei Teverya* would not count for *kashering* purposes.

Another interesting tidbit: women may use *Chamei Teverya* for purification purposes, but it may not be used for *netilat yadayim* (hand-washing before a meal). This is because hot water may be used for *netilat yadayim* only if the water started out cold and was later heated up. In contrast, water which was always hot (as is the case with *Chamei Teverya*) cannot be used for *netilat yadayim*. Some say that *Chamei Teverya* cannot be used for *netilat yadayim* because of its sulfur content, which makes it unfit to drink. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

#### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"Whoever spills a man's blood, by man shall his blood be spilled, for Man was made in the image of G-d." (*Bereishit* 9:6) There are several approaches to the message of Man being created in the image of G-d. One focuses on the use of the word, "Elokim," which is also used to describe judges. As Onkelos explains, the murderer is to be killed only if there are witnesses and a judge. Without that, people cannot put him to death. Instead, Hashem will find another way to take the killer from the world.

However, it is important that there be a system of law and order in the world so people do not do whatever they want. If they did, they would destroy the planet (and basically did that in the time of Noach.) This is why the Torah requires a murderer to be judged and accountable to others.

Just before this verse, Hashem told Noach that the animals would fear Man. Even though the animals in the ark only felt the care and concern of Noah, and they might not be fearful of people, Hashem put this instinct into them. This way, they would not harm human beings. This adds another dimension to the idea of the *tzelem Elokim*.

If a human being, who has intellect, could see that animals did not harm humans, and still be unafraid or undeterred to harm a person who was created in the image of Hashem, such a person has forfeited his own life and is put to death. He has underestimated Man's greatness and willingly snuffed out a life. But there is more.

What is the "image of G-d," we speak of? We know that Hashem has no corporeal form. How then, is Man created in "His image"?

Hashem is known to us by His attributes and how He interacts with us. He is a giver; He is a creator. When we say that a person is created in Hashem's image, it means that we each have some of that "creator" in us. Indeed, our purpose is to become partners with Hashem in the world and complete the things He has left for us to do.

The wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "Whose deeds are greater, those of Hashem or of Man?" He expected the answer to be Hashem, whereupon he

could question our act of mila/circumcision. R' Akiva showed him wheat, and showed him bread. He then asked the same question, which was better? His point was that Hashem gives us the basics and expects us to create good from them.

This murderer did not merely ignore the fact that his victim was created in Hashem's image and imbued with the ability and capacity for greatness. Instead, he also underestimated his OWN innate greatness. Because he became a destroyer, and not a creator, he negated his personal purpose in this world. For that reason, he is judged to have forfeited his life. We have greatness inside us, waiting to sprout. Let us nurture it and help it grow.

*R' Zalman Senders was a chosid of R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi z"l, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. R' Zalman had been a wealthy man until he tragically lost all of his money. Unsure of how to proceed, he went to the Rebbe, and described his desperate situation.*

*The rebbe closed his eyes in thought and, after a few minutes, said to him, "My dear R' Zalman, it is obvious that you have given much thought to your needs. Let me ask you, have you given as much thought to why you are needed?"* © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

#### **RABBI DONIEL TRENK**

## **Noach Was a Big Tzadik**

*Dedicated in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of Dov Trenk.*

**T**he Torah gives Noach an extraordinary title—Tzadik Tamim, a perfectly righteous person—something not even Avraham Avinu was called. This raises a fascinating question: Why was Avraham, and not this "perfect tzadik," chosen to become the father of the Jewish people?

After the mabul, we detect a change in Noach. The Torah no longer calls him an Ish Tzadik Tamim, but instead refers to him as Ish Ha'Adama—a man of the earth (similar to how Esav is later called Ish Sadeh—a man of the field). This suggests Noach might have lost some of his spiritual greatness, perhaps due to the overwhelming nature of being witness to the world's destruction.

This change becomes most clear in how Noach handles a family crisis. After becoming drunk and being disrespected by his son Cham, he curses Cham's descendants to serve their own family members, Shem and Yafes, whom he instead blesses. With this curse, Noach creates a deep family divide that would last for generations.

Think about it: How could Cham and his children ever feel like equals in their own family after this? How could Shem and Yafes ever see their brother as anything but beneath them? This split between brothers sets up many future family conflicts, especially between the children of Shem and Canaan.

Avraham, on the other hand, works hard to keep families together. Look at his actions: he marries Sarai,

his deceased brother Haran's daughter, keeping his brother's memory alive even though Haran hadn't fully shared Avraham's beliefs. By taking in both Sarai and her brother Lot, Avraham shows that family bonds matter more than differences in beliefs or even death itself.

This focus on family unity becomes a hallmark of the Avos. We see it in Avraham's pain when his sons, Yitzchak and Yishmael, can't live peacefully together. We see it in Yitzchak's special love for Esav, probably hoping to keep him connected to the family's path and at peace with Yaakov. The story reaches its peak with Yosef and his brothers—where early conflict and Yosef's slavery (much like Canaan's curse) eventually leads to reunion and peace.

