**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NOACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Noach that after Noach emerged from the ark following the flood, he offered animals as a sacrifice, and God “smelled the fragrant scent” of the sacrifice and then decided He would never again flood the earth (8:21).

The Gemara in Masekhet Eiruvin (65a), citing this verse, comments, “Whoever is lured as a result of his wine has within him the mind of his Creator.” *Chazal* here draw a comparison between God’s “softening” His approach to the world upon “smelling” Noach’s sacrifices, and somebody who yields to his fellow as a result of inebriation. The Gemara appears to praise those whose indulgence in wine results in greater flexibility and willingness to grant other people’s wishes, and compares such conduct to God’s favorable response to Noach’s sacrifice. This comment raises several questions, including the question of why this is admirable, and how it is possible to indicate – as the Gemara appears to do – that God was somehow “inebriated” by Noach’s sacrifice and thus “lured” to make His promise never to bring another flood.

One approach to explaining the Gemara’s remark is cited by the *Or Ha-chayim* in the name of his grandfather. The *Or Ha-chayim* explains that the Gemara here speaks of wine in the possessive form – “*yeino*” (“his wine”), suggesting an emphasis on the wine’s belonging to the person in question. Meaning, the Gemara is referring to a person who becomes softened and more generous after drinking his own wine. The *Or Ha-chayim* explains that this speaks of a host who asks his guess to pour him a cup of wine at his table, and feels genuinely grateful and indebted to the guest for this favor. Even though the guest simply gave him that which was already his, nevertheless, the host appreciates this small favor. This quality, the *Or Ha-chayim* writes, is “Godlike.” After all, as in the case of Noach’s offering, God lovingly accepts our sacrifices and rewards us for them even though He already owns anything we “give” Him. Any sacrifice we make is, in some sense, similar to the cup of the host’s wine brought to Him by his guest. The Gemara thus teaches us to feel deep appreciation for the small favors people do and the gestures they make, just as God appreciates our “favors” and gestures. The message being conveyed, according to the *Or Ha-chayim*, is that we should not reserve our feelings of gratitude and indebtedness for the enormous favors people do for us. We should be grateful even for the seemingly small, simple acts of kindness from which we benefit – even something as simple as our guest pouring our beverage for us – just as God cherishes and rewards us for even the small, simple *mitzva* acts that we do.

Sunday

After Noach exited the ark following the flood, God spoke to him and presented several commands, including the prohibition against murder, warning, “One who spills his fellow’s blood…his blood shall be spilt” (9:6). This verse is preceded by the pronouncement that God will make a reckoning for “*dimkhem le-nafshoteikhem*” (literally, “your blood for your souls” – 9:5). Rashi, based on the Gemara (Bava Kama 91b), explains that this refers to suicide, and God here warns that He would punish somebody who spills his own blood.

Rabbi Natan of Breslav, in *Likutei Halakhot* (*Hilkhot Orla*, 4:16), asserts that once the Torah equated suicide with ordinary murder, we may conclude that other offenses which are deemed equivalent to murder are forbidden to commit against oneself. Specifically, Rabbi Natan writes, it is forbidden to humiliate oneself, just as it is forbidden to humiliate others. *Chazal* (Bava Metzia 58b) famously state that publicly humiliating somebody is akin to murder, and Rabbi Natan thus concludes that just as one may not kill himself, it is likewise forbidden to put oneself to shame.

Practically speaking, Rabbi Natan writes, this means that we should – on some level – judge ourselves favorably just as we are to judge other people favorably. Of course, we must honestly assess and scrutinize our conduct, take note of our faults and work towards correcting them. However, we must distinguish between self-scrutiny and self-deprecation. Rabbi Natan explains that we are not fully aware of the many different factors that contribute to our failings, the numerous challenges and pressures which we face that make it very difficult for us to act as we should. While these considerations do not absolve us of accountability, they absolutely mitigate our level of guilt. And thus while we must accept responsibility for our actions and acknowledge our guilt for our misdeeds, we must also encourage ourselves by recognizing the challenges we face which often make it difficult for us to act the right way. Even during the process of self-scrutiny, we must temper, at least somewhat, our criticism of ourselves and retain our sense of self-respect and self-worth, so that we remain hopeful and optimistic about our capacity to change and improve, and ensure that our spirits and self-esteem remain high despite our mistakes and failures.

