

PARSHAS NOACH

תשפ"ג

The story of the mabul and Parshas Noach in general is a very complex story. In many ways, the story of the mabul is the story of the world we live in today.

Odom Horishon was created and put in Gan Eden under very ideal circumstances. All of his physical needs were taken care of. He didn't have to worry about food, clothing and shelter. The posuk says Odom was supposed to work it and guard it. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer explains that Odom Horishon was free from every consideration other than to serve Hashem. He is told that he may eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden. But there are restrictions – a very minor one. There is no such thing as life without restrictions. There is one tree whose fruit you cannot eat. The Tree of Knowledge. But Odom couldn't resist and he ate from it.

This wasn't just an individual sin affecting an individual person. All of humanity changed as a result of this. Odom became a ba'al taivoh.

We have a situation now where Odom Horishon in Gan Eden has total freedom and no responsibilities, and he is now given the option of dedicating himself to the worship of Hashem or maximizing his pleasure. Hashem realized that Odom has to leave Gan Eden. He had to move into a world of difficulties and obstacles where he wouldn't be able to focus on his pleasures around the clock. Growing food will now be difficult and raising children will be difficult. The world is now full of responsibilities so that people won't go crazy with taivoh.

When Kayin killed Hevel, the world went down another level and the land was even more reluctant to grow food.

Then came Enosh who invented avodo zoro. The philosophy behind avodo zoro is that there are no absolutes. Each god is in charge of a different force of nature and a person can just go and worship whatever god he needs at the time in order to get what he wants. Choose your own rules. Everything is relative.

The world keeps spinning out of control and parnosoh is getting harder and harder. Hashem is pleading with human beings not to turn into animals. But they don't pay any attention and just keep on going lower and lower until, as the midrash tells us, people started to resemble monkeys.

Hashem is giving up and then finally Noach is born. His father Lemech names him Noach because he will save us from the frustration and hardship of the land which is so cursed. Chazal ask a question. Is this a prediction that Noach will save the world from extinction by the mabul in the future? Was Lemech a prophet? Chazal explain that Hashem was giving humanity a last chance. People have become total animals and there is no purpose to this world if people have become animals. When Noach was born, two things happened. The potential savior of the world was born and Hashem reversed all the curses that had been preventing the land from being fertile and productive. Now farming became easier and life was much more pleasant. Maybe with this change of lifestyle, the people will feel relieved and have more energy to turn themselves around. There was overwhelming abundance.

What happened? Things became much worse. The powerful people in society abused their power and took everything they wanted.

Their taivoh knew no limits, they went from the permitted taivos to the forbidden taivos of married women, and then from normal natural taivos to unnatural ones, and then totally unnatural perversions. The posuk says clearly that people were only thinking about doing evil the

entire day. Nothing else occupied their minds other than more taivoh all day long.

Hashem is left with no choice but to destroy the Earth. It became too corrupted. There was robbery, crime, arayos, etc. Why does one produce the other? We have a clear example of this relationship from our recent experience in American society. Where were the riots and the looting and open lawlessness? In the places where there are no limits on expressing their taivos. Where there are no restrictions on taivoh, society will totally collapse and there is no law and order. They resent the police and resent violent criminals being put in jail. Having no restrictions whatsoever means society will break down. Hashem had no choice at the time of the mabul but to wipe it out and start over again.

The Rambam learns a very important principle about Hashem's judgment from this parsha. There is a judgment on each individual and on each community or nation, as we say in the tefillos on the Yomim Noroim. From the mabul, we see that there is even judgment on the entire world.

When the coronavirus created a worldwide pandemic two and a half years ago, I noted that not since the mabul has there been a decree which affected the entire globe. There have been plagues and wars which have affected many places, but never the entire world at once. Coronavirus wasn't just a worldwide health crisis. It also unleashed a collapse of the entire social structure of law and order. The constant pursuit of taivoh was channeled to bring about race riots and destruction of lives and property that was unprecedented.

At the time of the mabul Hashem said that there is no choice but to destroy and rebuild. Hashem prepared to rebuild with Noach who was a pure, righteous neshomo. He was told to build a massive ark – the length of two football fields. It was not a task that he could do without Hashem's help, even just to get all the wood and all the tar necessary.

The Torah is well aware of the physical reality which would have made building the ark impossible for Noach. The midrash asks why the Torah bothered to record the exact dimensions of the ark? Does it have any purpose for later generations? The midrash concludes that the Torah must be teaching us something practical about the world – the dimensions of the most sea-worthy vessel that is possible to make. If you want a boat with maximum stability, it needs to have the proportions of the ark. Once and a while, the Torah wants to illustrate that it contains all the wisdom about the physical world. Chazal knew this was true without testing it in nautical laboratories. Over the past 200 years, nautical laboratories around the world did make experiments without knowing about this midrash, and they discovered that the proportions of Noach's ark will in fact produce the most stable sea vessel.

So the Torah shows us that it is aware of the limitations of the physical world.

Noach spent 120 years building the ark and mankind and he was supposed to use all that time to inspire people to do teshuvah. But he was not successful. He ran the worst baal teshuvah movement in history – all that time trying to do kiruv and not one baal teshuvah was produced. Why not?

The Zohar says that Noach obeyed everything Hashem commanded without question. Noach was told to build an ark and prepare for

the destruction of the world, and he did not utter a single tefillah in protest! When Avrohom was notified about the destruction of Sodom, he protested and davened to save them. When Moshe was informed that Hashem was going to destroy Klal Yisroel, he protested and davened to save them. But, when Noach is informed that the entire world is going to be wiped out and he alone will be spared, he says, OK. No problem.

