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Perfect in His Generations

The Torah describes Noah as, "A righteous man, perfect in his generations." Rashi cites two explanations of the emphasis "in his generations":

Some expound [this word] as praise. Had he been in a righteous generation, he would have been even more righteous. And there are those who expound it to his deprecation. According to the [wicked standards] of his generation, he was righteous. But if he had been in the generation of Abraham, he would not have been considered anything [of significance].¹

Why did the second opinion interpret the expression "in his generations" to Noah's denigration? The Torah itself testifies that "Noah found favor in God's eyes," implying that he was indeed a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, in whose merit life on earth endured. Would it not then be more reasonable to judge him favorably, and presume that in a righteous

generation, Noah would have risen to even greater heights?

Furthermore, why does the first opinion compare Noah to a generation of "*tzaddikim*" – righteous people – in a general sense, whereas the second opinion compares him specifically to Abraham? What is unique about Abraham that made Noah pale in comparison?

The prophet Isaiah called the great Flood "the Waters of Noah,"² implying that Noah was in some way responsible for them. The Zohar in fact says so explicitly: God told Noah that He would protect him in the ark, as it is written, "Behold, I am about to bring the Floodwaters ..." and "I will blot out all existence I have made from upon the face of the ground, but I will establish My covenant ... and you shall enter the ark." When Hashem told Noah that he and his sons would survive, Noah failed to pray on behalf of the world, and everything was destroyed as a result. For this reason, the Floodwaters were called by his name, as it is written, "For they are the Waters of Noah before Me, and I have sworn never again to bring the Waters of Noah."³

Although Noah was perfectly righteous in his own affairs, he was called to account for failing to pray on behalf of the sinners of his generation, that they might be forgiven and spared from destruction. Those who explain the expression "righteous in his generation" to demonstrate Noah's sole fault compare him to Abraham, who prayed on behalf of the wicked sinners of Sodom, that they might be saved despite their many iniquities.

The Zohar states as follows: R' Yochanan said: Come and see the difference between Noah and the *tzaddikim* that arose in Israel after him. Noah did not defend his generation, nor pray on their behalf as did Abraham. When God informed Abraham that He intended to destroy Sodom, Abraham immediately approached Him in prayer. He continued to beseech Him, until God ensured that if only ten

righteous people were to be found in Sodom, He would spare the entire city on their behalf. Abraham assumed that including Lot and his family, God would certainly find ten. Therefore he concluded his prayers. Had he realized that there were not even ten, he would have prayed that Sodom be spared in the merit of even fewer.⁴

Someone who inadvertently kills another person is exiled to a city of refuge (*ir miklat*), where he must remain until the death of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest. The Kohen Gadol's mother would often send food packages to the exiles, to forestall them from praying for the death of her son. Although the Torah assures us that "As a bird that wanders off, so an unwarranted curse will not arrive,"⁵ the prayers of the exiles were not considered "unwarranted curses," since the Kohen Gadol was held responsible for their predicament. Had he prayed sufficiently for peace, the tragedies would never have occurred, and they would never have been forced into exile.⁶

From all these sources we draw an important conclusion. Torah leaders are responsible for the physical and spiritual welfare of their entire generation, even for the sinners among us. They must pray on our behalf, even when we prove unworthy. Noah's failure to do so left a blemish on his reputation, despite his perfect righteousness in all other matters.

1. Rashi, Bereishis 6:9.
2. Yeshayahu 54:9, read as the haftarah to this week's parashah.
3. Zohar, Bereishis 67b.
4. Zohar I, 254b.
5. Mishlei 26:2.
6. Makkos 11a.



Individual and Collective Responsibility

I once had the opportunity to ask the Catholic writer Paul Johnson what had struck him most about Judaism during the long period he spent researching it for his masterly *A History of the Jews*? He replied in roughly these words: "There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasised the individual - like the secular West today. And there have been others that placed weight on the collective - communist Russia or China, for example." Judaism, he continued, was the most successful example he knew of that managed the delicate balance between both - giving equal weight to individual and collective responsibility. Judaism was a religion of strong individuals and strong communities. This, he said, was very rare and difficult, and constituted one of our greatest achievements.

It was a wise and subtle observation. Without knowing it, he had in effect paraphrased Hillel's aphorism: "If I am not for myself, who will be (individual responsibility)? But if I am only for myself, what am I (collective responsibility)?" This insight allows us to see the argument of Parshat Noach in a way that might not have been obvious otherwise. The parsha begins and ends with two great events, the Flood on the one hand, Babel and its tower on the other. On the face of it they have nothing in common. The failings of the generation of the Flood are explicit. "The world was corrupt before God, and the land was filled

with violence. God saw the world, and it was corrupted. All flesh had perverted its way on the earth" (Gen. 6:11-12). Wickedness, violence, corruption, perversion: this is the language of systemic moral failure.