Monday

In commanding Noach to construct an ark and make preparations for the flood, God instructs, “*Kach lekha mi-kol ha-okhel asher yei’akheil*” – “Take for yourself from any kind of food which is eaten” (6:21) to sustain himself, his family and the animals during the flood. Rav Efrayim Luntshitz, in his *Keli Yakar*, notes that the phrase “*kach lekha*” (“take for yourself”) in other contexts indicates specifically something which one personally owns. As an example, *Keli Yakar* points to the well-known requirement that one must own the four species in order to fulfill the obligation of waving the species on the first day of Sukkot. This is inferred from the Torah’s formulation in issuing the command of the four species – “*u-lkachtem lakhem*” (Vayikra 23:40), as the word “*lakhem*” implies ownership. Similarly, *Keli Yakar* suggests, when God commanded Noach to prepare food for the ark with the term “*kach lekha*,” this meant that Noach needed to store specifically food which he owned.

*Keli Yakar* explains that conceivably, Noach was not capable of legally obtaining the enormous quantity of food he would need for his family and for the animals throughout the period they would be spending in the ark. Therefore, he might have justified stealing food from other people just prior to the flood in order to bring it into the ark. After all, as these people and all their belongings would imminently be destroyed by the flood, their possessions – perhaps – were to be legally considered ownerless. God therefore emphasized to Noach that he was to take only the food that he was capable of obtaining through legal means, and this food would miraculously suffice to sustain him, his family and the animals aboard the ark.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein, in his *Chashukei Chemed* (Bekhorot 13b), cites *Keli Yakar*’s comments in reference to the question as to whether one may take something belonging to somebody who is about to be killed and his possessions seized. The specific case under discussion is the tragic situation that arose during the Holocaust of Jewish inmates who sought to take possessions belonging to their fellow Jews who were being led to the gas chambers. Could the victims’ possessions be considered ownerless even before their deaths, once it became clear that they were about to be killed and their possessions seized by the Nazis? *Keli Yakar*’s remarks seem to suggest that one may not take people’s property even if he knows for certain that it will imminently be lost or destroyed – as Noach was not entitled to his contemporaries’ food despite having been told by God that they and their belongings were about to be annihilated by the flood.

However, Rav Zilberstein dismisses this proof, noting Rashi’s comments (7:13) that God began the flood with light rain, hoping that the people would repent and avert the catastrophe. This demonstrates that even when the rain was falling, the generation’s fate was not yet sealed, and the possibility of the generation’s survival remained open. Therefore, Noach’s being barred from taking his contemporaries’ possessions does not necessarily prove that one may not take the possessions of somebody whose property is certain to be taken, as was, tragically, the case in the situation described earlier of Jews being led to the gas chambers during the Holocaust.

Indeed, as Rav Zilberstein proceeds to cite, the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Kama (115b) addresses the case of an “*anass*” – an armed official – who approaches a person to confiscate something belonging to him, and states that already at that point this person is not considered the owner over the money that is about to be taken from him. The Gemara rules that if, during those moments before the money is stolen, the individual pronounces the transfer of the sanctity of his hallowed *ma’aser sheni* produce onto this money, his pronouncement is ineffective. Based on the *Netivot Ha-mishpat* (361:2), Rav Zilberstein explains that when it becomes certain that one is about to lose something, he already despairs at that moment, and that possession becomes ownerless. As such, the money in this person’s possession is not legally considered his property. When there is hope for future legal recourse or other means of retrieving the item or money in question, then the individual retains legal ownership, but once it becomes perfectly clear that the item will be permanently seized, it is ownerless at that point. Thus, in the tragic case of people being taken for execution, it would, seemingly, be permissible for others to take their possessions, which are already deemed ownerless.

Tuesday

Before the flood, God instructed Noach to bring with him onto the ark two of every non-kosher animal species – a male and a female – and seven pairs of every kosher species of animal (7:2). As we read later (8:20), Noach used some of the kosher animals as sacrifices which he offered to God upon exiting the ark after the flood.

The Torah here refers to the different groups of animals as “*tehora*” (“pure”) and “*asher lo tehora*” (“which is not pure”). The Gemara in Masekhet Pesachim (3a) famously observes that the Torah went out of its way to use the cumbersome expression “*asher lo tehora*” in reference to the non-kosher animals, instead of the much simpler word “*temei’a*” (“impure”). On this basis, the Gemara teaches that one should avoid speaking a “*davar meguneh*” – meaning, using unbecoming or unrefined language. If the Torah found it appropriate to avoid even the seemingly innocuous term “*tamei*” in favor of the lengthier but more delicate expression “*asher lo tehora*,” then we should certainly choose respectable, dignified words with which to express ourselves.

Many commentators raised the obvious question as to how to explain, in light of the Gemara’s remark, the Torah’s frequent use of the word “*tamei*” in other contexts. Whereas here the Torah avoids this word in reference to non-kosher animals, in Sefer Vayikra (11), where the Torah elaborates on the laws governing kosher and non-kosher animals, this word is used numerous times. Why is it only in the context of Noach’s preparations for the flood that the word “*tamei*” is avoided in favor of the less convenient but more refined expression “*asher lo tehora*”?

