

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Is there such a thing as an objective basis of morality? For some time, in secular circles, the idea has seemed absurd. Morality is what we choose it to be. We are free to do what we like so long as we don't harm others. Moral judgments are not truths but choices. There is no way of getting from "is" to "ought", from description to prescription, from facts to values, from science to ethics. This was the received wisdom in philosophy for a century after Nietzsche had argued for the abandonment of morality-which he saw as the product of Judaism-in favour of the "will to power".

Recently, however, an entirely new scientific basis has been given to morality from two surprising directions: neo-Darwinism and the branch of mathematics known as Games Theory. As we will see, the discovery is intimately related to the story of Noah and the covenant made between G-d and humanity after the Flood.

Games theory was invented by one of the most brilliant minds of the 20th century, John von Neumann (1903-1957). He realised that the mathematical models used in economics were unrealistic and did not mirror the way decisions are made in the real world. Rational choice is not simply a matter of weighing alternatives and deciding between them. The reason is that the outcome of our decision often depends on how other people react to it, and usually we cannot know this in advance. Games theory, von Neumann's invention in 1944, was an attempt to produce a mathematical representation of choice under conditions of uncertainty. Six years later, it yielded its most famous paradox, known as the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Imagine two people, arrested by the police under suspicion of committing a crime. There is insufficient evidence to convict them on a serious charge; there is only enough to convict them of a lesser offence. The police decide to encourage each to inform against the other. They separate them and make each the following proposal: if you testify against the other suspect, you will go free, and he will be imprisoned for ten years. If he testifies against you, and you stay silent, you will be sentenced to ten years in prison, and he will go free. If you both testify against one another, you will each receive a five-year sentence. If both of you stay

silent, you will each be convicted of the lesser charge and face a one-year sentence.

It doesn't take long to work out that the optimal strategy for each is to inform against the other. The result is that each will be imprisoned for five years. The paradox is that the best outcome would be for both to remain silent. They would then only face one year in prison. The reason that neither will opt for this strategy is that it depends on collaboration. However, since each is unable to know what the other is doing-there is no communication between them-they cannot take the risk of staying silent. The Prisoner's Dilemma is remarkable because it shows that two people, both acting rationally, will produce a result that is bad for both of them.

Eventually, a solution was discovered. The reason for the paradox is that the two prisoners find themselves in this situation only once. If it happened repeatedly, they would eventually discover that the best thing to do is to trust one another and co-operate.

In the meantime, biologists were wrestling with a phenomenon that puzzled Darwin. The theory of natural selection-popularly known as the survival of the fittest-suggests that the most ruthless individuals in any population will survive and hand their genes on to the next generation. Yet almost every society ever observed values individuals who are altruistic: who sacrifice their own advantage to help others. There seems to be a direct contradiction between these two facts.

The Prisoner's Dilemma suggested an answer. Individual self-interest often produces bad results. Any group which learns to cooperate, instead of compete, will be at an advantage relative to others. But, as the Prisoner's Dilemma showed, this needs repeated encounters-the so-called "Iterated (= repeated) Prisoner's dilemma". In the late 1970s, a competition was announced to find the computer program that did best at playing the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma against itself and other opponents.

The winning programme was devised by a Canadian, Anatole Rapoport, and was called Tit-for-Tat. It was dazzlingly simple: it began by co-operating, and then repeated the last move of its opponent. It worked on the rule of "What you did to me, I will do to you", or "measure for measure". This was the first time scientific proof had been given for any moral principle.

What is fascinating about this chain of discoveries is that it precisely mirrors the central principle of the covenant G-d made with Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, / by man shall his

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blood be shed; / for in the image of G-d / has G-d made man."

This is measure for measure [in Hebrew, middah keneged middah], or retributive justice: As you do, so shall you be done to. In fact, at this point the Torah does something very subtle. The six words in which the principle is stated are a mirror image of one another: [1] Who sheds [2] the blood [3] of man, [3a] by man [2a] shall his blood [1a] be shed. This is a perfect example of style reflecting substance: what is done to us is a mirror image of what we do. The extraordinary fact is that the first moral principle set out in the Torah is also the first moral principle ever to be scientifically demonstrated. Tit-for-Tat is the computer equivalent of (retributive) justice: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed."

