

פרשת נח

OVERVIEW

Alone among men Noah, his wife, his sons and their wives survive the world-shattering catastrophe which befell mankind. Within a time-space of forty days a fearful flood wipes out every trace of life on earth. As the masses of water recede, Noah and his family leave the ark and swear allegiance to G-d. – The rainbow becomes the symbol of G-d's reconciliation. – Noah's drunkenness is the object of derision by his younger son, Ham. The genealogical record resumes – The tower of Babel – The birth of Abraham.

COMMENTARY

The Flood

Sixteen centuries of steadily worsening moral deterioration brought mankind to the point where no other solution was possible but the cutting down of the entire tree in order to salvage a tiny twig which had not yet been contaminated. This proved to be a decisive turning point in the organic development of mankind. Nature and man were "re-created". Yet the continuity in the person of Noah guaranteed that ensuing generations would retain the memory of the catalytic event and its lesson and strive to prevent a repetition of a similar devastation.

Noah was commanded by G-d to build the ark. One could think of less complicated and cumbersome ways to save G-d's chosen from destruction. This construction was the final trial Noah had to undergo. Will he have the courage to

risk the ridicule of his contemporaries by building an ark far away from an ocean or even a river? Or will he prefer not to arouse "the attention of the outside world"? The reality of building the ark under such circumstances demonstrates the Jew's blind trust in G-d, irrespective of adverse conditions. We follow the divine order even if it means changing the course of our lives, breaking with time-honored customs, interrupting our normal routine. Unhesitating, total trust and equally total disregard for a mocking world - that is the mark of the true "Tzadik".

Is the heart of man evil? (8:21)

Noah has been saved. In the first emotion of gratitude he offers a "whole sacrifice" to G-d. The divine response is significant: "Never again will I curse the ground for the sake of man even if the inclination of man's heart were evil from his youth...". A poor translation led to an erroneous interpretation of these words to the effect that a pessimistic G-d decided to refrain from "interfering in the affairs of man" on the ground that it would be pointless, for "man is fundamentally evil". How could G-d despair of a creation that He has formed with the divine breath? Is it not precisely in man's independence of will that the entire human morality is rooted?

The correct meaning of the above verse is as follows: even when mankind charts a course similar to that of the "generation of the flood"; even when the hearts of men are stricken by the virus of evil, infecting the youth, symbol of purity and enthusiasm for the good, G-d will no longer intervene. Even if the

young should choose evil as the purpose of their existence so that nothing but evil could be expected from such generations - and G-d would have good reason to destroy the earth - He will not intervene. Yet there is always hope for improvement.

The Tower of Babel

There is a subconscious longing in every being to build his life on solid ground in order to bestow an aura of permanence on his fleeting existence. There is a strong element of this yearning in the love of parents for their children who will continue their parents' life work. The realization of our own insignificance may insure us to do our small part in helping to promote the progress of mankind. It may, however, have the opposite effect in that it may lead to a rebellion against an inexorable fate, an attempt to break through the barriers of our human limitedness. Humility or arrogance – these are the two likely products of our self-analysis...

The people of Babel deliberately chose the way of arrogance and haughtiness. They refused to understand or admit that the value and importance of the individual is judged by his contribution to the welfare of society. Their tower serves no purpose. It is but a grotesque reflection of an unbridled arrogance that presumes to efface the

eternally defined boundaries between man and G-d. G-d thwarts their bold plot by dispersing them over the face of the earth. He causes their common language to disintegrate and thus it came to pass that men no longer understood one another. Separated from each other, suddenly confronted by their weakness and the futility of their dreams of glory there was hope that the nations would regain their former unity of mind and outlook on life, to the benefit of all mankind.

Following Babel, men were deprived of their unity. All their efforts concentrated on retaining their foothold against the envy and greed of their neighbors. A world of purely materialistic orientation emerged which was without hope for the future. The sacred flame of G-d's Name will illuminate the darkness when Abraham, "father of the multitude of the nations", will summon mankind to the service of the One G-d and restore the awareness in men that every facet of life is sacred and good as long as it unfolds within the limits set by G-d.

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