YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT NOACH**

**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT”A**

Who was Noach?

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In the Mishna (*Avot* 5:2) we learn:

“There were ten generations from Adam to Noach, which indicates how long-suffering God is, for each generation angered Him more than the last, until He brought upon them the waters of the Flood. There were ten generations from Noach until Avraham, which indicates how long-suffering God is, for each generation angered Him more than the last, until Avraham came and received the reward [that could have been] for all.”

This mishna clearly presents Noach as a point of transition between two periods, and a symbol of the division between two different chapters in the history of the world. This prompts us to look more closely at this individual: Who was Noach? What was his uniqueness? How did he merit that we say in our Rosh ha-Shana prayers, “And You remembered also Noach with love”?

Ten generations from Adam to Noach

Let us first try to understand the sin of the ten generations from Adam to Noach.

Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden, his mission being “to cultivate it and to guard it.” God gave Adam a position of responsibility towards the world. *Inter alia*, he is given responsibility over the Garden, and at the center of this responsibility is a command:

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the Garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil – you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (*Bereishit* 2:16-17)

However, no sooner does Adam enter the Garden than he stumbles. The sin of Adam can be understood in several different ways – as a rebellion against God and a desire to become like Him; as a physical desire that he was unable to resist; etc. However, at the root of each explanation there is Adam’s lack of responsibility, his failure to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by God.

Therefore, the punishment that God metes out to Adam includes responsibility for the world: “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” – no longer will there be simple eating and enjoyment; there will be responsibility for creating things in the world. The woman’s punishment has a similar focus: “In sorrow shall you bear children.” No longer will sexual relations be solely a matter of pleasure; there will be responsibility for the continuation of the world, with all the pain and difficulty that this entails. It is here that the human race assumes responsibility for the command that it had received previously:

“And God blessed them and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every animal that creeps upon the earth.” (*Bereishit* 1:28)

Adam’s lack of responsibility finds expression in his attitude towards the animals, too. Man was placed in the Garden of Eden as the supreme species, ruling over all other animals – as stated explicitly in the command, “and have dominion.” How is this expressed? We find that Adam gives names to all the animals:

“And the Lord God formed out of the ground every beast of the field, and every bird of the sky, and He brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field, but for the man no helpmate for him was found.” (*Bereishit* 2:19-20)

We might understand the giving of names as a zoological categorizing, or as something more significant. Either way, however, this is the last we hear of the connection between Adam and the animals. The Torah immediately launches into the story of Chava, and then the sin.

The description of the generations in between Adam and Noach contains only genealogical information: “And he begot…. And he begot sons and daughters.” The generations in *parashat Noach*, in contrast, include the settlement of the world: “By these the isles of the nations were divided in their lands, each by its tongue and by their families, in their nations” (*Bereishit* 10:5). This settlement of the world is the fulfillment of God’s desire: “He did not create it a wasteland; He formed it to be inhabited” (*Yishayahu* 45:18).

Finally, attention should be paid to God’s decision to bring the Flood upon the world. The Torah describes the sin of the “distinguished men” who “saw that the daughters of men were fair, and they took them wives of all whom they chose” (*Bereishit* 6:2). The description of the sin of these figures of high stature is rather obscure, and the commentators are divided in their understanding of it. Nevertheless, here, too, the root of the sin is the same lack of responsibility: these figures take the daughters of man only because “they were fair,” without any sense of responsibility towards the world.

Noach assumes responsibility

At this point Noach arrives on the scene, offering a complete contrast to the generations that preceded him. Some commentators draw a comparison between Noach and Avraham, and point to Noach’s passivity, his righteousness qualified by the expression “in his generation.” Nevertheless, even if we adopt this view, the fact remains that he assumes responsibility for the world and saves what he can.

First and foremost, Noach saves a remnant of the human race: himself, his wife, his sons and their wives. On the next level, he saves a remnant of the animal kingdom, gathering into the ark each species of animal. He cares for them and takes along a supply of the type of food needed for each and every one of them. The midrash describes the level of Noach’s selflessness in caring for the animals:

“R. Huna said: He exited the ark groaning, as it is written, ‘And there remained only Noach [and all that were with him in the ark]…’ – the text does not say, ‘And there remained Noach…,’ but rather ‘there remained *only* [barely] Noach,’ indicating a qualification. R. Yochanan taught in the name of R. Eliezer son of R. Yossi ha-Gelili: Noach exited the ark having been savaged by the lion.” (Tanchuma Buber, *Noach* 3)

Noach emerges from the ark exhausted by his efforts, according to R. Huna; according to R. Yochanan, he emerges injured. The lion injured him because he was late in bringing its food. This was the level of difficulty involved in keeping the animals alive on the ark; this was Noach’s level of selflessness, his assumption of responsibility.