The story has a sequel. In 1989, the Polish mathematician Martin Nowak produced a programme that beats Tit-for-Tat. He called it Generous. It overcame one weakness of Tit-for-Tat, namely that when you meet a particularly nasty opponent, you get drawn into a potentially endless and destructive cycle of retaliation, which is bad for both sides. Generous avoided this by randomly but periodically forgetting the last move of its opponent, thus allowing the relationship to begin again. What Nowak had produced, in fact, was a computer simulation of forgiveness.

Once again, the connection with the story of Noah and the Flood is direct. After the Flood, G-d vowed: "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done." This is the principle of Divine forgiveness.

Thus the two great principles of the Noahide covenant are also the first two principles to have been established by computer simulation. There is an objective basis for morality after all. It rests on two key ideas: justice and forgiveness, or what the sages called middat ha-din and middat rachamim. Without these, no group can survive in the long run.

In one of the first great works of Jewish philosophy-Sefer Emunot ve-Deot (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions) -- R. Saadia Gaon (882-942) explained that the truths of the Torah could be established by reason. Why then was revelation necessary? Because it takes humanity time to arrive at truth, and there are

many slips and pitfalls along the way. It took more than a thousand years after R. Saadia Gaon for humanity to demonstrate the fundamental moral truths that lie at the basis of G-d's covenant with humankind: that cooperation is as necessary as competition, that cooperation depends on trust, that trust requires justice, and that justice itself is incomplete without forgiveness. Morality is not simply what we choose it to be. It is part of the basic fabric of the universe, revealed to us by the universe's Creator, long ago. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

The world is devastated, every last vestige of civilization washed away by the Great Flood. There are no people, no buildings, no roads, no crops, no cultivated land, only a great wooden ark perched incongruously on a mountaintop.

The door to the ark slowly swings open, and Noah steps out onto dry land for the first time in forty days. He looks about him at the endless expanse of ruin, and he realizes he must begin the work of reconstruction immediately. What does he do? The Torah relates, "And Noah, man of the earth, demeaned himself and planted a vineyard; he drank of the wine and became drunk." One thing led to another. Noah's son Ham took advantage of his father's inebriated condition and acted disgracefully toward him, thereby giving rise to the curse of Ham and his son Canaan.

The point of this entire episode is clearly to give the historical background for the depravity that would characterize Canaanite society, the nemesis of the Jewish people, for thousands of years. Why then wasn't it sufficient to tell us simply that Noah became drunk? Why does the Torah find it necessary to tell us that he obtained wine for his cups by planting a vineyard? And what if he had had a barrel stored away on the ark? Would the situation have been any different?

Furthermore, the Torah seems to imply that Noah debased himself by the very act of planting a vineyard, even before he drank the wine and became drunk? Why did planting a vineyard debase him?

The commentators explain that a person is a complex mass of interests, biases and drives that often obscure the true nature of his soul, very often even from himself. Going off in all directions, some good and some not so good, pursuing this, that and the other, he presents a confusing, multi-hued image. Which of those manifestations represent the real identity that lies within? It is difficult to determine. But there are some defining moments when he does not find it necessary to posture for other people and he is able to focus completely on his own interest. It is moments like these that the true nature of his essence becomes manifest.

Noah spent forty tempestuous days in the close confines of the ark, and now for the first time, he once

again sets foot on terra firma. As he looks around at the vast wasteland, where is his head? What thoughts and issues occupy his mind? What is the first thing he does? He plants a vineyard. So that is his true nature! That is what lies closest to his heart. And so by the very act of planting a vineyard Noah had already debased himself, long before he actually became drunk. And this debasement of his inner core, this lack of self-respect, triggered the awful disrespect of his son Ham.

A young man once came to a great sage and asked to become his disciple. "Please step into the synagogue for a moment," said the sage.

A few moments later, the young man returned.

"What did you see there?" asked the sage.

"I saw a foul-smelling window washer," he replied.

"I see," said the sage. "I'm afraid I cannot accept you."

"But why?" the young man protested. "Is it my fault that the fellow hasn't had a bath in a month."

