

NOACH

HASHEM'S FOUR GIFTS
TO HUMANITY

A

The Just Society and Its Destroyers

The *pasuk* states: “*Melech b’mishpat ya’amid aretz v’ish terumos yaharsena*. A king establishes a just society based on law, but a haughty person destroys it” (Mishlei 29:4).

The Midrash (Shemos Rabba, Parsha 30) expounds:

“A king establishes a just society”—this refers to Israel, as the verse states, “You shall be a kingdom of priests” (Shemos 19:6). “The haughty person destroys it”—this refers to the Generation of the Flood.

Said Rav Acha: Hashem wanted to give four things to the Generation of the Flood: 1) Torah, 2) *yisurim*—suffering, 3) *avodas hakorbanos*—the service of sacrifices, and 4) *tefilah*—prayer. But they did not want them, and this is why they were destroyed.

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, the *sheva mitzvos bnei Noach*. The Generation of the Flood did not keep

these imperatives. They stole, murdered, had promiscuous relationships, and fostered injustice. If they didn't keep even the basic rules for a just society, what was the hope of giving them the Torah? If they couldn't keep even six *mitzvos*, how could they be expected to keep 613?

B

Result of the Sin of the Eitz Hada'as

The 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 the souls of all the people who were destined 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 Hada'as, the tree that mixes good and evil together, this universal soul lost its fundamental purity and unity. The fruit of the Eitz Hada'as introduced a mixture of good and evil into their soul. Hashem wanted humanity to be pure; 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 has been 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 channeling them towards goodness.

Had Adam and Chava not sinned, the purpose of life would have been different. And in the future, when Mashiach comes, Hashem will cleanse people of their evil side, and we will go back to serving Him as originally intended in the Garden of Eden. 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

The four gifts that God offered to the Generation of the Flood (Torah, suffering, sacrifices, and prayer) are the means of 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, which had tremendous capacity for goodness. They could have become like Adam and Chava before the sin if only they had accepted the four gifts that Hashem offered them.

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

Noach was a *tzaddik* (Bereishis 6:9). However, he was not enough of a *tzaddik* to save the world; he alone was spared. Hashem wanted him to start humanity anew, and he would father a new mankind that would try again, and Hashem would see if mankind could purge itself of the Eitz Hada'as, the paradoxical lifestyle that people had led until then. This was the opportunity of the generations after the Flood.

After the Flood, Hashem gave humanity a tremendous capacity to build. This led to the project of Migdal Bavel, the Tower of Babel. 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. 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 Babel became the Dor Haflaga, the Generation of Dispersion. 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 (Bereishis 10:9).

D

Avraham's Arrival

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

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 every other nation. The many nations in the world would then 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 one 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 also had failed. However, due to the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who were pure and righteous *tzaddikim*, 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

Though the years of slavery were very hard, during them Yaakov's children learned what kindness was. They learned about helping others who were being beaten by wicked 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 3,000 years ago, we 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 often were 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, leaving only the essential, pure metal. The slavery in Egypt 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 (*gilgulim*). 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 Babel. 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 “*na’ase v’nishma*, Yes, we will keep the Torah!” (Shemos 24:7). They became a group of people whose souls were purified, looking to do good deeds and to bring goodness into the world.

This attribute of the Jewish People has been demonstrated over thousands of years. Wherever Jews have been, they have 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.

F

The Four Levels of the Soul

Let us examine the four gifts that were offered to the Generation of the Flood. We can understand them using the Kabbalistic notion of the different levels of the human soul. Specifically, the human soul has four levels in addition to a fifth one that we can’t grasp. The lowest level is the biological soul. We are living beings. We share characteristics of life with the smallest cell. Vegetation, fish, birds, animals, and people all have a biological soul. The 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 but a few. This level is called *nefesh* and is present also in the animal kingdom, though not in vegetation.

The next level up is exclusively human, the level of intellect,

seichel. Man is an abstract thinker, the only creature able to grasp concepts 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, such as airplanes, cars, phones, and computers.

To review, the first three levels are:

1. Biological – *guf*
2. Emotional – *nefesh*
3. Intellectual – *seichel*

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

Other Kabbalistic and Chassidic works use different terminology for these four levels: 1) *nefesh* 2) *ruach* 3) *neshama*, and 4) *chaya*.

G

The Four Gifts, One for Each Soul Level

The 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 Mitzrayim*. These were gifts for each level of the soul.

The first gift is Torah, which is clearly an intellectual entity. We have to study and understand it. This is Hashem's gift to our *seichel*.