Babel by contrast seems almost idyllic. "The entire earth had one language and a common speech" (11:1). The builders are bent on construction, not destruction. It is far from clear what their sin was. Yet from the Torah's point of view Babel represents another serious wrong turn, because immediately thereafter God summons Abraham to begin an entirely new chapter in the religious story of humankind. There is no Flood - God had, in any case, sworn that He would never again punish humanity in such a way ("Never again will I curse the soil because of man, for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth. I will never again strike down all life as I have just done", 8:21). But it is clear that after Babel, God comes to the conclusion that there must be another and different way for humans to live.

Both the Flood and the Tower of Babel are rooted in actual historical events, even if the narrative is not couched in the language of descriptive history. Mesopotamia had many flood myths, all of which testify to the memory of disastrous inundations, especially on the flat lands of the Tigris-Euphrates valley (See Commentary of R. David Zvi Hoffman to Genesis 6 [Hebrew, 140] who suggests that the Flood may have been limited to centres of human habitation, rather than covering the whole earth). Excavations at Shuruppak, Kish, Uruk and Ur - Abraham's birthplace - reveal evidence of clay flood deposits. Likewise the Tower of Babel was a historical reality. Herodotus tells of the sacred enclosure of Babylon, at the centre of which was a ziqqurat or tower of seven stories, 300 feet high. The remains of more than thirty such towers have been discovered, mainly in lower Mesopotamia, and many references have been found in the literature of the time that speak of

such towers "reaching heaven."

However, the stories of the Flood and Babel are not merely historical, because the Torah is not history but "teaching, instruction." They are there because they represent a profound moral-social-political-spiritual truth about the human situation as the Torah sees it. They represent, respectively, precisely the failures intimated by Paul Johnson. The Flood tells us what happens to civilisation when individuals rule and there is no collective. Babel tells us what happens when the collective rules and individuals are sacrificed to it.

It was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the thinker who laid the foundations of modern politics in his classic *Leviathan* (1651), who - without referring to the Flood - gave it its best interpretation. Before there were political institutions, said Hobbes, human beings were in a "state of nature". They were individuals, packs, bands. Lacking a stable ruler, an effective government and enforceable laws, people would be in a state of permanent and violent chaos - "a war of every man against every man" - as they competed for scarce resources. There would be "continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Such situations exist today in a whole series of failed or failing states. That is precisely the Torah's description of life before the Flood. When there is no rule of law to constrain individuals, the world is filled with violence.

Babel is the opposite, and we now have important historical evidence as to exactly what was meant by the sentence, "The entire land had one language and a common speech." This may not refer to primal humanity before the division of languages. In fact in the previous chapter the Torah has already stated, "From these the maritime peoples spread out into their lands in their clans within their nations, each with its own language" (Gen. 10:50. The Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:11, 71b, records a dispute between R. Eliezer and

R. Johanan, one of whom holds that the division of humanity into seventy languages occurred before the Flood).

The reference seems to be to the imperial practice of the neo-Assyrians, of imposing their own language on the peoples they conquered. One inscription of the time records that Ashurbanipal II "made the totality of all peoples speak one speech." A cylinder inscription of Sargon II says, "Populations of the four quarters of the world with strange tongues and incompatible speech ... whom I had taken as booty at the command of Ashur my lord by the might of my sceptre, I caused to accept a single voice." The neo-Assyrians asserted their supremacy by insisting that their language was the only one to be used by the nations and populations they had defeated. On this reading, Babel is a critique of imperialism.

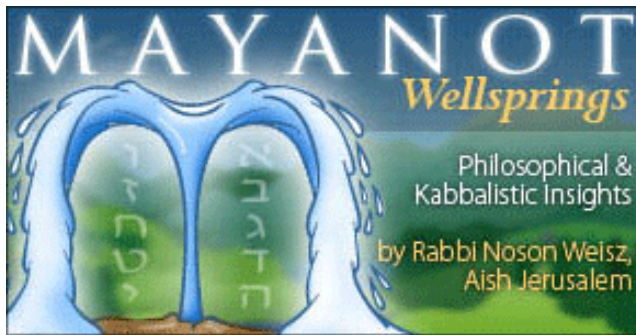
There is even a hint of this in the parallelism of language between the builders of Babel and the Egyptian Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites. In Babel they said, "Come, [*hava*] let us build ourselves a city and a tower ... lest [*pen*] we be scattered over the face of the earth" (Gen. 11:4). In Egypt Pharaoh said, "Come, [*hava*] let us deal wisely with them, lest [*pen*] they increase so much ..." (Ex. 1:10). The repeated "Come, let us ... lest" is too pronounced to be accidental. Babel, like Egypt, represents an empire that subjugates entire populations, riding roughshod over their identities and freedoms.