"My dear young friend," said the sage, "a high-minded man would have seen the beautiful ark, the holy books piled on the tables, the flickering eternal flame. Only a mean-spirited person would focus immediately on the foul smells emanating from the window washer."

In our own lives, we are constantly dealing with the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary society. Very little is clearly black and white, and we often find ourselves making all sorts of compromises and accommodations. But we should always ask ourselves what we are deep inside. Where are our minds? Where are our hearts? As long as we are essentially spiritual and altruistic, as long as the values and ideals of the Torah are the focus of our lives, we will always find ourselves uplifted and enriched, regardless of the environment in which we find ourselves. © 2009 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI DR. ABRAHAM J. TWERSKI

TorahWeb

The Torah is not a history book. "Torah" means "guide", and everything in Torah is intended to guide us. After emerging from the Ark, "Noach debased himself and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk" (Breishis 9:20-21). What does this teach us?

"Noach was a complete tzaddik..." (ibid. 6:9). How does a "complete tzaddik drink to intoxication?"

The commentaries say that Noach knew how much he could drink safely without the wine affecting him, but that was before the flood. What Noach did not consider is that the world had undergone a radical change, and it was not the same world he had known. In a new world, old rules may not apply. What was tolerable in the old world may not be tolerable in the new world.

In the 16th century, Rebbe Chaim Vital, chief disciple of the Ari z"l said "Given the pollution of the environment, our only hope is prayer." (Yesod Veshoresh Ha'avodah 2, end of p.89) He was not referring to carbon dioxide pollution, because there were no automobiles then, but rather to the spiritual deterioration. If the spiritual atmosphere of the 16th century was polluted, what can we say about our current environment, when the airwaves convey gross immorality, violence and corruption into our living rooms. Every trace of decency has been eroded. Every day, new scandals about people in positions of leadership are revealed.

Our world has undergone a radical change. Not only is it not the world of yore, but it is not even the world of decades past. The old rules are not adequate. Some human foibles were tolerable in the old world, but today we must live by higher standards. In past generations we could live as Shulchan Aruch yidden, and that was good enough, but today we must be Mesilas Yesharim yidden to give ourselves and our children the spiritual capital needed to survive the current spiritual atmosphere.

Rebbe Chaim Vital felt that prayer was a solution. Perhaps we should become a bit more sincere about our prayer. Prayer requires meditation, but how much can one meditate when the most desirable minyan is the one who finishes fastest?

In the past, young people married, raised families, and for the most part, families were stable. Today we have a divorce rate that is alarming, and children are affected by the deterioration of shalom bayis. Our young men and women are marrying without the slightest concept of the responsibilities that marriage brings about, and that consideration for one's partner must override one's own wishes. There is an unprecedented hemorrhage of our children deviating into drugs and other destructive life styles. Parenting by instinct is not acceptable. Young people, single and married, should be educated about marriage (see my book *The First Year of Marriage*, published by Shaar Press) and parenting (*Planting and Building in Education: Raising a Jewish Child*, By Rav Shlomo Wolbe, available from Feldheim Publishers in both Hebrew and English).

Most parenting is done by modeling. We must work diligently on refinement of our middos in order to resist the noxious effects of today's hedonistic world, in which we are essentially trying to go up on the "down" escalator.

While the challenges presented by today's world are daunting, we are assured that "ha'bo litaheir misayein oso-one who tries to purify himself will receive [Divine] help." Hashem helps us overcome all challenges, and thus no challenge is insurmountable. But to merit that help, we have to be "bo litaheir"-we must do our best to purify all aspects of our lives.

The lesson of Noach is that when the world has changed, we cannot afford to continue "business as usual." We must take concrete steps to improve ourselves, our tefillah, our marriages, and our children's spiritual environment and opportunities. © 2009 Rabbi Dr. A.J. Twersky & The TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, so that they shall not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:7).

What is the connection between Adam's existential state of aloneness and the tragic social isolation which results from the Tower of Babel, when one universal language is replaced by seventy languages, leading to bedlam, confusion and dispersion?