The second gift is *yisurim*, suffering. What is the nature of the suffering that the Midrash refers to? If it is physical, we Jews

certainly have suffered immensely—from the Holocaust to pogroms, the Inquisition, jihad, and terrorism. This may be the heavy price of being God’s children, of being representatives of God in the world. Evil hates us because we say it has no place on this planet. We challenge evil and so it resents us. Hitler is quoted as saying, “Conscience is a Jewish invention,” an avowed reason for hating Jews.

But the Shem Mishmuel points out that we do not believe that in order to be Jewish or to be a good person one has to suffer physically, heaven forbid. So how should we understand the “gift of suffering” that the Generation of the Flood declined? It is possible to interpret the Midrash as referring not to physical *yisurim*, but to the pain of struggling to fix our weaknesses. We all know how difficult it is to change ourselves. It is painful to admit having a flaw. It is even more painful to fix that flaw. This is the painful process of *teshuva*, 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 *teshuva*—the pain of self-critique—this suffering would be sufficient for the development of the 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 pain of *teshuva* is one such form of *yisurim shel ahava*. Clearly, physical suffering is focused on the *guf*, our bodies. But so are the *yisurim* of *teshuva*, which make us act properly with our *guf*. *Yisurim* thus rectify the *guf*.

The third gift, *korbanos*, addresses the emotional state of the Jew. A *korban* can be an inspirational experience as the person goes to the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim. It also can 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*.

The fourth gift of *tefila*, prayer, is connected with the spiritual level of the soul, the *tzelem Elokim*. The Shem Mishmuel defines the word *tefila* based on the *pasuk*, “*Naftulei Elokim niftalti*” (Bereishis 30:8). Rashi there says that *naftulei* means connection, like the word *pesil*, a wick comprised of several strands twisted together. *Tefila* 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 also is 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 the elements of our personality into one. *Tefila* 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 in a time of conflict—between people and between nations. Individuals experience conflict within themselves as well. A person has many goals that often clash. The goal of financial success, for example, drives a person to spend a lot of time working. But he also wants to spend time at home with his family. People want power, but power produces enemies. Then enter alienation and anxiety. How can we synthesize our contradictory drives? Prayer connects us with Hashem and helps us put our competing values in perspective.

When we connect to Hashem through prayer, 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. 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 *tefila*. 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 within ourselves instead of having conflicting levels of *guf*, *nefesh*, and *seichel*.

H

The Rejection of the Four Gifts

Unfortunately, the Generation of the Flood did not accept the four gifts. The generation's rampant murder was a violation of the holiness of the body, parallel to the level of *guf*. When they were promiscuous and committed sins of passion, they were misusing emotion, their *nefesh*. They served *avoda zara*, which means they held false beliefs, misusing their *seichel*. And they stole from each other, thereby violating their *tzelem Elokim*, the unifying core of the human personality and community. By not feeling united, and through their actions, they drove themselves completely apart.

Hashem destroyed that generation because it degenerated on every human level. By contrast, Noach was a person who was nearly perfect on every level—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. But he 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 it was destined for greatness, couldn't it have rejected the Torah and yet

maintained a mediocre standing? Why did it have to fail so drastically?

Sometimes, Hashem offers someone greatness. But if he or she rejects it, great evil rushes in. Mediocrity is not an option; it is a stark choice. If one chooses to keep the gifts Hashem offers, he will succeed greatly. If he declines, God forbid, he inevitably creates terrible consequences.

In history, we have seen many leaders who must have had great souls. Instead of leading their people to greatness, though, they led them to destruction. Hitler, Stalin, and other great evildoers had incredible potential for goodness. But instead, they chose to produce horrific evil.

All of us have great gifts, special talents that Hashem has given us. If we use them for good, we will see wonderful results. But if we turn them down, we will inevitably produce evil, God forbid.

When God gives us an opportunity to do good, He is saying, "I know you can succeed." We should accept the challenge rather than declining the opportunity by claiming that it is beyond our abilities. After all, the alternative is too terrible to contemplate. 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 really is a Heavenly compliment. God Himself is telling us that we can truly pass the test.

May Hashem bless us with the ability to face life's four levels of challenge and to reach our highest and holiest potential.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what way did eating from the fruit of the Eitz Hada'as 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 the other three?
5. How does *tefila* 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 before they were offered the gifts?

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Which of the four levels of your soul do you think is strongest?
2. Which level of your soul do you like the most?
3. Describe four different general activities you do with each separate level of your soul.
4. Describe four different activities you do with each one of the four levels of your soul that connect you to Hashem.

5. How could you make other activities that you do more spiritual?
6. Is it easy or hard for you to connect to Hashem?
7. 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 these different drives stem from.
2. Write down two *middos* you have that you feel are weak. Devise a plan for a week to improve them. What role will *tefila* 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.