If this is so, we will have to re-read the entire Babel story in a way that makes it much more convincing. The sequence is this: Genesis 10 describes the division of humanity into seventy nations and seventy languages. Genesis 11 tells of how one imperial power conquered smaller nations and imposed their language and culture on them, thus directly contravening God's wish that humans should respect the integrity of each nation and each individual. When at the end of the Babel story

God "confuses the language" of the builders, He is not creating a new state of affairs but restoring the old.

Interpreted thus, the story of Babel is a critique of the power of the collective when it crushes individuality - the individuality of the seventy cultures described in Genesis 10. (A personal note: I had the privilege of addressing 2,000 leaders from all the world's faiths at the Millennium Peace Summit in the United Nations in August 2000. It turned out that there were exactly 70 traditions - each with their subdivisions and sects - represented. So it seems there still are seventy basic cultures). When the rule of law is used to suppress individuals and their distinctive languages and traditions, this too is wrong. The miracle of monotheism is that Unity in Heaven creates diversity on earth, and God asks us (with obvious conditions) to respect that diversity.

So the Flood and the Tower of Babel, though polar opposites, are linked, and the entire parsha of Noach is a brilliant study in the human condition. There are individualistic cultures and there are collectivist ones, and both fail, the former because they lead to anarchy and violence, the latter because they lead to oppression and tyranny. So Paul Johnson's insight turns out to be both deep and true. After the two great failures of the Flood and Babel, Abraham was called on to create a new form of social order that would give equal honour to the individual and the collective, personal responsibility and the common good. That remains the special gift of Jews and Judaism to the world.



Paradise Lost

This week's Torah portion -- which relates the story of the great flood and of the events that lead to the building of the Tower of Babel -- contains this seemingly positive declaration:

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. (Genesis 11:1)

It sounds like peace on earth, good will to all men, utopia.

Indeed, it was peace on earth, but a war against heaven.

Rashi tells us that the people of the earth had united around the following idea: "God has no right to take the heavens for Himself; let us go up to heaven and wage war with Him." (See Breishis raba, 38,6.)

This very strange idea is presented as the underlying theme of the Generation of the Dispersal. The consequence of this war with God was the splitting of mankind into seventy different languages and cultures:

And God dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because it was there that God confused the language of the whole earth, and from there God scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:8-9).

War Against God?

How can we understand the idea of waging war against God? It is one thing to be skeptical about His existence, but to believe in God and yet decide to fight Him? How could a rational human being possibly adopt such an attitude?

Moreover, what is the war about? Rashi says it is over the fact that God assumed exclusive possession over the heavens. But what does man want with the heavens? He surely has no desire to live there. After all, man's habitat is the earth, and it is the earth that is his focus of interest. Rare is the human being who is interested in departing it prematurely to obtain a taste of heaven. Why then, should man want to wage war to gain control over the heavens, even assuming he had the power to aspire to such a dominion?

This question points the way to the answer and gives us the key to understand the dispersal. Man wants control over the heavens because it is the heavens that provide the inputs he requires to enrich his earthly life. The essence of belief in God is the knowledge that it is God who is the source of all being and energy. A created world is not assembled out of pre-existing materials. It is fashioned out of Divine energy. Even the "natural processes" of such a world must all be fueled by fresh inputs of Divine energy.

This constant input of Divine energy is called the "heavens" in the very first verse in Genesis: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* "Heavens" is the generic term used by the Torah to express the idea of "giver" (or energy source), whereas the earth is the generic term for the idea of "receiver."

If God controls the heavens, the input of Divine energy that maintains the earth is supplied on His terms, according to conditions set by Him. If man controls the heavens, then this input of

Divine energy follows the dictates of man. As man has no supernatural powers, and cannot directly dictate to the Divine energy and tell it what to do, practically speaking, man's control of the heavens translates into a universe that runs entirely according to natural law. For as long as the Divine energy is distributed according to the dictates of natural law, man has total control over all the inputs into his universe.

This is due to the fact that all processes that are governed by natural law can be brought under man's control. He can study natural law and understand it, and he can, therefore, make the universe do his bidding in ways that he can predict and control. When he fully unravels the mysteries of natural law -- and that is simply a matter of time given human intelligence -- he can find solutions to all his problems. But if God is in control of the heavens, man can never be the master of his own destiny. Ultimately it is God that makes all the decisions that involve the distribution of the Divine energy in the universe and man is always subject to His will.

Winning With Harmony

Now we understand what the war is about. But we still cannot fathom how man can possibly dream of winning such a war. After all, by definition Divine energy belongs to God, so how can man possibly aspire to control it?

