בס"ד

**Parshas Noach**

Creating & Exiling Divinity

*וַיָּחֶל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטַּע כָּרֶם: (בראשית ט,כ)*

*"And Noach, man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard.” (Genesis 9: 20)*

**I - Introduction**

The story of the *mabul* is one of the most well-known tales in the Torah. The Sumerians, Babylonians, and even the Greeks had flood stories in their respective mythologies and cultures. In fact, the Sumerian account is currently believed to have been written during the lifetime of the Avos. However, there are several critical differences between the true account in the Torah and the pagan narratives - such is what happened to Noach after he stepped out of the ark.

**II – Noach in the Aftermath of the Flood**

Every version of the story has Noach offering sacrifices and gaining divine favor, but that is where the pagan narrative diverges from what the Torah tells us. In the oldest known version of the Sumerian myth contained in the “Eridu Genesis” tablets, which were written during the time of the Avos (circa 1600 B.C.E.), Noach[[1]](#footnote-1) is granted immortality “like a god” and is sent to “live toward the east over the mountains of Dilmun,” a mountain range beyond the eastern frontier of Sumerian civilization (in modern-day Bahrain and Qatar).[[2]](#footnote-2) In the slightly later Akkadian version famously known as the Epic of Gilgamesh, Noach becomes an immortal god and is sent to “live far away at the Mouth of the Rivers.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In both accounts, Noach is deified. He becomes superhuman, transcending humanity, and as such, needs to live apart from them.

Not so the Noach in the Torah. Though he is initially referred to as an “*ish tzaddik tamim bedorosav*,”[[4]](#footnote-4) when he leaves the ark he is called an *“ish adamah*,”[[5]](#footnote-5) a man of the earth. He plants vineyards, gets drunk, and even debases himself. This is a much more human Noach. He is righteous, but humanly flawed, a man who very much lives in the midst of mortal society.

At first glance, these pagan accounts seem relatively straightforward, quite similar to other Mesopotamian myths. But upon closer analysis, there is something quite strange going on. Why would Noach’s descendants alter the story of the mabul. Presumably as a way to ‘move on’ from the lesson of the Flood that humanity is ultimately held accountable for its actions. Such a departure would ultimately culminate in the constructing the Tower of Bavel. But if that’s the case, why deify Noach? Why make the hero of the Flood even more righteous than in real life?[[6]](#footnote-6)

**III – Living in the East**

To answer this question, let’s imagine what life must have like for people after the flood. Initially, the descendants of Noach lived close to home, where the ark had landed. Every day, they awoke in the shadows of Har Ararat. They might have even seen the ark. (After all, it was a huge boat, measuring close to 600 feet long and 60 feet high.) [[7]](#footnote-7) No one could think of rebelling against Hashem there. There was a memorial to the *mabul* right in front of them! In order to move on from the flood, they needed to move from the mountain. Thus, humanity moved *en masse*[[8]](#footnote-8) away from Har Ararat to the valley of Bavel.[[9]](#footnote-9)

But that still wasn’t enough. Some memories are too resilient to fade away merely by a change in local. Many of us may have known someone or a child of someone who went through the Holocaust. Those painful memories of death and destruction don’t go away simply because we no longer live in Europe. The same was true of the people who lived after the *mabul*. Untold numbers of people and animals had been wiped out. The very earth itself had been eroded.[[10]](#footnote-10) Why? Because humanity had sinned and Hashem wanted to start over. Those memories and the sense of responsibility and accountability of one’s actions can’t be denied simply by moving away from the ark.

What could the nations of the world do dissociate from the memories and messages of the *mabul*?

They relegated it to mythology.

