



Parshat Noach

For the week ending 6 Cheshvan 5760
15 & 16 October 1999

Overview

It is now ten generations since the creation of the first man. Adam's descendants have corrupted the world with immorality, idolatry and robbery, and Hashem resolves to bring a flood which will destroy all the earth's inhabitants except for the righteous Noach, his family and sufficient animals to re-populate the earth. Hashem instructs Noach to build an ark in which to escape the flood. After forty days and nights, the flood covers the entire earth, even the tops of the highest mountains. After 150 days, the water begins to recede. On the 17th day of the 7th month, the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat. Noach sends forth a raven and then a dove to ascertain if the waters have abated. The dove returns. A week later, Noach again sends the dove, which returns the same evening with an olive leaf in its beak. After seven more days, Noach once again sends forth the dove, which this time, does not return. Hashem tells Noach and his family to leave the ark. Noach brings offerings to Hashem from the animals which were carried in the ark for this purpose. Hashem vows never again to flood the entire world and gives the rainbow as a sign of this covenant. Noach and his descendants are now permitted to eat meat, unlike Adam. Hashem commands the Seven Universal Laws: The prohibition against idolatry, adultery, theft, blasphemy, murder, eating the meat of a living animal, and the obligation to set up a legal system. The world's climate is established as we know it today. Noach plants a vineyard and becomes intoxicated from its produce. Ham, one of Noach's sons, delights in seeing his father drunk and uncovered. Shem and Yafes, however, manage to cover their father without looking at his nakedness, by walking backwards. For this incident, Canaan is cursed to be a slave. The Torah lists the offspring of Noach's three sons from whom the seventy nations of the world are descended. The Torah records the incident of the Tower of Babel, which results in Hashem fragmenting communication into many languages and the dispersal of the nations throughout the world. The Parsha concludes with the genealogy of Noach to Avram.

Insights

WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY

“They said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.’ And the brick served them as stone, and the lime served them as mortar.” (11:3)

Technology is the conceit of the modern world. The GPS system in our car allows us to receive satellite signals locating our position to within six feet anywhere on the planet. Behind the helm of our trusty gleaming V-8, we are the kings of the road. Previous generations pale into technological primitives.

We have the technology. With a cellular phone we can call from the desert, from the top of a mountain, from the middle of nowhere, and communicate to anywhere in the world. And what are those deathless words that we wish to communicate across the tens of thousands of miles?

“Hi! Guess where I am!”

Now that's what I call progress.

We may know where our car is better than ever before, but when it comes to knowing where we ourselves are — that's a different story.

If we had developed in any real sense over the last couple of thousand years, would we still find anything of value in Shakespeare? If the human spirit had undergone a comparable degree of progress to technology, the poetry and art of those who died hundreds of years ago should seem impossibly quaint to the modern eye. If we were really more advanced, no-one should be in the slightest bit interested in John Donne, Cervantes, Sophocles, Pascal, Mozart or Boticelli — except for historians. And yet, we recognize that our generation is hard put to come anywhere close to these artists.

Technology is an apology for our feelings of inferiority when we compare ourselves to our forebears.

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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Parshat **Noach** — 6 Cheshvan 5760, 15 & 16 October 1999

Our axiom is "We may have less to say, but we can say it from the middle of nowhere." Cold comfort is better than none.

At the end of this week's Parsha, the Torah describes the attempt of the Generation of Dispersion (*Dor Hapalaga*) to build a tower that reached into the sky.

"They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire.' And the brick served them as stone, and the lime served them as mortar."

Rashi comments: *"In Babylon there were no stones..."* Because there were no rocks in Babylon, they were forced to apply technology and invent the brick. Immediately following this verse they say, *"Come, let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens..."* They wanted to make a tower to challenge G-d.

This is a seeming non-sequitur. What does the lack of stones in Babylon have to do with building a city and a tower to challenge G-d? Why is making bricks a

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1-10

Just as in this week's Parsha, where G-d promises never to bring another flood to destroy the world, so too the Haftarah carries G-d's promise never to exile the Jewish People after the redemption from the current Exile of Edom.

The Parsha depicts the terrible flood which destroys the earth and its myriad creatures at the decree of the Merciful G-d. It looks like the end, but it is, in reality, the beginning. Out of the ashes of a degenerate world sprouts the seed of Noach.

Similarly, the destruction of the first *Beis Hamikdash* and the dispersal of the Jewish People were like a "flood" which superficially seemed a total disaster.

The Prophet tells that rather than being the ruin of the nation, in reality this was its preservation, and like a mother left lonely and grieving, Zion will be comforted when the exile has achieved its appointed task of purification, and her children return to her.

harbinger of incipient rebellion?

The *Dor Hapalaga* were intoxicated with technology. Bricks were the Babylonian equivalent of a Saturn V rocket. Take some mud, bake it and voila! Genius. If man can take mud and turn it into towers and spires and palaces, what can he not do? Is there a limit to his powers?

From this kind of thinking there is a very small step for mankind to think that they can dispense with G-d completely.

"Let us build and make for us a name." We have the technology.

Sources:

Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Rabbi Yissocher Frand

MOVED TO NOT REMOVE

"...And My kindness shall not be removed from you..." (60:10)

The words "shall not be removed" appear twice in our tradition. Once here, and once in *Yehoshua 1:5* — "This book of the Torah shall not be removed from your mouth."

It is the merit of Torah study — it *not being removed* from our mouths — that gives us the merit that "My kindness shall not be removed from you."

JEWISH DIETETICS

"Come all who are thirsty...go to the water...get wine and milk." (55:1)

Just as water, wine and milk keep best in plain inexpensive containers, so Torah, which satisfies the thirst of all who learn it, stays with one who is humble.

The revealed part of Torah is like water: Just as the human body cannot exist without water, so the Jewish People cannot survive spiritually without the revealed Torah.

The secrets of the Torah are like wine: They must be imbibed with care and are not equally tolerated by all.

The *midrashim* of the Torah are like milk and honey: They are sweet and nourishing, instilling love and fear of G-d.

Tiferes Zion