The answer is surprising: Man's weapon against God is the maintenance of social harmony and the establishment of world peace.

To appreciate this we have to realize that world history has a pattern. The Generation of the Dispersal learned how to conduct its war with God from the Generation of the Flood. The Generation of the Flood also rebelled against God's dominion. But the Torah itself informs us that it was not this rebellion that brought on the world's destruction. The immediate cause

of the destruction was the oppression of man by his fellow.

Now the earth had become corrupt before God; and the world had become filled with oppression. (Genesis 6:12)

The Talmud learns from here that although the earth was totally corrupted by idolatry and immorality, the fate of the flood generation was only sealed for destruction because of acts of robbery and oppression. (Sanhedrin 108a)

God is endlessly tolerant of man's sins, but He listens to the cry of the oppressed, as we are taught:

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. If you cause him [the orphan] pain ... if he shall cry out to Me, I shall surely hear his outcry. My wrath shall blaze and I shall kill you by the sword, and your wives will be widows and your children orphans. (Exodus 22:21-23)

God's anger must be ignited before He will consent to sit in judgment, and it only blazes when the cry of the oppressed reaches His ears. Once God assumes the seat of justice, He will administer retribution for all of man's sins, but unless He is prompted to do so by the cries of the oppressed, man can, in effect, do as he likes as God will never agree to sit in judgment.

This principle finds its strongest expression in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the twin cities who are metaphors for evil and its consequences:

Now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful towards God, exceedingly. (Genesis 13:13)

Yet, despite their evil, God only brought them to justice because of the outcry of an oppressed maiden.

"I will descend and see: if they act in accordance with this outcry, then destruction!" (Genesis 18:21)

The Midrash explains that this outcry, which prompted God to sit in judgment, was the scream released by Lot's daughter Plitas as she was cruelly murdered by the populace for having committed the crime of secretly feeding a pauper. (Pirkei d'R'Elazar, Ch.25)

The same thing had happened in the time of the generation that preceded the flood, and it was this kind of cruelty of man against man that led God to destroy the earth.

A Lesson Learned

But mankind internalized the lesson of the flood. The Generation of the Dispersal was exceptional in the excellence of its interpersonal relationships. The "common purpose" referred to in the verse quoted above is interpreted by the Midrash to imply social unity and harmony. (See Bereishis Rabba, 38,6.) People had learned that as long as they did not oppress others, they could do as they wished. As long as no outcry issued from the oppressed, God would leave them to their own designs.

Indeed, they were substantially correct. In comparing the Generation of the Dispersal with Generation of the Flood, the Midrash finds the former more culpable. Yet God did not destroy them; He merely scattered them. God hates dissension but loves peace. He can never find it in His heart to treat people who are good to each other very harshly. (See Rashi, 11:8.)

Having drawn the broad outlines of the story of

the dispersal, let us try to understand some of the motivations involved. A good way to bring the underlying concepts down to earth is to study the current unfortunate situation that prevails in Israel.

The Current Situation in Israel

Israel entered a very risky "peace process" with the Palestinians. It kept offering ever greater concessions in the hope of achieving such peace over a period of six long years without seriously insisting on any sort of reciprocity from the other side. Just when it seemed at Camp David that a lasting peace was finally in sight, Arafat turned his back on the entire process and began shooting at Israel with the guns that the Israeli government had so trustingly given him. Were the Israeli leaders stupid? What induced them to take such enormous risks and make so many one-sided concessions without any guarantee of return?

The answer is simple.

For the person who does not believe that ultimately, all solutions come from God, it is intolerable to remain in a problematic situation for which there does not appear to be a solution. The Israeli establishment had to believe that there was a rational solution to the problem of coexistence with the Palestinians, a solution they could arrive at by themselves. As this involved making peace with Arafat they forced themselves to believe that he was a credible peace partner despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The alternative to such a belief was to accept the fate of living in a country where there is no foreseeable prospect of peace, and where the Israeli people will never fully control their own fate. Israel would be forced to place its trust in God. Such a proposition is unacceptable to "modern" man. To tolerate life, he must feel

that he is the master of his own fate and is able to solve his own problems.

The proposition of entrusting one's fate to God was no more acceptable to ancient man. He also was unwilling to lead an existence that he couldn't completely control. Hence his desire to wrest the control of the heavens out of the hands of God.

The Missing Piece

But there is still a missing piece here. Modern man is truly unable to rely on God, as he has been taught not to believe in Him, but ancient man went to war with the God he recognized not only as the creator of his world but the supplier of all the energy that it takes to run it. Why didn't this belief make a difference?

To fully understand, we must learn some more human history.

