

Noach

Hashem's Four Gifts to Humanity

A. The Just Society and Its Destroyers

Midrash Shmos Raba Parsha 30:

The *pasuk* states: *Melech b'mishpat ya'amid aretz, v'ish trumos yaharsena*. A king establishes a just society based on law, but a haughty person destroys it.

The midrash expounds:

A king establishes a just society – this refers to Israel, as the verse states, "You shall be a kingdom of priests." *The haughty person destroys it* – this refers to Generation of the Flood.

Rav Acha said, Hashem wanted to give four good gifts to the generation of the flood: 1) *Torah*, 2) *Yisurim* – suffering, 3) *Avodas hakorbanos* – the service of sacrifices, and 4) *Tfila* – prayer. But they did not want them, and this is why they were destroyed.

Question:

What is the meaning of this midrash? We know Adam was given six universal, basic *mitzvos*, followed by an additional one given to Noach. These are the seven laws of gentiles, *mitzvos bnei Noach*. The Generation of the Flood did not keep these seven imperatives. They stole, murdered, had promiscuous relationships, and they fostered injustice. If they didn't keep even the seven basic rules for a just society, what was the hope of giving them the Torah? If they couldn't keep even seven *mitzvos*, how could they be expected to keep 613?

Explanation: Part 1

B. *Chet Eitz Hadaas* introduced conflict within a formerly unified soul.

Shem Mishmuel explains this midrash based upon the writings of the Ari Hakadosh, the father of modern Kabbala. The original soul of Adam and Chava contained within it all the souls of all of the people who were ever going to live on the earth. Their universal soul had a pure character, and was meant to produce people of the same kind, pure of spirit. But when Adam and Chava ate from the Eitz Hadaas, the tree that mixes good and evil together, this universal soul of theirs lost its fundamental purity and unity. The fruit of the Eitz HaDaas introduced a mixture of good and evil within their soul. Hashem wanted humanity to be pure. So when Hashem created people, He wanted life to be simple, not full of conflicting impulses and temptations. But as a

result of the sin of Adam and Chava, impulses that drive a person into internal conflict became an integral part of the human experience.

Since then, life is a process of returning to the purity of Adam and Chava before their sin. The goal of life is to purge the evil that is within the human soul, either by subduing the evil impulses and controlling them, or by channelling them towards goodness.

Had Adam and Chava not sinned, the purpose of life would have been different. And when Mashiach comes Hashem will cleanse people of their evil side, and we will go back to serving Hashem in the original way, as originally intended in the Garden of Eden. In the future, life will not have all of the problems imposed by our evil inclination. Until then, though, life is a mortal struggle between our good and evil sides.

C. The Purpose of the Four Gifts – to rectify Adam's sin

The four gifts that God offered to the generation of the flood: Torah, suffering, sacrifices, and prayer are the means for achieving the purification and rectification of humanity. These gifts help people regain the purity of their souls. In the generation of the Flood, God put powerful and deep souls into the world. These souls had tremendous capacity for goodness. They potentially could have become like Adam and Chava before the sin if only they would have chosen to do so; if they would have accepted the four gifts that Hashem offered them.

Had that generation accepted these four gifts they could have brought out the best side within themselves. However, once they refused the gifts, their evil side overrode their good side. The evil side conquered and overwhelmed the good side to such an extent that God had to destroy them and the world.

Noach, however, was a *tzadik*. He was not enough of a *tzadik* to save the world, but enough to be saved himself. Hashem wanted him to start humanity anew. He would father a new mankind that would try again, and Hashem would see if mankind could purge itself of the *Eitz Hadaas tov v'ra*, the paradoxical lifestyle that people had led until then. These were the opportunities of the generations after the Flood.

After the Flood, Hashem gave humanity a tremendous capacity to build. This led to the project of the Tower of Bavel, *Migdal Bavel*. Together and united, many people participated in this building. They wanted to build up to the sky, into the heavens. Had they intended this structure for good, they could have accomplished great things. Unfortunately, they used this building for wickedness. Think of how much wickedness can occur in a big city. Similarly, we can ask, how much goodness can there be in a big city? When people gather together in one area and pool their strengths and talents they possess powerful potential – for good or for evil.

The generation of the Tower of Bavel became the *Dor Haflaga*, the Generation of Dispersion, and

failed. Even though they had a great reservoir of goodness, they refused to access it. God stopped their project and dispersed them to the four corners of the earth.