To answer our question, let us begin by returning to the story of creation and G-d's declaration: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a help-opposite for him" (Gen.2:18). When Adam fails to find his 'help-opposite' among the animals, we are told: "The Lord G-d cast a deep sleep upon man and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place, and of the rib, which the L-rd G-d had taken from the man, He made a woman, and brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:21-22).

Why is the birth of Eve surrounded with this poetic quality? Why does her creation differ radically from all other creatures?

The answer is that had Eve been created from the earth like the rest of the animals, Adam would have related to her as a two-legged creature. Even if she walked and talked, she would end up as one of the animals to name and control. Her unique 'birth' marks her unique role.

In an earlier verse, we read that "G-d created the human being in His image; in the image of G-d He created him, male and female created He them" (Gen. 1:27). "Male and female" suggests androgynous qualities, and on that verse, Rashi quotes a midrashic interpretation that G-d originally created the human with two "faces," Siamese twins as it were, so that when He put Adam into a deep sleep, it was not just to remove a rib but to separate the female side from the male side.

G-d divided the creature into two so that each half would seek completion in the other. Had Eve not emerged from Adam's own flesh to begin with, they could never have become one flesh again.

Awakening, Adam said of Eve, "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (2:23). His search was over, and what was true for Adam is true for humankind. In the next verse, G-d announced the second basic principle in life: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (2:24). "Leave" does not mean

reject; but it does mean that one must be mature and independent in order to enter into a relationship of mutuality with one's mate. (How many divorces can be traced to crippling parent-child relationships!)

One of the goals of a human being is to become one flesh with another human being, and this, the truest of partnerships, can only be achieved with someone who is really part of yourself, only with someone to whom you cleave intellectually and emotionally. If a relationship suffers from a lack of concern and commitment, then sexuality suffers as well. The Torah wants us to know that for humans, sexual relations are not merely a function of procreative needs, but rather an expression of mutuality on a profound level. Hence, in contrast to the animal kingdom, humans are not controlled by periods of heat; sexuality is ever-present. Thus Nahmanides speaks of one flesh in allegoric terms: through a transcendent sexual act conceived in marriage, the two become one.

Rashi interprets the verse, "You shall become one flesh" to mean that in the newborn child, mother and father literally become one flesh. In the child, part of us lives on even after we die.

The entire sequence ends with the startling statement, "And they were both naked, and they were not ashamed" (2:25). Given the Torah's strict standards of modesty how are we to understand a description which seems to contradict traditional Jewish values?

I would suggest a more symbolic explanation: Nakedness without shame means that two people must have the ability to face each other and reveal their souls without external pretense. Frequently, we play games, pretending to be what we're not, putting on a front. The Hebrew word 'begeg' (garment) comes from the same root as 'baG-d' - to betray. With garments I can betray; wearing my role as I hide my true self. The Torah wants husband and wife to remove garments which conceal truth, so that they are free to express fears and frustrations, not afraid to cry and scream in each other's presence without feeling the "shame of nakedness." This is the ideal 'ezer kenegdo.'

The first global catastrophe, the flood, struck when the world rejected the ideal relationship between man and woman. Rape, pillage, and unbridled lust became the norm. Only one family on earth - Noah's remained righteous. Now, with the Tower of Babel, whatever values Noah attempted to transmit to future generations were forgotten.

What exactly happened when one language became seventy is difficult to understand. Yet, metaphorically, one language means people understand each other. With their 'ezer-kenegdos,' existential and social loneliness is kept at bay as they become one in love and in progeny.

The Tower of Babel represents a new stage of depravity, not sexual, but social. People wanted to create a great name by building great towers, not for the sake of Heaven, but for the sake of materialism; the

new G-d became splendid achievements with mortar and brick. As they reached greater physical heights, they forgot the human, inter-personal value of a friend, a wife, a life's partner. According to the Midrash, when a person fell off the Tower, work continued, but if a brick crashed to the ground, people mourned.

Thus the total breakdown of language fits the crime of people who may be physically alive, but whose tongues and hearts are locked -people who are no longer communicating with each other. It was no longer possible for two people to become one flesh and one bone, to stand naked without shame, to become 'ezer-kenegdos.' Existential loneliness engulfed the world and intercommunication was forgotten. The powerful idea of one language became a vague memory.