In the prelude to the flood, the Torah contains the following passage:

And it came to pass that when man began to increase upon the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of Elohim saw that the daughters of man were good and they took themselves wives from whomever they chose. (Genesis 6:1-2)

The commentators explain this title the "sons of Elohim" in various ways; this is the interpretation offered by Nachmanides:

Following the sin of Adam, who was himself fashioned by the hands of God personally, and his banishment from the Garden of Eden, there were two types of offspring in the world. The members of Adam's immediate family and their descendants retained an aspect of godliness about them, but the rest of mankind were all ordinary human beings. This aspect of godliness retained by the sons of Adam

inspired such awe among the rest of mankind that no one dared to oppose these godlike beings, and consequently these people did as they liked until they were all destroyed by the flood.

When Noah, the sole survivor of the flood emerged from the ark, the Torah describes him thus:

Noah, the man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard. (Genesis 9:20)

Noah was a "man of the earth." There were no more sons of Elohim on the planet. There was nothing godlike about Noah. He was a man of the earth. Contrast this with the Torah's description of Moses:

And this is the blessing that Moses, the man of God, bestowed upon the children of Israel (Deut. 33:1)

The Turning Point

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, in his work *Derech Hashem*, "Path of God," explains that the turning point in history over this issue happened at the time of the Generation of the Dispersal. Until then it was possible for anyone to choose to be a man of God, and return to the original lofty level upon which Adam was created. Whoever chose to do so would have descendants who were also men of God.

All of the seventy families of mankind had this option open to them. Until the dispersal, they were all able to climb out of the Noahide status of being "men of earth" and could all become "men of God." This was the heroic age of human history, the age of archetypes and patriarchs and the door was open to all.

But only Abraham chose this path. In Genesis (14:13) he is referred to as *Ivri*, a word that

means "bank" or "side" in Hebrew, because the entire world was on one side and he was on the other. (See Bereishis Rabba, 42,8.)

Had others chosen this path, all of humanity would have been treated by God in exactly the same manner as the descendants of Abraham, God's Torah would have become the legacy of all human beings, and all human offspring would have been born into a flourishing God-man covenant.

In fact, the unity achieved by mankind prior to the dispersal was precisely over this question of choosing to be "men of the earth" and not "men of God." Mankind was unified by its universal desire to wage war against God.

Two Kinds of Believers

Belief in God does not shield one from becoming a "man of the earth." There was no greater believer than Noah himself who was the first to bear this description. To be a man of God, one has to decide to live with God, to base one's life around the God-man relationship. But one whose life is based on such a relationship is never the master of his own fate.

There is little difference between the modern thinker who is skeptical of God's existence and the ancient believer who rejects the idea of basing his life around forming a relationship with God. Such a believer wants to consign God to remote history shrouded in the mists of creation and consequently make Him irrelevant, or to the distant future when the Messiah will finally proclaim the coming of a new world order, and therefore make Him not yet relevant. Bottom line: this kind of believer wants the world of the present that he inhabits to be totally under his own control.

World history was fixed by the dispersal. When the seventy nations were frozen into the mold of "men of the earth," God withdrew His presence from them. Lacking the opposition to

the common enemy -- which God's presence had represented -- they no longer had a focus for their unity and so they split apart into their natural divisions. They differentiated into the seventy human families that were always destined to descend from Adam, and being "men of the earth," they each went their own way and found their own spot on the planet.

The key to human unity and world peace was left in the hands of Abraham, the only human of that time who elected to become a "man of God."

In fact the Midrash (in Bereishis raba, 38,6) points this out in a most dramatic way. The rabbis understand that the commonality of purpose referred to was directed against the other principles of unity -- God and Abraham. Against Abraham they declared, "There is no need to concern ourselves about him. He is obviously a sterile mule. He presents no danger as he has no future. His ideas will die along with him." Against God they declared war using their own unity as explained above.

Well this sterile mule has managed to make a great noise in the world after all. The line of the "men of God" he established is still flourishing. If only it could manage to unify as well.



The Raven - Nevermore?

..."Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! -

*prophet still, if bird or devil!
Whether Tempter sent, or whether
tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this
desert land enchanted,
On this home by horror haunted - tell
me truly, I implore,
Is there - is there balm in Gilead - tell
me - tell me, I implore!"*
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."
-- The Raven, by Edgar Allan Poe¹

In the aftermath of the destruction, as Noach floats along on his Ark, the waters have become eerily still, and a strange silence has replaced the angry, deadly, destructive storm. Now the Torah reports that Noach and all of creation have been remembered:

*"But the Almighty remembered Noach
and all the wild animals and the
livestock that were with him in the ark,
and the Almighty sent a wind over the
earth, and the waters receded."
(Bereishit 8:1)*