He didn't identify at all with the plight of the wicked of his generation, and this made him totally ineffective in inspiring them to do teshuvah. Deep down, he didn't really care about them and this came through in his kiruv. This was one reason.

Additionally, Chazal say he didn't really believe the mabul was actually going to happen until it started raining hard and the waters of the mabul pushed him inside the ark. So how could he genuinely warn people to repent or suffer the consequences when he himself didn't really believe in those consequences? So of course, no-one took Noach seriously enough to make any changes in their life.

At the end of the parsha we read about the dor haflogoh. It was a different type of generation which prided itself in its advanced technology. They made a huge breakthrough in engineering which allowed them to build huge towers and massive structures that could have never been built before. What was it? They figured out how to make bricks.

We see throughout history that every time a civilization makes a serious advancement in technology, they feel they can conquer the world and they don't want Hashem to interfere with their lives. The dor hamabul was obsessed with taivoh and the dor haflogoh was obsessed with advancing and developing their technology. This is what China is today.

It is interesting that Hashem completely destroyed the dor hamabul but not the dor haflogoh. What is the difference? The society of the dor hamabul was in total collapse and there was no unity. So it had to be destroyed and Hashem had to start over again. The dor haflogoh had complete unity and it was punished, but not destroyed.

After the mabul, avodo zoro started again and Nimrod becomes the leader of another evil civilization. Noach has a son Shem and a grandson Ever who received their mesorah about Hashem from Noach, and remained tzaddikim. But, they had no real influence on the world at large. They were cloistered in Be'er Sheva near the desert and started a little yeshivah with no real contact with or impact on the outside world.

But then, ten generations after Noach, Avrohom Ovinu came on the scene. He is a very unique individual who was raised in avodo zoro and had no mesorah. But, he used his mind to seek the truth. He rejected avodo zoro, and publicly challenged it and Nimrod, and he made a huge impact on the world. But a more fascinating figure to my mind is Avrohom's father, Terach.

He was in the avodo zoro business with a son who was preaching against it. After Avrohom survived the ordeal of Ur Kasdim and walked out alive from a fiery furnace by open miracle, he realized two things. He has to leave Ur Kasdim. He doesn't belong there anymore. But where does he decide to go? To Eretz Canaan – to that small hidden yeshivah of Shem and Ever who were always talking about one Creator – just like Avrohom is talking.

The way to travel from Ur Kasdim which is modern day Iraq to Eretz Canaan is not straight across the massive Arabian desert. You first have

to travel north to Turkey and then come down to Syria and Jordan to reach Be'er Sheva. But Terach stopped in the middle of the journey. His enthusiasm fizzled out. He died in Choron which is 80% of the way. He can't make it all the way even though he was so inspired at the beginning when he left to reach the yeshivah of Shema and Ever and live with people who believe in one G-d.

A lot of people get inspired by dramatic things that happen, and begin to make drastic changes with a lot of enthusiasm. But eventually it fizzles out.

Just imagine who Terach was. Terach was not a simple individual. Not only did Avrohom come from Terach, but Terach was the grandfather of all four Imahos as well. He was motivated, he saw where the truth was, but he fizzled out and remained in Choron and died there.

But there is Avrohom Ovinu who didn't fizzle out. How was Avrohom inspired to turn his life around? Not by miracles and mofsim or dramatic events. Those things come and go. As the Rambam describes, Avrohom sat himself down and thought through everything about the world and the meaning of it all with a deep intellect. He finally arrived at the truth after years of thinking and searching. This is why his drive and motivation was able to last and last with no fizzling out.

But there is one condition before Avrohom can become the father of a nation. Avrohom had to make a clean break from his past. He had to cut out his former society and upbringing in order to make a new start. This is why he was successful in transmitting his values and way of life to future generations.

The one who wasn't able to make this break with the past was Hogor. Even though she joined the household of Avrohom and saw malochim all the time, she still identified as an Egyptian woman. She is always referred to as the Egyptian maidservant. When she was thrown out of Avrohom's house, she took her son Yishmoel back to Egypt to find a wife. Rashi comments that it meant she was still deeply connected to her roots. And this is why, despite all her greatness, she failed in raising children who would continue in the new path she took. Avrohom was able to cut out the past, and Rus was able to cut out her past, and this is why they were successful in raising children who would follow in their ways.

We have lots of stories and there are basic ideas in this parsha. You cannot have a society consumed with pleasure all day. In a leisure society consumed with pleasure, it will eventually fall apart.

We are in this situation today. We are put in a generation of total moral and societal collapse due to the endless pursuit of taivoh. But we are told we have to keep our balance despite the corrupt culture of the world around us. The Ohr Hachaim explains in Parshas Acharei Mos why the Torah introduces the parsha of arayos by saying that Klal Yisroel are on the way from Egypt to Canaan, where people were steeped in arayos. We were given a Torah that is designed to give us the tools to withstand the most degenerate societies that we were raised in. Whether it is a twisted society of taivoh or a twisted society of technological advancement. We have a different set of values and a different way of life which the Torah provides.

Perhaps the biggest lesson in Parshas Noach for our generation is that a society consumed by taivoh with no restrictions and with no harmony and social unity will eventually far apart. It doesn't mean we can't survive. In the midst of all that corruption, the Torah gives us the ability to maintain our balance – but only if we don't identify with a society that is on a path of self-destruction.