The concept of responsibility is also reflected in the license to eat meat after Noach leaves the ark. Adam was not permitted to eat meat, because his situation was one in which man’s status was seen in relation to, or in competition with, the animals:

“And have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every creature that creeps upon the earth.” (*Bereishit* 2:28)

In Noach’s time, the relationship between man and the animal world is different. In *parashat Noach*, man is not viewed in competition with the animals, but rather as superior to them: responsible for them, controlling them, and therefore also permitted to eat them.

Noach himself

Let us now turn our attention to Noach himself. We are familiar with the *midrashim* describing the stature of Adam, who stood hundreds or thousands of meters high, but there are no such descriptions of Noach. Noach is a regular, average man of his generation. According to the midrash, he was even involved in the sins of his generation:

“R. Abbar bar Kahana said: [The text says, on one hand,] ‘For I regret having made them,’ [but on the other hand] ‘but Noach found favor’ – how can this be? This indicates that even Noach, who [alone] remained alive of them, was not worthy; he simply found favor.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 28)

Even if Noach was the best of his generation, he was still part of that generation. Nevertheless, the moment he understood his role, the moment he understood the responsibility that he bore, he carried out the guidance of the Mishna: “In a place where there is no man, try to be a man” (*Avot* 2:5).

He does so with no pretenses. He simply does what needs to be done. Those who have studied some history know that a central cause of the fall of Communism was the initiative of an electrician from Gdansk who understood that he had to do whatever he could. With no special status or training, he would do whatever he was able to do in order to move forwards – and by doing so, he changed history.

Planting the vine

Following Noach’s emergence from the ark, the Torah describes his planting of the vine. What is the reason for this act? Some commentators explain it in a positive fashion, others take a negative view; I shall propose a different possibility.

1. Negative – the fall

The better-known interpretation presents the planting of the vine in a lowly, materialistic light:

“’And Noach became (*vayechal*) a man of the ground’ – he became profaned (*nitchalel*) and was profane (*chullin*). Why? ‘And he planted a vineyard’ – he should not have planted this, [but rather] some more useful tree – a fig or an olive. But ‘he planted a vineyard.’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 36)

The planting of the vineyard is viewed here as a materialistic, body-centered act. After the world is saved and Noach emerges from the ark, he falls; his moral edifice collapses. We are all familiar with the phenomenon that, following a period of intensive activity with significant progress, there is a sudden fall, a vacuum. We have to exert efforts to avoid such a fall in any situation or context where it might occur.

1. In praise – responsibility for the plant kingdom

We have commented on Noach’s assumption of responsibility for the continuation of the human race and of the animal kingdom. The same midrash describes the source of the seeds that Noach brought onto the ark

“And from where did he procure them? R. Abba bar Kahan said, He brought in with him branches and saplings of fig trees, and olive saplings.”

This shows Noach’s responsibility towards the plant kingdom, not all of which could survive the Flood. This brings us back to the same message of responsibility that we encountered above. It must be remembered that in the ancient world there was no such thing as a “soft drink.” The main alternative to water, which is not always clean and potable, was wine.

1. Noach as a survivor

Another way of understanding Noach’s act of planting the vineyard is as an escape. We must bear in mind that Noach is the survivor of a generation, of an era. His friends, his extended family, the sights that he was used to – all are gone. This sort of situation leads many people to fall, to seek escapes, to drown their sorrows.

One might also propose a combined interpretation: it is possible that by day, Noach continues to fulfill his responsibilities, developing and planting, while at night, alone, he uses wine as an escape.

This is a recognized phenomenon among Holocaust survivors. The State of Israel underwent tremendous growth and development thanks to the efforts and industry of Holocaust survivors, who became high-ranking officers in the I.D.F., professors, and heads of *yeshivot*. Many of them started new families which grew and flourished. However, we cannot know what each survivor lives with when he is alone at night. He remains with his painful memories even many years later. Noach, like the survivors of today, struggles with his memories even as he is motivated to prodigious efforts by his sense of responsibility.

(This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat parashat Noach 5772 [2011].)