The name of God utilized in this section is Elokim. The connotation of this name is "God of Judgment",² as opposed to "God of Mercy". We might have thought that a "harsh and angry God" punished humankind and then a kind (albeit perhaps fickle) God changed his mind, but the Torah informs us that now that judgment has been meted out, *Elokim*, the very same aspect of Judgment, remembers Noach. At the end of 40 days Noach opens the window and sends forth a raven:

*After forty days Noach opened the
window he had made in the ark, and
sent out a raven, and it kept flying
back and forth until the water had
dried up from the earth. (Bereishit
8:6-7)*

The raven suffers from a negative reputation, associated in both Rabbinic and general Western literature with demonic forces.³ In the unforgettable words of Edgar Allan Poe, quoted above:

*..."Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! -
prophet still, if bird or devil!"⁴*

While we can leave it to scholars of American Poetry to reveal Poe's sources of information and attitude, the negativity toward the raven apparently goes all the way back to chapter 8 of Bereishit. But why the antagonism? What dastardly deed did the raven commit to deserve this reputation? Compare the raven to the dove, which is regarded as a loving, faithful, loyal harbinger of peace. The contrast is stark - as stark as black verses white. While in fact the raven is dark and the dove is white, can the Torah actually ascribe such significance to pigmentation? Let us continue the story and see what happens with the dove.

*Then he sent out a dove to see if the
water had receded from the surface of
the ground. But the dove could find no
place to set its feet because there was
water over all the surface of the earth;
so it returned to Noach in the ark. He
reached out his hand and took the
dove and brought it back to himself in
the ark. He waited seven more days
and again sent out the dove from the
ark. When the dove returned to him in
the evening, there in its beak was a
freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noach
knew that the water had receded from
the earth. (12) He waited seven more
days and sent the dove out again, but
this time it did not return to him.
(Bereishit 8:8-12)*

A careful reading of the verses brings several problems to light: While the objective of the dove's mission is clearly stated, "to see if the

water had receded", the text does not reveal the motivation for sending the raven. While the juxtaposition of the two birds might suggest a common mission, the lack of explanation for the raven's mission is nonetheless striking. This leads to additional questions about the raven: We don't know why specifically the raven was chosen or if the mission was successful or aborted. Was this Noach's idea, or was he commanded to send the raven out? Did Noach perhaps seek permission or approval for his initiative? The text is silent.

When we compare the two verses which describe the sending of the raven and dove respectively, we notice a second difference: When Noach sends the dove, the word used is *me'ito* : literally rendered, he sent the dove "from himself" (an idiom that is difficult to translate). The reader is left with the impression that Noach had a close relationship with this dove - perhaps it was his personal pet. This sort of modifier is totally absent in the case of the raven.

The dove's mission was successfully completed when it returned with the olive branch in its beak, creating the enduring image of peace. But what of the raven? Why was it sent and how did it fare? The *Chizzkuni* suggests an ominous mandate for the raven:

The raven was sent because its nature is to eat carcasses, and if the water subsided, it would find corpses strewn on the shore. (Chizzkuni Bereishit 8:7)

In contrast to the olive branch in the mouth of the dove, eternal symbol of peace, we have a vivid image of the predatory, carnivorous raven descending upon corpses, perhaps even mutilating one to bring something back to Noach. The image persists even though the raven apparently fails to even leave the immediate vicinity of the Ark - and doesn't

bring back any flesh. While the *Chizzkuni's* may be the correct reading of the text and of Noach's motivation for sending the raven, we are still baffled as to why this is not stated explicitly - namely that the raven was also sent to see if the water had subsided. This, coupled with the other outstanding textual oddity - the dove described as having been sent "from him" - leaves us searching for the deeper meaning of the narrative. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin ("The *Netziv*") in his Torah commentary *Ha'amek Davar* ⁵ raises some important questions: Why were the raven and dove singled out? There are many birds that fly farther and better than these two. Furthermore, who gave Noach permission to release these birds prior to the time when all the other inhabitants of the Ark would be released? The *Netziv* theorizes that these two birds were not of the "two by two" brought to the Ark, rather they were Noach's pets. With this suggestion, the *Netziv* solves one problem, but exchanges it for another: While we may now know why Noach was permitted to send these birds, we don't know how he brought them to the Ark in the first place.

The *Ohr Hachaim (Hakadosh)* also questions why the raven was sent, but rejects the suggestion that it was in order to check the water level: The Torah surely would have stated this, as it does subsequently regarding the dove's mission. Rather, in keeping with a Talmudic tradition,⁶ the *Ohr Hachaim* reveals why the raven was sent: because Noach didn't want it around. The Talmud suggests that the raven was cast out because it broke protocol and had relations on the Ark. While the dove was sent on a reconnaissance mission, the raven was simply expelled. The raven, for his part, refused to leave.