Noach, the hero of the *mabul* whose righteousness saved him, his family, and the future of all of humanity, became larger than life. He became a god, someone who transcended humanity. Because of this deification, Noach is sent away. He is sent east outside Mesopotamia. A god has no business being in the land of mortals because he has nothing in common with them. Indeed, the east in the Torah was where Gan Eden was (“*gan be’eden mikedem*”).[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the Gilgamesh version, Noach is sent to the “head of the rivers.” To me, this is also a reference to Eden. As the Torah stated, “*v’nahar yotzei me’eden lehashkos es hagan umishap yipared vhayah larbaah rashim*.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This version goes even farther. Here, Noach is even greater than Adam. Adam lived in Gan Eden, while Noach lived in Eden, a place the Gemara tells us is 60 times greater than Gan Eden.[[13]](#footnote-13) In effect, Noach has transcended humanity. He is a *tzaddik tamim*. Perfect. Sinless, even greater than Adam who sinned eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

But Noach’s deification effectively exiled him from the rest of humanity. He was too perfect to be human. Even the hero Gilgamesh could not achieve Noach’s greatness. Living in the East didn’t only mean that he lived in paradise, but it also meant that humanity didn’t have to live with Noach or live like Noach. He wasn’t like them and thus they didn’t need to compare themselves to him. They did not have to be *tzaddikim temimim*. In fact, they couldn’t be. It wasn’t humanly possible. The only one who could was now a god.

This was how the nations of the world moved on from the flood. They couldn’t deny what had happened. That a person is held accountable by Hashem for one’s actions, and that Hashem can reward and punish those who follow or reject His commandments and values. So they did the next best thing. They deified it. It became something larger than life. Divorced from life. You don’t need to deny something that doesn’t affect you. Noach was real, but not human. He was a god that existed, but lived in the East. A realm that very much existed but divorced from every-day life and the human psyche.

The real Noach, however, the Noach in the Torah was different. He emerged from the ark as an “*ish adamah*,” a man of the earth. Someone dedicated to rebuilding and living in the physical world. Someone who could make mistakes by planting a vineyard before other staples of human survival.[[14]](#footnote-14) Someone capable of debasing himself. This is something that the nations of the world could not accept. That a *tzaddik tamim* could be an *ish adamah*. Could live in the real world, capable of making mistakes. Because if that were true, then he would be just like them. And that would mean that they could be and were expected to become *tzadikim* just like Noach.

**IV – Exiled to Jerusalem**

We have just finished the month of Tishrei. A month inundated with holidays. We had a Rosh Hashnah and Yom Kippur. Days spent praying, repenting, and accepting Hashem as our King. We had a Succos and Simchas Torah. Almost a week and half dedicated to rejoicing in our newfound closeness to Hashem and His Torah. Now we come back to real life.

The transition was even more powerful in the times of the Beis Hamikdash. A farmer lives in the Galilee and needs to travel to Jerusalem for Succos to fulfill the commandment of *aliyah l’regel*. But why stop there? Why not come a few days early to watch the Cohen Gadol perform the avodah of Yom Kippur? So he and his family decide to come for Yom Kippur. But to be able to enter the Temple you need to be ritually pure and sprinkled with the ashes of the Parah Adumah. This process takes another week. Traveling takes another week, so before Rosh Hashana, the family leaves their little village and begins the long trek to Jerusalem.

When they arrive at Jerusalem, the see largest gathering of Jews that they have ever seen. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people in this metropolis. It’s overwhelming. They find a place to stay and begin the purification process. Finally, on Yom Kippur the enter the Bais Hamikdash for the first time and see the Kohen Gadol in all his splendor and glory. They see the red string turn white. An open miracle signaling God’s forgiveness. Their joy is indescribable. Then comes Succos. Eight days of non-stop celebrations in the Bais Hamikdash. The gemara tells us that someone who has not seen the Simchas Beis Hashoeiva has never witnessed a true celebration.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Eventually it’s time to leave. The family packs its bags, spend another week on the road. and finally, after six weeks away from home, the family returns to their little village. To their little home. And to their regular lives. The sights, sounds, and responsibilities in their hamlet are so incongruous with their time in Jerusalem and the Beis Hamikdash. How do they move on? No one can deny that the past six weeks never occurred. The memories are too powerful and visceral.

