YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Noach**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*

By Debbie and David Sable

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**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN**

**Noach and His Sons**

Adapted by Immanuel Meyer and Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

 The stories in the book of *Bereishit* are preoccupied with family matters. The book of *Bereishit* is not told from a nationalist perspective; it does not relate the stories of nations and world powers and the relationships between them. It deals with the personal relationships of the fathers of mankind and the Jewish people. Thus it is stated in the Midrash:

Ben Azzai said: "This is the book of the generations of Adam" (*Bereishit* 5:1) – this is a great principle in the Torah. (*Bereishit Rabba* 24, 6)

In the story of Noach's drunkenness (*Bereishit* 9:20-27), Noach is portrayed as a survivor, who saw a world built, destroyed and then rebuilt, and the story describes how Noach dealt with the extreme changes that he experienced. But the story also brings the other side of the coin: how the world dealt with him.

Not only Noach, but also Shem, Cham and Yefet experienced a great reversal. In the sixtieth decade of his life, Noach lost his power and his ability to lead, and he was left exposed to his children in his humbled state. Every child idolizes his parents in his early years; he sees his father as all-powerful, capable of rescuing him in every crisis and from every distress. Even after he grows up, and understands that his father and mother cannot solve every problem, he recognizes that they can still give advice and offer support, economically and emotionally, based on their rich life experience and worldly knowledge. In the case of Noach's children, the situation was far more extreme: their father saved the world, literally. Not only did he give them a hand when they fell, but he saved them from the flood. All animals, plants and members of mankind owed him their lives.

Here we come to the story of Cham: “And Cham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without” (*Bereishit* 9:22). Over and beyond the simple physical meaning, Cham sees his father's nakedness in the metaphoric sense as well.[[1]](#footnote-1) He sees his father in his lowly state, in his utter helplessness. The supportive father reveals himself to be a broken reed, who cannot take care of himself on the simplest physical level. How does one deal with such a phenomenon? *Chazal* propose two understandings of Cham's response to the event:

Rav and Shmuel disagree. One says that he castrated him. The other says that he sexually abused him. (*Sanhedrin* 70a, cited by Rashi on the verse)

According to the first understanding, Cham castrated Noach, which means that he rejected him. Noach was no longer relevant in Cham's eyes. He could no longer use his vital and creative forces, he could no longer "supply the goods," and therefore it was possible to simple erase his influence and power and ignore them, as if they had never existed.

According to the second explanation, it is certainly possible that Cham exploited his father – not only in the sexual sense mentioned by *Chazal* – but he did this in a belittling and controlling manner. He acted in the manner of lord and patron. In the past he had exploited Noach's strength, when the latter could support him, in order to achieve his own goals; now he exploits his father's weakness, when the latter cannot even take care of himself, in order to achieve a position of power and influence.

Fundamentally, Cham's response was based on a perception of the authority of the father-figure as built on exploitation and the satisfaction of needs.

Shem and Yefet, on the other hand, responded differently:

And Shem and Yefet took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. (*Bereishit* 8:23)

Shem and Yefet fully understand their father's situation, but they choose not to focus on it; they choose not to see their father's nakedness, and they repay the acts of kindness that he had done for them.

According to Shem and Yefet, Noach is an admirable person in his own right. The fact that in the past he could save the world is an **expression** of his greatness, and not his entire greatness. This is a **sign** that we are dealing with a figure to whom one should cling, but not the reason for doing so. This is the foundation of love that does not depend on anything else, where the person's contribution to the relationship does not condition the relationship on that contribution, but rather it is a trigger for a relationship that stands on its own. Such a connection and relationship last even after the original reason no longer exists.

*Chazal* teach us: “Both the tablets [of the law] and the fragments of the [broken] tablets were deposited in the ark [of the covenant]” (*Menachot* 99a). *Chazal* conclude from this that a Torah scholar who has forgotten what he had learned – who can no longer deliver an impressive *shiur* to his entire yeshiva by way of subtle distinctions between conflicting Talmudic passages and *Rishonim –* must be properly honored (*Menachot* 99a). This is true also about the father-child relationship. Even when the father can no longer lead, he must still be treated with respect.

 Nobody denies the distress and crisis that arise when the relationship reverses, when the former provider must now be provided for, and the former receiver must now accept responsibility. The difference lies in the manner in which Cham exploited the problem or ignored it, and the manner in which Shem and Yefet tried to deal with it.

As noted earlier, Noah is portrayed as a survivor. Modern Israeli society also deals with survivors, whether we are dealing with Holocaust survivors from Europe or with later waves of immigration, in the course of which people in positions of power and influence in their native countries uprooted themselves and came to Israel, where they did not always succeed in dealing with the difficulties of acclimation in their new country. Society must learn how to deal with them and their problems, however they express themselves. We must learn how to relate to such people, even if they stand before us today in helpless distress.

In addition, the dilemma in our *parasha* has another practical application: The twentieth century might be held accountable for many moral problems that arose in it – world wars, materialism and hedonism. But there is no doubt about the exceptional contribution of this century to medicine and longevity. There is no doubt that humanity has achieved exceptional accomplishments regarding the saving of lives. But the prolonging of life is not always accompanied by prolonged quality of life. Many people are forced to deal with aged parents, whose functional state is continuously deteriorating. One must learn how to support a parent in the manner of Shem, and not lord over and humiliate him as did Cham. This point will determine whether society will be built on the basis of "a servant of a servant shall he be to his brothers" – exploitation and neediness, or on the basis of proper personal relationships.

It should be noted that the Netziv finds a difference between Shem and Yefet with respect to Noach, based on v. 23 which attributes the action to Shem: “And Shem and Yefet took [*vayikach* (in the singular)] a garment.” According to the Netziv, Yefet was aware of the problem and understood the solution, but did not actively deal with it. He recognized the need to care for Noach, but more than wanting to solve the problem, he wanted the problem to be solved. Shem, in contrast, took active steps to reach a solution.

Yefet's approach is still valuable, and great reward is promised him who adopts it. But the aspiration must be in the direction of Shem, who supported his father himself, and didn't try to cast the effort on an outside party. He knew how to receive the good from Noah, and now it was time to repay him. He builds a solid relationship with his father, and even after the latter appears to him in his humbled state, he remains with him in continuous connection.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Noach 5772 [2011].)

1. As in *Bereishit* 42:9: "And Yosef remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them, and said to them: You are spies; to see the nakedness of the land you are come." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)