The Talmud recounts that the raven lodges a complaint: He accuses Noach of acting with cruelty and prejudice, for his expulsion would result in the extinction of the species.⁷ In fact, that is just one of many accusations the raven puts forth:

"And he sent forth a raven." Resh Lakish said:

The raven gave Noach a triumphant retort. It said to him, 'Thy Master hateth me, and thou hatest me. Thy Master hateth me - [since He commanded] seven [pairs to be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean. Thou hatest me - seeing that thou leavest the species of which there are seven, and sendest one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind?' (Talmud Sanhedrin 108b)

The Talmud describes the raven as having a winning argument. He accuses both Noach and God of hating him: God had shown an obvious preference for other species, commanding Noach to preserve seven of each. And surely it would have been more prudent for Noach to send a bird from one of the species of which more than two of a kind had been on board the Ark.

"And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noach opened the halon [e.v. 'window'] of the Ark." This supports the view that it was a window [trapdoor]. "and he sent forth a raven": thus it is written, He sent darkness, and it was dark" (Ps. 105:28). "And it went forth to and fro (yatzo va'shov). R. Judan said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: It began arguing with him: 'Of all the birds that thou hast here thou sendest none but me!' 'What need then has the world of thee?' he retorted; 'For food? For a sacrifice⁸?' (Midrash Rabbah 33:5)

Perhaps Noach sees the world through utilitarian eyes: Either something can be used or it has no value. If a raven can't be eaten and can't be used as an offering, the world simply doesn't need it.

Then the raven goes even further and hurls a bizarre accusation:

Or perhaps thou desirest my mate!' - 'Thou evil one!' he exclaimed; 'even that which is [usually] permitted me has [now] been forbidden: how much more so that which is [always] forbidden me!' And whence do we know that they were forbidden? - From the verse, And thou shalt enter into the Ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and the wives of thy sons with thee; whilst further on it is written, Go forth from the Ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee. Whereon R. Johanan observed: From this we deduce that cohabitation had been forbidden. (Talmud Sanhedrin 108b)

The raven accuses Noach of fancying his spouse; Noach honors the accusation with a response, proving the raven's charge outrageous: If, while on the Ark, he has maintained abstinence from his own wife, how much more so would he avoid intimacy with the raven's spouse, who is always off limits! What could have made the raven construe the situation in this manner? The Talmud portrays this as a case of projection. The raven was one of three who broke boundaries on the ark and engaged in illicit sexual behavior:

Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished - the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates [his seed into his mate's mouth]. And Ham was smitten in his skin. (Talmud Sanhedrin 108b)

Noach's perspective of the raven is negative, but of the three transgressors, surely the one who bore the most responsibility was Ham, though some commentaries suggest that only

after seeing the raven engaging in this behavior did Ham "heat up"⁹ and follow suit. While Noach doesn't have much use for the raven, seeing him as dark and devoid of utility, he also may not have much use for his son Ham, whose outrageous and immoral behavior in the following verses leads Noach to cast a dire curse upon one of Ham's sons.¹⁰ In citing Ham's punishment by affliction of the skin, the analogy between Ham and the raven is drawn on more than one level, and we return to the theme of pigment. Later in the narrative we are also told that one of Ham's children is Kush - which means black.

Noach sees the raven as a symbol of the darkness and cruelty that surround him and that have led to the massive, nearly total destruction of the world and its inhabitants.¹¹ Noach believes that God has abandoned the world.¹² God's kindness has disappeared and the attribute of *Elokim*¹³ reigns. For his first overture in the ante-deluvian world Noach sends forth a symbol of cruelty and darkness. Only later does he explore the possibility of kindness, loyalty and peace, sending the white dove which represents God's merciful and kind attributes, even with its name (the Hebrew word *yona* is composed of three of the four letters of the Divine Name denoting omnipresence). Noach rejects the raven, casts it away, and identifies with the dove that he sends "*me'ito*" - of or from himself.

There is, however, someone who does not concur with Noach's judgment and attitude toward the raven: God, the Creator of this dark, maligned creature.

R. Berekiah said in R. Abba's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [Noach]: 'Take it back, because the world will need it in the future.' 'When?' he asked. 'When the waters dry off from on the earth' (ib.). He replied: 'A righteous man will arise and dry up the world, and will cause him to have need of them [the ravens], as it is written,

And the ravens ('orvim) brought him bread and flesh, etc. (I Kings 17:6). (Midrash Rabbah 33:5)

This Midrash refers to an episode that we may consider an inverse of the flood - a time of drought. The raven comes into its own, as it were, and rises to the occasion.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "By the God of Israel (YHVH) whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Then the word of God came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." So he did what God had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. (The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. (verses 1-6)

God's answer to Noach is, "I have a plan for the raven. He will be needed in the future." The name of the raven in Hebrew, *orev*, does not mean "black"; it comes from the root word meaning "mixture."¹⁴ While Noach may treat the raven as black,¹⁵ especially when compared to the fair dove, whose name and nature possess a hint of the Divine, the raven is apparently far more complex - reflecting the mixture of good and bad, a representation of post-Eden reality. Noach chooses to reject and expel the raven. He does not accept the merger of good and evil. He sees his own survival as testimony to the eradication of evil and the triumph of good. God sees things differently.