The Tower of Babel ended an era in the history of mankind, and the social destruction it left behind could only be fixed by Abraham. His message of a G-d of compassion who wishes to unite the world in love and morality is still waiting to be heard. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The rabbis were not so much critical of Noach-as he is paid the highest of compliments, throughout the Torah as a righteous person-but they were wary of him. I have often felt that this attitude is born of the idea that Rashi himself states in commenting upon the origin of Noach's name. Rashi makes a point that the name Noach should not be construed as a derivative of the Hebrew word "nacheim"-meaning to comfort-but rather it is derived from the other Hebrew word "noach"-meaning, rest, leisure, comfortable but not comfort as in consolation.

Rashi attributes this understanding of Noach's name to the fact that he was the father, so to speak, of modern agricultural technological advancement and progress. The iron plow, the first great essential tool for farming developed for humans, enabling settlers to abandon a nomadic existence, was an invention of Noach. This was his great contribution towards the advancement of human technology.

Noach therefore becomes the source of human technological progress which grants us leisure, eases our physical workload and gives us many physical comforts in life. However, technology alone with all of its attendant blessings does not guarantee us any sort of mental, spiritual or social comfort. It does not console us in our hour of grief nor does it strengthen our spirit in our moments of self-doubt and personal angst.

If Noach could have achieved these goals then Rashi points out that his name would have been Menachem-the one who brings true consolation and comfort to troubled souls. Hence Noach is viewed in tradition as being incomplete- technologically advanced

but spiritually wanting-in short a pretty accurate description of our current human society.

The Rabbis of the Talmud taught us that if "one tells you that there is wisdom, knowledge and skills present amongst the nations of the world you should believe him. However, if one tells you that there is Torah amongst the nations of the world, then do not believe him." Judaism and Jewish society has no basic argument against the advance of technology. We are not the Amish nor are we willing to be consigned a back seat in the drive to physically improve the human condition of life on this planet. Yet Judaism realizes that true psychological and spiritual comfort cannot be found in the latest version of the ipod.

Noach's technology can be enormously beneficial in a society that adopts Avraham's values and beliefs. But bereft of any spiritual focus or restraint, technology run wild makes our world a more fearful place to inhabit and forces many to yearn for the good old, less technologically advanced, eras that preceded us. Noach's grand technology could not save the world from the ravages of evil that brought upon humankind the great flood described in this week's parsha.

Avraham's grand values and holy behavior almost saved the seat of world evil, Sodom. The world is Noach's world but its survival is dependent upon the survival and eventual triumph of Avraham's children, ideas and beliefs. © 2009 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At the conclusion of the deluge, G-d proclaimed that "while the earth remains...day and night shall not cease." (Genesis 8:22) Rashi deduces from this verse that the natural progression of day and night, ceased to exist during the time of the flood.

Since this verse mentions day before night, the position of Rashbam that at creation day preceded night makes sense. Before the Great Flood, we were sun people with the day being paramount.

Only much later, after we left Egypt did G-d proclaim that we were to become moon people-that the day would begin at night.

What then is the conceptual difference between the sun and moon? There is a deep difference between these two approaches. It has been noted that the sun represents sameness. This because it is always the same size. Kohelet writes "there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9) In other words, tomorrow is no different than today, today is no different than yesterday. When facing challenges there is little hope that there can be any change-everything seems to be the same as it was and will always remain stagnant.

The moon, however, fluctuates in size. It diminishes and eventually vanishes only to reappear. Thus the Hebrew word for moon, *chodesh*, is similar to *chadash* which means new. The moon teaches that no matter the obstacles, we have the power to renew ourselves and overcome.

While our calendar is primarily lunar, it is solar as well. Every few years a month is added to the lunar year so that the lunar cycle be in sync with the solar. The emphasis on the ever-changing moon with a need to acknowledge the consistent solar cycle, teaches that life is made up of a balance of sameness and newness. Some things remain as they always were; other things have the capacity to change.

Events in Israel speak to this balance. On the one hand, all seems the same. Jews are being murdered because they are Jews. The world by and large blames us. The message of the sun is alive and well. Things today seem no different than throughout history.

