

NORTHWEST YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL

presents

Thoughts on the Parasha

By Rabbi Bernie Fox, Head of School

Upcoming NYHS Event:

Saturday, November 8 - Junior & Senior Parent Party at the Home of Deanne & Don Etsekson, 8pm

Sunday, December 7 - Open House for Prospective Students & Families at NYHS, 7:30pm

Noach 5769

The Worst Sin of the Generation of the Deluge

The L-rd said to Noach: The end of all fesh has come before Me, for the Earth is full of violence on account of them. I am prepared to destroy them with the Earth. (Beresheit 6:13)

Rashi explains that the generation of the Flood was guilty of three crimes. The people had adopted idol worship. They had abandoned all parameters of proper sexual conduct and even incestuous relationships were common. Finally, theft accomplished by force and violence was common.¹ Rashi further notes that the judgment of the generation was sealed because of the crime of violent theft. It is this crime that is referred to as "violence" in the above passage.²

Why is the crime of violent theft more serious than idol worship and unrestricted and incestuous sexual behavior? Certainly, the duty to recognize and serve the Creator is primary to humanity's mission. Idol worship is an abandonment of this objective. Similarly, it is difficult to comprehend the value of a society lacking any restraint of sexual desires. Restraint and self-control differentiated the human being from the beast.

Nachmanides responds that the significance of violent theft is that the impropriety of the behavior is known, and easily demonstrated.³ However, he does not explain why this characteristic of the sin sealed the judgment against the generation.

Perhaps, Nachmanides' point is not that the severity of this sin decided the generation's fate. He acknowledges that the other sins in which the generation engaged were at least as serious as violent theft. However, the significance of this sin was that it demonstrated that humanity had degenerated to an extent that virtually precluded its rehabilitation. In other words, although humanity was engaged in a variety of other depraved behaviors, these activities allowed for the possibility that humanity might realize its failings and reform itself. Why did humanity's involvement in violent theft indicate that

repentance was not longer likely?

Repentance of men depends upon a person's ability to pursue enlightened self-interest. In turn, this pursuit requires two steps. First, one must recognize that sinful practices are detrimental. Second, the person must have adequate self-control to act on this recognition and make a change in his behavior. If a person cannot exercise this self-control even when he is aware that his sinful behavior is self-destructive, then the person will not be able to alter his behavior and repent.

Nachmanides' premise is that although the generation of the Deluge engaged in many very serious sins, their fate was only decided when it became clear that the people were incapable of repentance and change. This level of degeneration became evident from the people's engagement in behaviors that were clearly self-destructive and yet, the people could not restrain themselves. Violent theft is a self-destructive behavior of this type. It is obvious that this behavior is self-destructive. Once society becomes lawless and its members forcibly seize other's property, everyone's livelihood, security, and happiness is compromised. No one can insulate him or herself from harm in a pervasively violent society. Those who contribute to creating an environment of violence will, eventually, become a victim of other's violence. In other words, an individual's relationship with the Creator and personal sexual behavior may be subject to theological debate, but controlling violent tendencies and working towards an orderly society involves only an appreciation of the practical necessities of society and the exercise of self-control. Therefore, Nachmanides explains that violent theft sealed humanity's fate.

The Illumination of the Ark's Interior

And you should make a tzohar for the ark. And the structure should taper upward to a cubit. And you should place a door in its side. Make it with a bottom level, a second level, and a third level. (Bereishit 6:16)

Noach is commanded to build a *tevah* - ark. Hashem dictates the design of the *tevah* to Noach. He tells Noach the *tevah* should include a *tzohar*. The Sages agree that the *tzohar* was designed

¹ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 6:11.

² Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 6:13.

³ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 6:13.

for illumination. However, the specific design is disputed. Some Sages explain that the *tzohar* was an ordinary window. It provided natural light from the outside. Rebbe Yochanan disagrees. He maintains that the *tzohar* was a luminous stone.⁴ What is the basis of this dispute? Why would Sages disagree over the design of the *tzohar*?

Torah Temimah explains that the disagreement can be easily understood if we consider another incident. In Parshat VaYerah, the Torah describes the destruction of Sodom and the rescue of Lote and his family. Lote and his party are warned not to look back at Sodom during their flight. The Sages explain the reason for this injunction. Lote and his family were saved as a consequence of Avraham's merit. These individuals did not, by their own merits, deserve to be spared. Therefore, they had no right to look back and observe the destruction of their neighbors. Various questions can be asked regarding this restriction. However, one principle emerges. Those not deserving to be spared have no right to look upon the destruction of others.