There is another book that grapples with this same tension: Should an imperfect society be

saved or eradicated? The prophet who chooses to see the world in black and white is none other than the prophet named Yona, the Hebrew word for dove.

The word of the God came to Yona son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Yona ran away from God and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Jaffa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from God. Then God sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. (Yona 1:1-4)

The name of God used here indicates compassion. Yona runs away from God's compassion; he thinks that he would prefer pure justice.

But Yona was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to God, "O God, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O God, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Yona 4:1-3)

In order to appreciate the irony, and to fully understand the connection, we must take a closer look at the other main protagonists in the Book of Yona, namely the inhabitants of the city of Ninveh. What is their lineage - from which dark place did they emerge?

Kush (the son of Ham) was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty

hunter before God; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before God." The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. (Bereishit 10:8-12)

The city of Ninveh is built and populated by descendants of Ham, his son Kush and his grandson Nimrod¹⁶ - quite an unholy trinity of forebears. Such a city should certainly be destroyed; what justification could possibly exist for its salvation? This seems to be Yona's perspective. The rebellious prophet tries to escape God's call to judgment on a boat, just as Noach did all those years before. Now Ninveh, which is thematically connected with the raven, has as its adversary Yona - the thematic continuation of Noach and the dove. Yona, like Noach, sees the world as black and white, while the city of Ninveh represents the raven - the *orev* - the combination of good and evil. When Yona looks at Ninveh - its past, present and future - he sees evil. God sees the more complex reality, the confusion of good and evil represented in the figure and personality of the raven.

How appropriate that the symbol of God's covenant with Noach, and through him with all of humanity, is the many-colored rainbow: The world is not black and white, it is multi-colored, and each color melts into the next. Good is merged with Evil, and Evil with Good. The very existence of the world in the aftermath of the deluge is a testament to the Merciful God, and the symbol of His covenant is a spectacular mosaic of color. Even when the world seems foreboding, dark and evil, we must learn from God and not from Noach or Yona: We must look more carefully and learn to distinguish between the elements of the mixture. Good may be found amongst the evil, and things

that don't look completely good are not necessarily completely bad. That is the lesson taught by the raven.

1. First published on January 29, 1845, in the New York Evening Mirror.
2. See Shmot 20:1 and Rashi's comments, as well as Rashi's comments to Psalms 58:12. Occasionally the word *elohim* refers to a human judge. See Exodus 22:28. This name denotes "possessing power", hence my use in translation of the name "Almighty".
3. The *Be'er Mayim Chaim* points out that the word raven in Hebrew is spelled *ayin resh bet*, the same letters which spell *b'rah* in reverse, which means "in evil."
4. See note 1, above.
5. *Haemek Davar* Bereishit 8:7.
6. Sanhedrin 108b.
7. In his commentary to Sanhedrin 108, the *Ben Y'hoyada* points out that once the raven had relations, a new generation of raven was now on the way, and there was no danger of extinction.
8. Apparently Noach is not troubled by the potential extinction of the raven. (Zohar Genesis 36b)
9. The name *Ham* means hot. See comments of Rav Shimshon ben Rafael Hirsch to this section.
10. See 9:24-26.
11. See *Rav Zadok Hakohen*, Kometz Mincha part 2 section 24, where sources are cited that the raven hates its own offspring.
12. See *Zohar Chadash*, Bereishit 38b.
13. The issue of the use of the different names of God, used as an intellectual battering ram by certain students of Biblical criticism, sheds much light on Biblical study when properly understood, particularly when studying Bereishit and Noach. If one keeps in mind that the Torah always uses *YHVH* in connection with offerings,

some insight may be achieved. The commandment to bring certain animals to the Ark "two by two", simply to insure survival of the species, is ordered by *Elokim* - a name associated with nature. The command to bring ritually pure animals on to the Ark seven by seven, to facilitate the bringing of offerings after the flood, is commanded by *YHVH*. The two names are merged in 9:26-27.

14. The raven represents the mixture or confusion of good and evil that is the result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. See comments of *Noam Elimelech* to Parshat Ki Tavo.
15. It is important to note that black is not a primary color - but rather a lack of color.
16. According to tradition it was Nimrod who threw Avraham into the fiery furnace. See Bereishit Rabbah 38:13.