In the same breath, the lunar side of our calendar reminds us that all need not be the same. One should not be overly pessimistic. No doubt we face serious challenges, the likes of which I believe we've never faced since the establishment of the state.

So while we were originally sun people with day preceding night, we, in time, learned to infuse the sun with the spirit of the moon. Night precedes day. No matter how bleak and how the same life seems, we must always be alive and hopeful for a different reality than before, a new dawn - when our people can live in unity without fear - when real *shalom* will prevail. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah projects the glorious future of the Jewish people and describes the splendor of Jerusalem in breath-taking dimensions. In the midst of this indescribable vision the prophet Yeshaya draws a striking comparison between our present exile and the flood in the time of Noach. Yeshaya says in the name of Hashem, "For a brief moment of anger I concealed My countenance from you but with everlasting kindness I will show My compassion. As with the waters of Noach about which I swore that they will never again flood the world so have I sworn never again to become angry with Israel." (54: 8, 9) The prophet assures the Jewish people that their painful years of exile will soon draw to a close never to be repeated. Drawing attention to the flood, he guarantees that, "As the world has never experienced a second flood so will the Jewish people never experience another exile." This peculiar equation between the flood and the Jewish people's exile suggests a strong association between

the two. It appears that Hashem's unconditional guarantee to withhold a flood from this world serves as sound evidence to the eternal redemption of the Jewish people.

In order to appreciate this association, let us analyze Noach's role during the flood and Hashem's response to it. The Torah tells us in the beginning of our Sidra that the flood was sent because humanity turned totally inwards. The Torah states, "And the land was corrupt before Hashem and the land was full of robbery." (Breishis 6:11) All of mankind became focused on themselves-satisfying all of their personal pursuits without taking anyone else's privileges and rights into consideration. They regarded everyone and their possessions permissible to themselves in order to satisfy their personal interests and desires. Humanity was literally destroying itself with every person concerned only for himself, showing no care or respect for anyone else. During the months of the flood it became Noach's sole responsibility to restore morality to the world. The prevalent principles and policies in the Ark, Noach's world, had to be kindness and compassion. Every moment spent there had to be filled with caring and sharing. Hashem therefore charged Noach with the overwhelming responsibility of providing and tending to the needs of every living being in the Ark. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 108B see Maharsha ad loc.) relates a conversation between Noach's son, Shem, and Eliezer wherein Shem stated that he never formally went to sleep throughout the twelve months he was in the Ark. Noach's family was totally preoccupied with their magnanimous chore of continuously following the varied feeding schedules of each living being. In this way, the family was totally involved in acts of kindness, providing for others every moment of their stay. This total reversal of priorities, placing their entire focus on the needs of others, reestablished the world. In fact, our Chazal in the Midrash (Breishis Rabba 33:4) understand this to be the single merit through which the floodwaters ended and Noach's family was permitted to leave the Ark and reenter the world.

Upon reentry, Noach immediately approached Hashem through sacrificial offerings and pleaded with Hashem never to repeat the devastating floodwaters. In this week's haftarah we discover that Hashem responded with an oath that a flood of those dimensions would never reoccur. Apparently, Noach's total dedication to kindness bore everlasting fruits and in response to Noach's kindness Hashem promised to shower His boundless kindness on the world. The Malbim (see commentary on Yeshaya 54:10) reflects that the nature of kindness distinguishes itself in regards to the recipient's worthiness. Unlike compassion and mercy which are governed by and fashioned according to the worthiness of the individual in need, kindness knows no bounds. In essence, one need not be worthy in order to qualify for Hashem's kindness. In view of this, the Malbim explains that a

pledge of Hashem's kindness is, by definition, an eternal commitment. Throughout the era of the flood, Noach totally preoccupied himself with kindness and, in response, Hashem promised that throughout the era of this world He will preoccupy Himself with the world's kindness. This kindness translated into the unconditional guarantee that regardless how undeserving the world becomes it will never experience total destruction.

