

Geulas Yisrael #21

Noach: An Ancient Echo

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The legendary journey begins. Civilization was centered in the areas to the north of Israel- in the general vicinity of the mountain-top upon which Noach's ark had landed. After the failure of the audacious but impudent Bavel project, humanity was scattered across the Middle East. Tribes and clans each voyaged different regions, seeking nationhood and homeland. Only one chosen nation was destined to travel to the chosen land of Hashem and launch the greatest project in history. After two thousand years of theological confusion, one people would teach the world about "one God". Our epic journey to the promised land of Israel was launched by.....Terach! Not Avraham but Terach!

The conclusion of parshat Noach describes Terach's decision to relocate his family- including his son Avraham- to the land of Israel. Terach dies in mid-voyage, at which point Hashem famously instructs Avraham to complete the journey to Israel. Terach is the first Jew to make Aliyah!

Terach doesn't exactly fit the expected profile of the first "Jew" to settle Israel. This is the same Terach who is annually indicted every Pesach as our pagan ancestor. Chazal fill in the blanks on Terach's checkered religious history: he fashioned and supplied pagan idols and was incensed by his son's monotheistic leanings. Furious with his errant son Avraham, he 'informed' the authorities, and soon thereafter Nimrod cast Avraham to what seemed like a fiery death. Why would this pagan heretic who also "ratted out" his son, relocate his family to the land of Hashem?

Evidently, the land of Israel even enchants hearts empty of faith. Avraham's captivation with the land of Israel was based upon years of religious discovery, disciplined practice and dedicated preaching to others. The 'voice of Hashem' was familiar to him, and the divine instructions to travel to a land of Hashem were completely reasonable. His pagan father Terach, however, could not understand Hashem and certainly wasn't interested in knowing about Him. The land of Hashem did not speak to him, yet something about this land of destiny transfixed

him. He began the difficult journey from the comforts of Ur Kasdim to the frontier lands of Kena'an. What voice did he hear?

Of course he also heard the voice of Hashem- it was just disguised as something else. Ideally, a Jew inspired by the classic "works" of religion: Mitzvah observance, Torah study, prayer and moral behavior. Hashem however, realized that, throughout history, many Jews would become severed from these classic religious anchors. Hashem programmed within the Jewish heart the capacity to respond to land, people, and country, independent of the ability to respond to religion and ritual. Even for those who have lost the trail of Sinai the mountains of Yerushalayim still beckon. Terach was the first person to hear this inner echo of the land of Israel.

Redemption can sometimes be a baffling experience. We face so many unanswered questions and so many unyielding enigmas. To so many, these questions are more than nagging mysteries; they seem so unanswerable that the entire process is rejected and Divine authorship denied. If this were clearly the hand of Hashem, it would not be riddled with so many question marks. Even for those who embrace the State of Israel as the start of our redemption, these disquieting questions are haunting.

One of the most baffling enigmas is the question of secular Zionism. Not only were the great leaders of this renaissance secular, but the entire movement was premised on secular principles. The values of Secular Zionism were proposed as a replacement for traditional religious values. Moreover, Zionism, in its inception, was not just "incidentally" secular; it effectively sought to, and, true to its plan, succeeded in, replacing and displacing religion for so many millions of Jews. The State of Israel is primarily a secular organism, generally driven by secular institutions and maintained by a majority which is either completely secular or, at most, traditional in their religious practice. How can this process be deemed redemptive or even Divine?

The divine nature of secular Zionism can only be understood by appreciating the sad collapse of organized religion during the 19th century. Enjoying a post-Renaissance and industrialized world of

prosperity and restored faith in the human spirit, Mankind looked back at the stagnancy and suffering of the past thousand years, and accused organized religion as the great criminal of human history, responsible for much of the death and suffering of humanity. Facing these accusations, organized religion was collapsing around the globe and, sadly, Judaism was no different. By the end of the 19th century, millions of Jews were already "on their way out the door" and threatened with historical extinction. Sadly, religion and ritual no longer gripped their disenfranchised hearts.

At this stage, Hashem Himself, evoked this ancient echo- the echo of Terach. Hashem sounded this echo, resurrecting deep identification with land, people, and history- even in hearts turned away from Torah and religion. The divine broadcast of that ancient echo rescued millions of Jews from historical annihilation. How many millions of Jews cling to Jewish identity through the state of Israel? What about the incredible dedication and commitment of secular Jews to their homeland? Where does this passion come from? It is the modern version of the echo of Terach. Smarter than history, Hashem knew the exact time to amplify this echo. This echo reverberated from the palaces of Vienna, to the Hasidic courts of Hungary, to muddy shtetls of Eastern Europe, galvanizing the Jewish imagination. Millions of Jews are walking down Terach's path on their way home. Secular Zionism is not a miscarriage of history but is the modern manifestation of an ancient echo, programmed by Hashem in Jewish hearts.