D. Avraham's Arrival

From this context Avraham emerged. He saved the world from another possible destruction, and he founded the Jewish people. This new people was going to be the new experiment of the Almighty. But this time, there was a twist. In the previous tries, with Adam and then the generations of the Flood and the Dispersion, Hashem had wanted *all* of humanity to succeed, to choose good. This time, Hashem chose one small nation, just a few people out of the billions of humans in the world.

Here was His plan for the experiment with this small group. If they would keep the Torah, follow their good side and purge themselves of their evil side, this nation would be a light to all the other nations in the world. The many nations in the world would then hopefully follow in the footsteps of this one exemplary nation, and humanity would be redeemed.

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the founding fathers of the Jewish nation, did great things. They fulfilled God's plans. They succeeded as individuals. Although Hashem was no longer looking for all of humanity to embrace His mission, He wanted more than an individual in each generation to do so. Yaakov took the first major step in that direction and raised a large family. But then the evil side became strong again. The twelve sons were not able to maintain the level of greatness for which they were destined, even though they were a small group, nurtured personally by Yaakov. The *machlokes* between Yosef and his brothers allowed evil to become too strong. The brothers betrayed their loyalty to the family as a whole and sold him into slavery. The sin of selling Yosef angered God. He decided that this small group had also failed. However, due to the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who were pure and righteous *tzadikim*, Hashem decided not to destroy the twelve tribes of Israel. He would fix them instead, and therefore made them slaves in Egypt for more than 200 years.

E. The Purpose of Egyptian Slavery

The years of slavery were very hard. But during those years of slavery Yaakov's children learned what kindness was. They learned about helping others, others who were being beaten by the same evil oppressors. In this crucible of Egyptian slavery, evil personality characteristics were purged from Israel and replaced with goodness and sweetness.

Since the Jewish nation left Egypt more than 3000 years ago, the Jewish people have always been in the forefront of social movements to better the plight of humanity. The labor movements, civil rights movements, hospitals and medical programs for the poor and needy in

the modern world have all been spearheaded and led by Jews. Worldwide, Jews are proportionally much more involved in public betterment than any other group. The *chesed* of our nation is unmatched. This trait comes from the crucible of Egypt, where Hashem forced Israel to become pure. A furnace burns away impurities of metal, leaving only the essential pure metal. Egyptian slavery burned away the impurities of our nation, leaving us a goodhearted and kind people.

According to the Ari HaKadosh, the generations of the Flood and the Dispersion, together with the generations of the Jews in Mitzrayim all possessed the same recycled souls. Hashem had hoped that the purification would come during the generation of the Flood. But they failed. He tried again with the generation of the Tower of Bavel. But they also failed.

After that generation the souls were recycled again, this time as Jews in Egypt. This time the generation did become pure. When they came to Har Sinai, they said *naaseh v'nishma*, "Yes! We will keep the Torah!" They became a group of people whose souls were purged and pure, looking to do good deeds and to bring goodness into the world.

This has been demonstrated over thousands of years. Wherever Jews have been located they have always worked for social justice. The Jewish people will lead the way until Mashiach comes, showing others what it means to live a redeemed and holy life, under the guidance and inspiration of Hashem.

Explanation: Part 2

F. The Four Levels of the Soul

Now, Let us examine the four gifts that were offered to the generation of the *mabul*, but were unfortunately turned down. But first we must examine a kabbalistic notion – the four levels of the human soul.

The human soul has four levels. (There is also a fifth one that we don't have a grasp of). The lowest level is the biological soul. We are living organisms. We share characteristics of life with the smallest cell and virus. Vegetation, fish, birds, animals and people all have a biological soul. Shem Mishmuel refers to this biological level of the soul as *guf*, body.

The second level is the emotional soul. Humans are subject to many emotions: love, hate cruelty, kindness, happiness, and anger, to name a few. This level is called *nefesh*, and is also present in birds and animals, but not in vegetation.

The next level up is exclusively human, the level of intellect, *seichel*. Man is an abstract thinker and the only creature who is able to grasp things from the tiniest atom to the distant stars. Man is also a creator. He builds and invents things that no other creature has ever come close to doing, including airplanes, cars, phones and computers.