The story of Bereishis takes us from brother fighting brother—starting with Kayin and Hevel, continuing with Noach's sons—to the possibility of peace through the Avos' constant work toward achdus. This journey finally succeeds at Har Sinai, where Yaakov's descendants stand together as one nation, achieving the lofty ideal of K'Ish Echad b'Lev Echad—like one person with one heart. This change from family fighting to national unity becomes the foundation of who we are as Jews and what we're meant to achieve in this world.

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#### **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**W**hile everyone is familiar with the biblical story of Noah's ark and has most likely seen cartoon drawings of the ark, there are many aspects of this story with which the vast majority of people are unfamiliar. I therefore decided to compile a list of facts culled from the Torah and rabbinic sources that you likely did not know about this seminal tale.

Noah is the only person in the entire Scriptures to be described as a tzaddik – wholly righteous.

Noah lived a very long life. Abraham, born ten generations later, was 58 when Noah died.

According to one opinion, the ark contained 900 rooms each 12x12 (the typical size of a room on a modern cruise ship).

Noah even took demons on the ark to save them from the flood.

According to one opinion, the light inside the ark was generated by a precious stone (no, there weren't any flood lights).

Noah came out of ark limping because a grumpy lion was annoyed that his food arrived late and swatted him.

The general living conditions on the ark were fairly horrible – imagine a year of 24-hour animal feeding schedules handled by only a handful of people in a mostly dark and smelly environment.

The raven refused to reconnoiter at the end of the 40 days and 40 nights to see if the land had dried because he was concerned that Noah would elope with

his mate. Noah sent a dove instead.

The dove found an olive tree and came back with a branch signifying that the flood was over and that things had started growing again. God had made peace with the world, and forevermore an olive branch came to be a symbol peace.

This week's Torah portion opens with: "These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man and perfect in his generation, and Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9).

As mentioned, Noah is the only person in the entire Holy Scripture to be described as a tzaddik – a "righteous" person. It is, in my mind, equally fascinating that the only person in the entire Torah to be called a tzaddik is in fact a non-Jew. God actually tells this to Noah directly, "You and your family shall enter into the ark; for you have I seen to be righteous before me in this generation" (Genesis 7:1).

The Almighty goes on to tell Noah that he should gather all the animals and birds and bring them onto the ark. Noah did as he was told; "And Noah did according to all that the Lord commanded him" (Ibid 7:5).

Finally – and only as it began to rain – Noah gathered his family and entered the ark, "And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood." (Ibid 7:7).

The famous Biblical commentator known as Rashi quotes a rather astonishing teaching from the sages on this verse. The midrash states that Noah – like the rest of his generation – was lacking in emunah (often described as "faith"). For this reason, he did not enter the ark until the waters began to run over his ankles. In other words, he didn't enter the ark after God told him to go in; it was the waters of the flood that compelled him into the ark.

This is a stunning statement. How is it possible for Noah – who the Torah describes as a tzaddik – a wholly righteous person, to have a lack of faith? What exactly was he missing in his faith – he was quite literally having a conversation with the Almighty! What does he not "believe"? How is there any possibility for him to have any kind of doubts whatsoever?

Maimonides (1138-1204), the great Jewish philosopher and codifier of Jewish law, authored a work known as a Sefer HaMitzvot – a complete listing of the 613 commandments found in the Torah and a brief description of each.

This compilation of all the mitzvot begins with the very first mitzvah, "The first commandment is that we are commanded in belief – emunas – of God. That is; He is the origin and cause of all that exists and He is the power behind all of existence. The source of this mitzvah is found in (the first sentence of the Ten Commandments); 'I am the Lord your God [...]' (Exodus 20:2).

Nachmanides (1190-1270), another famous medieval Rabbinic scholar and philosopher – and widely

regarded as the greatest of his generation – wrote a commentary on Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot. Nachmanides comments on the points in the work with which he disagrees.

On this very first commandment Nachmanides asks an absolutely devastating question: How is it possible to have a commandment requiring a person to believe in God? A commandment by definition implies a "commander" – so if you have a commandment then you already believe in God who issued the command. If you do not believe in a "commander" then you cannot have a commandment. It is circular logic.

For this reason, Nachmanides disagrees and says that belief in the Almighty is a requirement and prerequisite to all the commandments, and it is therefore not to counted as a separate mitzvah.

I believe that Maimonides has a fundamentally different understanding of what emunah means and it does not mean belief or faith.

It is important to understand that Judaism is not a religion of "belief," it is a religion that requires a knowledge of God. This is, in fact, what Maimonides writes in his magnum opus on Jewish Law known as Yad HaChazaka, "The foundation of all foundations and pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a First Being Who brought everything into existence" (Mada 1:1).

Maimonides clearly states that we are commanded to "know" that there is a God and not to merely "believe" in a God. Knowledge is a much higher level of certainty, and that is the very foundation of Judaism. In a prior edition I explained this in greater detail (for more information, see Shabbat Shalom on Parshat Eikev).