They have two options. One is to mythologize the past six weeks. To say that the past six weeks happened but aren’t part of this world. The person in Jerusalem was the Yerushalmi me. The Beis Hamikdash me. That me is divine. Someone larger than life. Someone that has nothing in common with rest of the year me. Someone exiled to Jerusalem.

The other option is to embrace that identity. To accept that the Yerushalmi and the farmer is the same person. Someone who can be a *tzaddik tamim* and an *ish adamah* in the real world. Someone capable of making mistakes. And someone nevertheless capable of reaching great heights.

**V – The Challenge of *Isru Chag***

That is the challenge we all face coming back from Yom Tov. After each of the *shalosh regalim* we have an *isru chag*. A quasi holiday on which we don’t say *tachanun*.[[16]](#footnote-16) The name comes from a pasuk in Tehillim which we say in Hallel. “*Isru chag baavosim ad karnos hamizbeach*.”[[17]](#footnote-17) To bind the holiday to the corners of the alter. The purpose of *isru chag* is to help us bind Yom Tov to the corner of the altar, something used every day without fail. We too need to take the Yom Tov and make it a part of our every-day lives. To not relegate our experiences and spiritual achievements of Tishrei to a pedestal displayed and imprisoned in a trophy case. But to be able sit in a subway or car on the way to work knowing and believing that we are the same people who heard the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, who repented on Yom Kippur, and who danced on Simchas Torah.

It’s certainly not easy. That’s why the people built *Migdal Bavel*. To separate the divine heavens from their every-day lives.[[18]](#footnote-18) But Avraham was able to become a *tamim*,[[19]](#footnote-19) even reaching a higher level than Noach did,[[20]](#footnote-20) and still remain very much ensconced in the world - interfacing with royalty and shepherds alike - inspiring them to accept Hashem as the one and only G-d, and as his children, we can do the same.

1. The protagonist’s name in each pagan myth is different. For convenience sake, the name Noach is used throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Great Flood: Sumarian.” http://www.livius.org/articles/misc/great-flood/flood2-t/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The Great Flood: Gilgamesh.” http://www.livius.org/articles/misc/great-flood/flood3\_t-gilgamesh/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 6:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 9:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. What makes this question even more perplexing is that the Gemara notes how one of the factions constructing the tower believed that the flood had actually been a purely natural phenomenon that occurred every 1656 years, and they thought that the tower would act as a support column when such an event should happen again. How could something that they had immortalized and deified be concurrently chalked up to natural phenomena if Noach actually lived during the tower’s construction?! Indeed, the Midrash Rabbah (Genesis 38:7) relates how the people said that Avraham was barren and not a threat. Some *mefarshim* understand that they were not concerned about Avraham perpetuating and potential divisive religious philosophy because he had descendants who would carry on his legacy. Others (see Ramban Genesis 11:28) understand that they ridiculed him for preaching about a religious system that believed in an incorporeal, invisible, and ostensibly unresponsive (as of then) deity. If Avraham was truly following the one and only G-d, why had Hashem punished him by not granting him children.

   Either way, this *midrash* highlights how the people during the time of the Tower’s construction were attempting to discredit and attenuate potential threats to their heretical beliefs. Why then did they not feel threatened by Noach?! (One might answer that Noach and his son Shem did not actively preach. On the contrary, Avraham was unique in his practice of spreading monotheism.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Genesis 6:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Genesis 11:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Oznayim LaTorah* ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Genesis Rabbah 31:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Genesis 2:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Genesis 2:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ta’anis 10a [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Genesis Rabbah 36:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Succah 51a [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Succah 45, Rashi ad loc, and Rama OC 429:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Psalms 118:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Ramban Genesis 11:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Genesis 17:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rashi Genesis 6:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)