To review, the first three levels are:

1. Biological – *Guf*
2. Emotional – *Nefesh*
3. Intellectual – *Sechel*

The fourth and most important level of the human soul is the *Tzelem Elokim*, our spirituality, that is our likeness to God. We are not just from this world. We have a sense of another world, of a completely different reality, *olam haba*. We bear God's image; we are like angels. The *Tzelem Elokim* unites all of the other aspects of our personality into the single, living, spiritual being that we are.

Other Kabbalistic and Chassidic works call these four levels of the soul 1) *Nefesh*, 2) *Ruach*, 3) *Neshama*, and 4) *Chaya*.

G. The Four Gifts, One for Each Soul Level

Shem Mishmuel explains the significance of the four gifts that Hashem wanted to give to the generation of the flood, and eventually gave to the *yotzei mitzryaim*. These were gifts for each level of our soul.

1) Torah is clearly an intellectual entity. We have to study and understand it. This is Hashem's gift to our *seichel*.

2) *Yisurim*, suffering, is the second gift. What is the nature of the suffering that the midrash refers to? If the suffering referred to is physical, we Jews have certainly suffered immensely from the Holocaust to pogroms, to Inquisition, jihad, and terrorism. This may be the heavy price of being God's children, of being the representative of God in the world. Evil hates us because we say evil has no place on this planet. We challenge evil. So evil resents us. This was Hitler's avowed reason for hating Jews, because he said that the Jews were the world's conscience.

Shem Mishmuel says heaven forbid for us to believe that in order to be Jewish or to be a good person that you have to suffer physically. So how should we understand the gift of suffering that the generation of the flood declined? It is possible to interpret that instead of physical *yisurim*, the midrash refers to the pain of struggling to fix our weaknesses. We all know how difficult it is to change ourselves after we identify a personal weakness. It is painful to admit to having a flaw. It is even more painful to fix that flaw. This is the painful process of *teshuvah* and this is the meaning of the gift of suffering.

If we would replace the suffering of the Jewish victim at the hands of anti-semites, with self-development and *teshuvah* – the suffering of self-critique – this suffering would be sufficient for the development of Jewish character. The pain and struggle to fix ourselves is cathartic and helps us grow. *Yisurim* are sometimes called *yisurim shel ahava*, suffering of love, referring to suffering

that stems from Hashem's love for us. The *yisurim* of *teshuva* are those kind of *yisurim shel ahava*. Clearly, the physical *yisurim* focus on the *guf*, our bodies. But so do the *yisurim* of *teshuva*, which make us act properly with our *guf*, body.

3) The third gift, *korbanos*, address the *nefesh*, the emotional state of the Jew. A *korban* can be an inspirational experience as the person goes to the holy Temple in Yerushalayim. It can also be a cathartic return to God through forgiveness of sins. Bringing a *korban* is an emotional experience, involving a mixture of joy and tears. The opportunity to bring a *korban* is a gift from Hashem for the emotional level of the Jewish soul, the *nefesh*.

4) *Tfila*, prayer, is Hashem's gift for the *tzelem elokim*. Shem Mishmuel defines the word *tfila* based upon the *pasuk* in Breishis 30:8, "*Naftulei Elokim niftalti.*" Rashi says that *naftulei* means connection, like the word *p'til*, which is a wick comprised of several strands twisted together. *Tfila* therefore means connecting to Hashem, directing our own Godliness towards Him. This is the gift Hashem gave to us in order to express the Godly, spiritual side of ourselves.

This process of connecting to God through prayer is also a unifying process within ourselves. Our biological souls may want to eat, drink and be merry, but our emotional, spiritual selves often say no. Sometimes our emotions want to get angry, but our intellect says no. We experience many internal conflicts. How can we settle the contradictions within ourselves? The *tzelem elokim*, our inherent Godliness, unifies all of the elements of our personality into one. *Tfila* addresses these issues by making us aware of our own Godliness and connection to Him, thus enabling our spiritual side to be the arbiter of our inner conflicts.

We live at a time of conflict – between people, and between nations. Individuals experience conflict within themselves. A person has many goals, which often conflict. The goal of financial success, for example, drives a person to spend a lot of time working. But we also want to spend time at home. People want power, but power produces enemies. Then enter alienation and anxiety. How can we synthesize our conflicting drives? Prayer connects us with Hashem, and helps us put our competing values in perspective.