Every translation is an interpretation. For this reason, it is particularly important to always look at the origin of words and their usage in their original context. A full accounting of the sources for the word emunah in the Torah is beyond the scope of this article, but it seems to be rooted in the concept of being ever-present. A man with his faithful servant or his faithful dog refers to the fact that they are always with him.

The word for this in English is immanence – and a very obvious cognate of the Hebrew word emunah. I believe that Maimonides is describing that the first commandment is to affirm the immanence of the Almighty. In other words, we must constantly be aware and act as if we are continually in the presence of the Almighty. We are commanded to affirm the ever-presence of the Almighty in our lives. (This is also why the word amen (also related to the word emunah) means, "I affirm.")

Man was created with a desire for self-fulfillment and self-achievement. This is often manifested in the negative trait of self-indulgence. Simply put, we want to do what we want to do and not be constrained by an outside source. At a basic level, when we sin we are saying to God: "You're not the boss of me and I can do

whatever I want."

Like Noah in this week's Torah portion, every time we do something that we know is wrong or particularly bad for our health (smoking, overeating, etc.) it involves a cognitive dissonance – some version of "I know this is wrong, but I want to do what I want to do." Thus, when we sin we are actively ignoring the ever-presence of the Almighty, and it is a failure of the responsibility of affirming His immanence in our lives.

This means that, of course, Noah knows that God told him to go into the ark. The fact that he does not go into the ark until the waters compel him to enter is not a failure of him not "believing" that the flood was coming. Rather his action is one of defiance – like every sin of every human – an assertion that he wants to do what he wants to do when he wants to do it. It's a failure of affirming of living in the ever-presence of the Almighty.

The only human to ever overcome this and achieve living in the ever-presence of the Almighty is Moses – but that's a conversation for another time.  
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#### **RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND**

## **RavFrand**

*Transcribed by David Twersky*

*Technical Assistance by David Hoffman*

**T**he parsha says that Noach was perfect and righteous (tzadik tamim) in his generations (plural). The Meshech Chochmah infers that Noach exhibited these two attributes: tzadik and tamim. Tzadik, as we said, meant that he was careful to avoid theft. In the generation prior to the flood (which was full of theft), Noach was distinguished as a tzadik because he did not engage in theft like the rest of humanity. Tamim indicated that he was humble and of lowly spirit. Imagine: Noach walks out of the teivah. He and his family are the only people in the world and it is now up to him to populate the entire world. Out of the entire universe, only Noach was saved by the Ribono shel Olam. How does such a person feel about himself? "I must be someone very special." Nonetheless, Noach was humble and of lowly spirit. This means that in the generation subsequent to the flood, he was still a tamim, he was still humble.

This is the meaning of "in his generations." In the generation prior to the flood, he was a tzadik in his monetary conduct and in the generation subsequent to the flood, he was a tamim, meaning he was humble and lowly of spirit. Noach was perfect and righteous in both generations.

The Torah says, "Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth had become filled with robbery. And G-d saw the earth, and behold it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. G-d said to Noach, 'The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery through them; and behold, I am about to destroy them from the

earth." (Bereshis 6:11-13)

Besides robbery, the generation of the flood was guilty of many other things as well. They were guilty of idolatry and sexual immorality. However, despite all of that, Rashi writes that their decree was only sealed by virtue of their "chumus" (robbery). They were terribly corrupt and immoral in many ways and yet the straw that broke the camel's back was their "chumus".

The Talmud Yerushalmi asks: What is the definition of "chumus" and what is the definition of "gezel"? The Gemara answers that "gezel" involves theft of money worth at least a perutah and "chumus" involves theft of less than a perutah in value. This is amazing. "Chumus" does not mean robbing a bank. "Chumus" means stealing something that may be worth no more than a fraction of a cent! This exacerbates our question. For illicit relations, the decree was not sealed. For adultery, idolatry, and all types of gross immorality, the decree was not sealed. But "chumus" -- meaning even less than a perutah's worth of theft -- broke the camel's back! What does this mean?

I saw an interesting insight in Rabbi Avrohom Buxbaum's new sefer on Chumash: The lesson is that when a person steals a single pea or a single needle or something worth less than a perutah, he is abusing the legal system because he knows that he can get away with it. If you know you can "get away with it," you are doomed!

When a person commits adultery, he knows that he is doing something wrong. When a person worships idols, he also knows that he is doing something wrong. There is a sense of guilt. When a person feels guilty, he is close to repentance. Eventually, his conscience will bother him and he will come to the realization that he needs to stop what he has been doing because it is sinful.

When the generation of the flood committed these major aveiros, the Ribono shel Olam was willing to have mercy and wait, in the hope that eventually they would do teshuvah. But when a person does something wrong and he says, "There is nothing wrong with this," then he is distant from teshuvah. When he is distant from teshuvah, he will never repent. That is why the final decree of the generation of the flood was only sealed over the sin of "chumus". The Almighty realized that they would never repent for this. When a person tries to abuse the system and "get away with murder" (or whatever it may be), even though technically it may be legal, he knows he is "gaming the system" and he feels that he never did anything wrong. If I feel that I never did anything wrong, I will never feel remorse and I will never do teshuvah. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