Apparently, the precise application of the Gemara’s teaching – that we must avoid “*davar meguneh*” – depends on context. The Torah’s discussion in Sefer Vayikra appears amidst a lengthy, detailed section outlining the laws of *tum’a* and *tahara* – purity and impurity – as these statuses affect the *Mishkan* and the sacrifices. The intent of this section is to establish the need to distance *tum’a* from the *Mishkan* and its rituals, to preserve its sanctity by barring anything impure from its territory. In this context, it is indeed fully appropriate to use the word “*tamei*” as the label assigned to that which must be distanced from the Sanctuary. As these laws are specifically designed to establish the need to keep impurity away from the *Mishkan*, the Torah uses the direct term “impure” in order to underscore its incompatibility with the sacred domain of the *Mishkan*. Here in Parashat Noach, however, the context is the interest in preserving all animal species, regardless of their status vis-à-vis the laws of purity. The focus here is not on the relatively negative aspect of non-kosher animals – their disqualification for consumption and for use as sacrifices – but to the contrary, the need for them to be kept alive during the flood. Therefore, in this context, even when it became necessary to distinguish between the pure and impure animals, the Torah found it appropriate to “downplay” the impure nature of the latter group. Here, the Torah focuses on these animals’ importance as part of the natural world which needed to be protected from the flood, and so the Torah went out of its way to use a more delicate expression rather than the term *tamei* which has a more directly negative association.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Noach the disturbing story of Noach’s inebriation, during which he removed his clothes. One of his sons, Cham, relished the sight of his father’s disgrace, and rushed to tell his brothers – Sheim and Yefet – of what happened. Sheim and Yefet promptly covered Noach to protect his honor. Later, when Noach regained sobriety, he proclaimed a blessing upon Sheim and Yefet, and a curse upon Cham.

Rashi (9:23), based on the Midrash, notes that the Torah uses the singular form “*va-yikach*” (as opposed to “*va-yikchu*”) in reference to Sheim and Yefet’s taking a garment to cover Noach. This indicates that one of the two played the primary role in this effort, and the other a secondary role. Rashi explains, “This teaches that Sheim exerted himself in the *mitzva* more than Yefet.” Therefore, Rashi writes, Sheim’s descendants received a greater reward than Yefet’s descendants. Yefet’s reward was that his evil descendants – the nation of Gog – would receive burial after their defeat (Yechezkel 39:11), whereas Sheim’s descendants received the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*, wearing special fringes on their garments, just as Sheim took a garment to cover Noach.

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein (*Or Yechezkel* – *Torah Va’daas*, pp. 132-3) comments that the Midrash’s remarks demonstrate how a quantitative difference in effort can make a qualitative difference in the results. It seems unlikely that the difference between Sheim and Yefet’s levels of exertion in this episode was all that drastic. They simply took a garment and covered the private parts of their father’s body; if they both participated, Sheim’s efforts could not have been qualitatively greater than Yefet’s. And yet, this minor difference resulted in vastly different outcomes. Sheim’s act was considered qualitatively greater than Yefet’s due to the extra bit of effort and enthusiasm that he invested in this important *mitzva*. *Chazal* here thus teach us, Rav Levenstein explains, that even a slight increase in our investment of effort can significantly – and even drastically – affect the outcome. Putting in a little extra time, concentrating a little more intently, paying a little extra attention to detail, and investing a little more emotion into what we do can make the result qualitatively better than it would be otherwise. The Midrash thus urges us not to discount even small amounts of additional work and effort, to recognize the great importance of every ounce of exertion we invest in Torah study and *mitzva* performance, and overcome our natural tendency towards complacency that threatens to drastically diminish from our success and achievement.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Noach tells of God’s promise after the flood that He would never flood the earth again. Introducing this section, the Torah writes that God spoke these words “to Noach and to his sons with him” (9:8) – seemingly implying that God spoke to all four men, Noach and his three sons. The Ramban, however, explains this to mean that God spoke only to Noach, who was then to relay the information to his three sons. After all, the Ramban notes, one of Noach’s sons – Cham – is known to have been sinful, as indicated in the story told later (9:22) of Noach’s inebriation, during which he removed his clothes. Cham saw his father’s disgrace, and excitedly rushed to tell his brothers, reveling in Noach’s humiliation. The Ramban thus found it inconceivable that Cham reached the spiritual level necessary to experience prophecy, and this prompted the Ramban to read the verse to mean that God spoke only to Noach.