In view of this, Yeshaya draws our attention to this guarantee and states in the name of Hashem, "For the mountains may jar and the hills may shift, but My kindness will never leave you and My covenant of peace will never falter." (54:10) As we have seen regarding Noach's kindness, Hashem promises to respond to our kindness with a similar unconditional guarantee. This kindness means that Hashem will never respond to our shortcomings with expressions of anger. Irrespective of our behavior, never again will the Jewish people experience exile and other similar manifestations of Hashem's wrath. Once the Jewish people return to Eretz Yisroel, never again will Hashem remove His sacred presence from their midst. Hashem's kindness is eternal and after the Jewish people will receive His promise of kindness, it will be an unconditional and everlasting one.

This insight reveals to us the hidden message of Chazal and profoundly reflects upon the affluence of our generation. Chazal (see Rashi, Breishis 12:2) inform us of the character of the generation preceding Mashiach. They explain Hashem's introductory Bracha to Avrohom Avinu stated in the beginning of Lech Lecha in the following manner. There will be certain generations wherein Hashem's influence will be realized through our acts of kindness, others through our acts of devotion and sacrifice, and others through our commitment to Torah and truth. But in the era which precedes Mashiach the prevalent virtue will be kindness. (based on the reflections of HoRav HaGaon Rav Shimon Shkop zt"l) This particular era distinguishes itself by being the launching pad for the era of Mashiach. This preceding era and its merits must secure the coming of Mashiach and all associated blessings. Amongst the blessings of Mashiach's times is Hashem's promise to shower us with His everlasting kindness, guaranteeing our eternal stay in Eretz Yisroel. But this commitment of everlasting kindness will only come in response to our selfless and personal commitment to unconditional kindness. This explains why never before has the opportunity of kindness availed itself to the Jewish people in such extraordinary proportions as in our days. Yes, with our generation accepting its responsibility and displaying of loving kindness we will deserve Hashem's unconditional response of His everlasting kindness. Yeshaya therefore points us to the flood and assures us that, as Hashem responded to Noach's kindness with His unconditional guarantee we should realize

wholeheartedly that Hashem will also respond to our kindness with that same unconditional guarantee and shower His blessing upon His people for eternity.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Parashas Noach teaches us about two lost generations, the "Dor haMabul" (Generation of the Flood) and the "Dor haPelaga" (Generation of the Dispersal). Aside from Noach and his immediate family, the flood wiped out the entire generation, while "only" half of the generation that built the "Tower of Bavel" died (see Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 24). Our sages (referenced by Rashi on Beraishis 11:9) wondered why the generation that directly challenged G-d (see Rashi on 11:1) survived, while the generation that did not challenge G-d, but sinned out of selfishness, greed and desire, was completely destroyed. Their answer seems quite simple (Beraishis Rabbah 38:6): "The generation of the flood were awash in theft, therefore no remnant remained. But because these (the Dor haPelaga) loved each other, a remnant remained of them." (Rashi's wording is "because they acted with love and friendship towards each other," as opposed to the Dor haMabul, who "were thieves and there were arguments between them.") The lesson is obvious, described by Rashi: "you learn [from here] how hated is divisiveness and how great peace is," for the unity of the Dor haPelaga is what saved them.

The irony is striking. They were saved because of their ability to get along and work together, yet G-d dispersed them across the land and destroyed the very unity that was their best attribute. Yes, I know one of the sins of the generation (as pointed out by numerous commentators) was their deliberately staying in one location "lest we become dispersed upon the face of the earth" (11:4) despite being commanded to "be fruitful and multiply and fill up the land" (1:28 and 9:1), and the only way to rectify that was to forcefully disperse them. Still, it seems strange that the lesson about the value of unity is learned from a situation that ended up in disunity.

One of the issues discussed by the commentaries is Rashi's contention (11:2) that the movement to the valley where they built the city and tower was from "the eastern mountain" (10:30), as this was not where everybody lived, only Shem and his descendents. Additionally, the area described as being where Shem lived refers to where his descendents moved after the dispersion, not before it (see Ramban). However, Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer (24) tells us that Noach assigned each of his sons a place to dwell, with Shem given "all the settled land," Chum given "the seashore," and Yefes given "the desert and fields." These are not the same boundaries eventually settled in by each, so must be the area given to them before the

dispersion. If Shem's land is described as "all of the settled land," it must have been where Noach and his family settled after the flood, an area that became more "settled" and populated as the "family" grew. Chum and Yefes may have taken trips to "their" land (perhaps for fishing and hunting and to work on the crops), but it is reasonable to assume that most people, from all three families, lived in the "settled" area, the land given to Shem. Rashi's comment that they moved from this settled area to the valley no longer seems so difficult.