Using this principle, Torah Temimah explains the argument over the design of the *tzohar*. A window provides light. It also affords the opportunity to look upon the outside world. A luminous stone also provides light. However, if the *tzohar* was a rock, the *tevah* was completely sealed. Noach and his family could not observe the destruction of humanity. The Sages maintaining that the *tzohar* was a window, are expressing the opinion that Noach was a righteous person by any standard. He was saved because of his own merits. Accordingly, he was permitted to observe the destruction of the Deluge. Rebbe Yochanan disagrees. He maintains that Noach did not deserve the extraordinary treatment through which he was saved. Instead, he was spared because Hashem wished to reestablish humanity after the Deluge and Noach and his family – although flawed – was the best choice for this purpose. Rebbe Yochanan reasons that Noach and his family were not completely innocent of sin. Like Lote and his family, they had no right to observe the destruction of their fellow human beings.⁵

***And the entire earth had one language with uniform words
(Beresheit 11:1)***

This *pasuk* introduces the discussion of the Dispersion. After the Deluge, humankind reestablishes itself. Population increases. Society is very homogenous. All people share common ancestors, language, and customs. It is not surprising that Noach's offspring chose to live together and settle in a valley in Shinar. Humanity joins together in constructing a magnificent city with a tower reaching into the heavens. They feel that this project will create social cohesion. All members of the community will live together

in this impressive city. Families will not establish individual settlements. Hashem objects to this plan. He brings about the development of a variety of languages among the families. The people no longer share a common language. Without this unifying influence, the various families drift apart and establish individual communities.

Every incident included in the Torah serves a purpose. Some important lesson is taught. What is the message of this episode? Our Sages offer a number of responses. Although some of these explanations are well-known, there are other fascinating responses. Maimonides provides one of the most interesting explanations. Maimonides explains that the Torah asserts that the universe was created by Hashem. The Torah recognizes that an obvious objection can be raised. If we are descendants from a single set of ancestors, how can we account for humanity's cultural diversity? Humanity is composed of radically diverse societies and cultures. How can this be reconciled with the proposition that we all descend from Noach?

Maimonides explains that the episode of the Dispersion is included in the Torah as a response to this question. The Dispersion established the beginnings of human diversity. This incident is included in the Torah to account for this diversity.⁶

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno suggests an alternate explanation of this section's significance. In order to understand his interpretation of this incident, we must begin with a question. Why did Hashem disrupt the work of these advanced social planners? It seems that their objective was admirable. Much of the conflict and hatred throughout history is a result of the perceived differences between nations and people. These early social engineers had the foresight to work towards preventing this tragedy. It seems that the history of humanity would be far more civilized had these builders succeeded!

Sforno suggests that the incident must be understood in its context. The Chumash relates this incident immediately prior to the introduction of Avraham. This alludes to some connection between this incident and the development of Avraham. What is this relationship?

These social planners existed at a time in which idolatry was widely practiced. The shared culture of humanity included this universal religious perspective. If the builders had succeeded, they would have created overwhelming religious uniformity. This uniformity would have encouraged absolute conformity. It would have been very difficult for any individual to question the religious perspective of all humanity. In addition, it would be very easy to suppress any would-be critic.

4 Ibid. 108b.

5 Rav Baruch Halevy Epstein, *Torah Temimah on Sefer Beresheit* 6:16.

6 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) *Moreh Nevuchim*, volume 3, chapter 50.

The fragmenting of society eliminated this problem. Religious diversity quickly developed. With the emergence of many conflicting religious outlooks, it was easier for an inquisitive person to quest on the truth of the various perspectives. In fact, the emergence of a variety of perspective encouraged an open-minded person to consider the truth of the religious system's competing claims. After all, they could not all be correct. Avraham was such a thinker and he questioned the theologies of his era. This process of questioning led Avraham to the development of monotheistic religion.⁷

Gershonides suggests another explanation of the incident. He begins with the assumption that Hashem created a universe governed by natural laws. Hashem does perform miracles. However, these miracles are exceptions to His interaction with the universe. He created a wondrous system of natural laws designed to govern the everyday events of the material universe. He interferes only sparingly with this system.

In such a universe, there is potential for natural disasters. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods are all part of the pattern of nature. These disasters can destroy communities and wipe out entire populations. However, humanity has survived these catastrophes. This is because generally, these tragedies are localized. A volcano may erupt destroying an entire island. However, a community five hundred miles away will be relatively unaffected.

It is obvious that the survival of humanity depends upon its dispersion. If all humanity were to concentrate in a specific geographic area, its survival would be endangered. A single catastrophe could destroy all humankind. In order to prevent such a tragedy, Hashem dispersed humanity over the face of the globe. This assured that natural disaster would not jeopardize all of humankind.⁸

Wishing our friends
Michael Benoliel,
Rachel Sassoon, and
Elie Levy a HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

- Robert & Leah Gladstein

7 Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit*, 11:6.

8 Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag/Gershonides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit*, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 98.