Ibn Ezra, after offering this interpretation, briefly adds that some commentators maintained that Noach’s sons were all prophets, just as he was. This approach also appears in the commentary of the Radak. Apparently, proponents of this view were not troubled by the prospect of Cham receiving prophecy before his shameful response to Noach’s inebriation. It should be emphasized that according to the Gemara (Sanhedrin 70a), Cham did not just look and jeer at his father, but committed a heinous act; one view claims Cham raped Noach, and another claimed he castrated him. Nevertheless, according to the approach referenced by Ibn Ezra, the man who perpetrated such a crime was a prophet to whom God spoke not too long before this appalling act.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Netivei Chayim*, notes how according to this view, Cham serves as a striking example of human weakness and inconsistency, how people are capable of quickly deteriorating from piety to contemptible immorality. Prophecy, as the Rambam famously discusses (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:1), is given only to those who have achieved a special level of personal piety and wisdom. Accordingly, if Cham was a prophet at the time the flood ended, as the view cited by Ibn Ezra suggests, then he must have been exceedingly righteous at that point. And yet, not long thereafter, he committed a heinous criminal act against his righteous father, alerting us to the reality that piety in the present is no guarantee of piety in the future, and that no matter what level we have achieved, we must always work and struggle to maintain our standards – or, preferably, to raise them.

More specifically, Rav Elazary points to the Midrash’s comment cited by Rashi (9:25) that Cham castrated Noach to ensure that Noach would not beget any more children who would diminish from his portion of the inheritance after Noach’s passing. Greed, it seems, is capable of driving a person from towering heights of moral and spiritual greatness to the lowest depths of cruelty and depravity. The lust for money can lead people to betray their principles and values even in the most shocking ways. As the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (4:2) famously exhorts, “Do not trust yourself until the day you die.” As long as we are alive, we are capable of both greatness and evil, regardless of what we’ve done in the past. Just as our past sins and mistakes do not prevent us from achieving spiritual greatness, likewise, our past achievements and current spiritual standing do not guarantee that this is how we will always live, and we must therefore always continue working and exerting effort to achieve to the best of our ability.

Friday

After the flood, God appeared to Noach and reiterated the command of “*peru u-rvu*” (“be fruitful and multiply” – 9:7) which had been given to Adam upon his creation, instructing Noach to begin the process of repopulating the earth. God then emphasized, “*shirtzu va-aretz*” – “swarm the earth.” The Radak explains the term “*shirtzu*” as a reference to rapid population growth, as indicated by its use in the Torah’s description of *Benei Yisrael*’s remarkable rate of reproduction in Egypt (“*va-yishretzu*” – Shemot 1:7). According to the Radak, God emphasized to Noach that he and his children should endeavor to produce a lot of offspring in order to quickly repopulate the newly desolate world.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains differently, noting that the word “*sheretz*” refers to small insects and the like, the lowest level of living creatures whose existence is defined by nothing more than their movement. As such, Rav Hirsch asserts, the verb “*shirtzu*” means “swarm,” moving to different locations. In his view, the command “*shirtzu va-aretz*” instructed Noach and his family to reproduce and to spread across different geographic regions where they would form diverse societies. Rav Hirsch writes:

Noachian mankind is given the mission to spread over the whole world, and under the most diverse conditions and influences of climate and physical nature of the countries, to become Men and develop the one common real character of Man; a diversity and a multiplicity…

God wanted humankind to disperse, to live under drastically different conditions, to show that the principles of morality that people must abide by are relevant and attainable under any condition.

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in *Mei Ha-shiloach*, suggests interpreting the command of “*shirtzu va-aretz*” based on Rashi’s understanding of the word “*sheretz*” earlier in Sefer Bereishit (1:20), as referring to very small creatures. Accordingly, the *Mei Ha-shiloach* finds in the command “*shirtzu*” a subtle reference to the solution for avoiding the kind of lawlessness that characterized human life during the generation of the flood. The *Mei Ha-shiloach* explains that God commanded those who came after the flood to live with humility and with humble demands and expectations, to accept “smallness” and feel content even with a modest share. Just as a “*sheretz*” lives content with its infinitesimally small portion of this earth, we, too, must learn to feel satisfied with whatever we have, without constantly demanding and pursuing more. The turmoil and moral collapse of the generation of the flood resulted from people’s sense of entitlement and greed, their firm belief that they needed and deserved more than they had and more than others had. The antidote to this dangerous mentality is “*shirtzu*,” living with “small” demands and expectations, recognizing that we can live modestly, that we do not always need more, that we can feel happy and content even if others have a larger share than we do. When we live with this mindset, people can live together peacefully and harmoniously, in mutual respect and consideration.

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