When we connect to Hashem, He stretches out a hand, caresses us, consoles us, and tells us to put things into perspective. He shares a bit of His divine perspective with us through the power of prayer. Our bodies shake back and forth, our souls sing in emotional rapture, our minds contemplate the greatness of the Almighty and how He can help us. All levels of our personality are involved in one act of connection with Hashem together with our own unified, single soul.

Let us always be strong in *tfila*. This is the solution for concerns of health, wealth, peace, and security. Prayer connects us to Hashem and He helps us with our needs. It places *tzelem elokim* as the prime mover of all the levels of within ourselves, instead of having conflicting levels of *guf*, *nefesh* and *sechel*.

H. The Rejection of the Four Gifts

Unfortunately the generation of the Flood did not accept the four gifts. They murdered people, a violation of the holiness of the body, parallel to the level of *guf*. They were promiscuous and committed sexual sins of passion, thus misusing emotion, their *nefesh*. They served *avoda zara*, which means they held false beliefs, misusing their *sechel*. They stole from each other. By stealing they violated their aspect of *Tzelem Elokim*, the unifying core of the human personality and community. They did not feel united, and through their actions, they drove themselves completely apart.

Hashem destroyed that generation because they degenerated on every human level. In contrast, Noach was a person who was perfect on every level: on the physical, emotional, intellectual as well as on the spiritual level. Noach, however, was unable to reach others in the world, so they were lost.

I. Spiritual Space Must be Filled

But why did this generation have to perish? Even though they were destined for greatness, couldn't they have rejected the Torah and maintained a mediocre standing? Why did they have to fail so drastically after Hashem desired to give them the Torah?

Sometimes Hashem offers us greatness. But if a person rejects it, great evil rushes in. Mediocrity is not an option. When Hashem offers greatness to a person, he will either have great goodness or great evil. It is a stark choice. If you choose to keep the gifts Hashem offers to you, you will greatly succeed. If you decline, God forbid, you inevitably create terrible consequences.

In history, we have seen many leaders who must have had great souls. Instead of leading their people to greatness, they led them to destruction. Hitler, Stalin, and other great evil-doers had incredibly huge potential for goodness. However, they did not choose goodness. Instead they produced horrific evil.

Each one of us has great gifts, special talents that Hashem has given us. If we use them for good they will be wonderful. If we turn them down, though, they will inevitably produce evil.

When God gives us an opportunity to do good, He is saying, "I know you can succeed." We should do it, and not decline the opportunity, claiming that it is beyond our abilities. The alternative is too terrible to contemplate. We must do it. *Chassidus* teaches us that we can and will succeed. Hashem always gives a person the ability to handle all of life's tests. If we are given a test it is because He knows that we can succeed in it. If it seems too hard, it is really a Heavenly compliment. God Himself is telling us that we can truly do this.

May Hashem bless us with the ability to face life's four levels of challenge, and at every level of our soul for us to reach our highest, holiest potential.

Questions:

1. In what way did eating from the fruit of the *Eitz Hadaas* change the nature of the human soul?
2. What was the purpose of Egyptian slavery? Why was it necessary?
3. What are the four levels of the soul? Name and explain each one.
4. How does the fourth level impact upon the other three?
5. How does *tfila*, prayer, impact the soul?
6. According to Chassidus, what is the theory of Hashem's choice of the Jewish people?
7. What are the four gifts Hashem gave to the Jewish people for the four levels of the soul?
8. What type of suffering is considered *yisurim shel ahava*, suffering of love?
9. What happens when people reject spiritual gifts? Can they stay at the same level they were at before they were offered the gifts?

Reflection:

10. Which of the four levels of your soul do you think is strongest?
11. Which level of your soul do you like the most?
12. Describe four different general activities you do with each separate level of your soul.
13. Describe four different activities you do with each one of the four levels of your soul that connect you to Hashem.
14. How could you make other activities that you do more spiritual?
15. Is it easy or hard for you to connect to Hashem?
16. Is there a way that you think could make it easier for you to connect to Him?

Exercises:

1. In what situations do you experience conflicting drives? Identify which levels of your soul that these different drives stem from.
2. Write down two *midos* you have that you feel are weak. Devise a plan for a week to improve them. What role will *tfila* play in your *teshuva* process?
3. Think of ways in which you can use each one of the four gifts given to us by Hashem in your personal spiritual growth.