There are other indications that, even before a conscious decision was made by Nimrod and company to consolidate all of humanity into one area, separate nations existed. Although Rashi (11:1) tells us that they all spoken "the holy tongue" (Biblical Hebrew), others (see Chizkuni on 11:7)) say that everybody spoke all 70 languages (and were able to understand each other's language until G-d caused them to forget every language but their own). [These two opinions can be found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Megila 1:9)]. If there were 70 languages before the dispersion, there must have already been 70 different nations. Some commentators (e.g. R' Saadya Gaon) make a point of translating the verse that says they were "one nation and language" (11:6) as "they were like one nation," because they really were many different nations. When discussing how they were dispersed, Rabbi Yehuda (Beraishis Rabbah 38:10) tells us that "the people of Tzur went to Tzidon and the people Tzidon went to Tzur," i.e. each nation was forced to live in a land that had belonged to a different nation before the dispersion.

Instead of one large population, of one large, area working together to build a city and a tower, the whole purpose of their unity, the reason they joined together, was this urban project. The commentators give many reasons why they wanted to become centralized, but the bottom line is that the project wasn't a result of their unity; their unity was a result of the project. Nevertheless, it is an extremely positive thing that so many people were able to work together, even if the reason they got together was problematic.

G-d had to prevent the project from being finished (or ruin it shortly after it was finished), and the level of sin, the evil motivation for building the project, and what would have resulted had it been allowed to remain, warranted destroying the entire generation rather than letting them succeed. However, the project could be stopped without wiping out the entire generation; the people could use their ability to work together to rebuild new cities in different areas. The land would be settled, there would be no central religion preventing a search for the One True G-d (see Sefornu), and no despotic king forcing everybody to follow his way of thinking or else.

Had the problem been corruption, separating them would not have solved it; they would be corrupt in their "new" country too. It was for this reason that there was no other option but to wipe out the Dor haMabul;

G-d wasn't going to change their corruption, and they weren't going to change on their own. The Dor haPelaga, on the other hand, had the ability to work with each other, so "all" G-d had to do was disperse them. They were saved because of their unity, and given the opportunity to use that unity in a positive way. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

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The pasuk at the end of Parshas Bereshis [5:32] says: "And Noach was 500 years old and he gave birth to Shem, Cham, and Yafes". Rashi asks why others of Noach's generation gave birth to children at the age of 100 on average while Noach did not have any children until much later in life. Rashi answers that G-d did Noach a favor, so to speak. If he had children at a normal age and they turned out to be wicked, G-d would have had to kill them out with the rest of their generation. If, on the other hand, they were righteous, then by the time of the Flood they in turn would have already had several generations of descendants and Noach would need to build several Arks to house all his descendants. Therefore, Noach's children were born close in time to the Flood, such that Noach's oldest son was not yet a "bar onshin" [at the age when he would be subject to Heavenly punishment] when the decree concerning the Flood was issued.

Let us put ourselves in Noach's shoes for a minute. Noach was the greatest Tzadik in his generation. Everyone else was having children and grandchildren. Noach was infertile and childless. Where is there justice in this world? Noach must have had such thoughts for 400 years! He must have been asking himself "What does G-d have against me? What does he want from me? Why is he doing this to me? I am the most righteous person of my generation!"

The answer is that the Almighty has His calculations. He knew that there would be a Flood and everyone would be destroyed. He knew that it was best for Noach that he not have children for those 400 years. So the Almighty does Noach a favor and makes him infertile.

Our own perceived misfortunes are one of the hardest things for any of us to understand. We are limited by time and space and can only see what is happening in front of our eyes. There are times when we can't believe the things that happen to us and we perceive them as the greatest punishment. We must have this bedrock faith, which is so much easier to preach than to integrate into our psyche. This is the true Jewish outlook on life. If we could all know what the Almighty has in mind for us, we would understand that G-d is not doing us a disservice, but He is doing us the greatest favor! © 2009 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org