YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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In memory of David Yehuda Ben Shaul z”l (Mr. David Goldstein)

whose *shloshim* fell this week

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**Parashat Noach**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**The Seven Noachide Laws**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. The Giving of the Torah and the Flood**

In a different context, we discussed the vision, or perhaps the prophecy, of Lemech the son of Metushelach at the time of Noach's birth. Noach was the first person born after Adam died for his sin. With his birth, he brought hope for a new and better world, a world of "this one shall comfort us in our work" (*Bereishit* 5:29). Indeed, the *Zohar* describes Noach as the first one who rested, as follows from his name (*Tikkunei Ha-Zohar*, *tikkun* 70).

A better world in the eyes of the Torah and of *Chazal* means a world that is fit to receive the Torah, to add a second level to the world of creation – a level of holiness. *Chazal* allude to the fact that Noach's generation was fit to receive the Torah:

"And God remembered Noach" (*Bereishit* 8:1). What remembrance was there? Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, for at the end of the month of Iyar ended the forty days of rainfall and the hundred and fifty days during which the water prevailed. (*Midrash Aggada* [Buber], *Bereishit* 8)

In other words, the flood ended right before the beginning of the month of Sivan, this being a time fit for receiving the Torah.

Sin, however, led to a change of plans, and what was supposed to the giving of the Torah turned into floodwaters that destroyed the world. Also at the time of the giving of the Torah, a sword descended from heaven to the nations of the world, who refused to accept the Torah and improve their ways (see *Shemot* *Rabba* 2:4).

There are a considerable number of allusions to the correspondence between the flood and the giving of the Torah, the most striking of which is the correspondence between the forty days and forty nights of rainfall, and the forty days and forty nights that Moshe spent on Mount Sinai. Moreover, immediately following the flood, Noach erected an altar to God and offered a sacrifice, as did Moshe at the foot of Mount Sinai. In both contexts, a covenant was made with God (the covenant of the rainbow with Noach and the covenant of the basins with Israel at the foot of the mountain in *Shemot* 24). It was then that Noach received the basic Torah, the fundamental commandments – the seven Noachide commandments – for himself and for his descendants after him.

**II. The Seven Noachide Commandments and Their Source**

The seven Noachide commandments are the prohibitions to worship idols, to engage in forbidden sexual relations, to murder, to steal, to curse God, and to eat a limb removed from a living animal, and the obligation to establish courts and ensure justice. *Chazal* found an *asmakhta* for the fact that these *mitzvot* preceded Noach in the command that was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden:

Our Rabbis taught: The descendants of Noach were given seven commandments: Setting up courts, refraining from cursing God, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery, and eating a limb removed from a living animal…

From where do we know this? R. Yochanan said: As the verse states: "And the Lord God commanded the man saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat" (*Bereishit* 2:16). "And He commanded" refers to the setting up of courts… "The Lord" – this is [the prohibition of] cursing God…; "God" – this is [the prohibition of] idolatry… "the man" – this is [the prohibition of] bloodshed…; "saying" – this is [the prohibition of] adultery… "of every tree in the garden" – and not stolen property; "you may freely eat" – and not a limb from a living animal.

When R. Yitzchak came, he taught a reversed interpretation. (*Sanhedrin* 56a-b)

It stands to reason that this *midrash* is only an *asmakhta*, and the *gemara* indeed notes that R. Yitzchak arranged the commandments in the reverse order.

It is possible to find in our *parasha* a source for three *mitzvot*:

Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall you not eat. And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man's brother, will I require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man. (*Bereishit* 9:4-6)

The first mitzva spelled out in the Torah is the prohibition to eat blood removed from a living creature, a prohibition that *Chazal* interpreted as a prohibition to eat a limb removed from a living creature. The second mitzvais the prohibition to shed human blood. The third mitzvais the obligation to set up courts, which was learned from the words, "by man shall his blood be shed" – an obligation falls upon human society to bring a murderer to justice and punish him with the death penalty.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this passage, however, there is not even a hint to the other four prohibitions that, according to *Chazal*, are binding upon the descendants of Noach.

It may be presumed that the flood itself served as a warning regarding the prohibitions of violence and stealing, as well as regarding the prohibition of "all flesh had corrupted their way," which we explained elsewhere alludes to forbidden sexual relations. The prohibition of idolatry may be derived from the serpent's incitement, as we explained in our discussion regarding the sin of the serpent in *Parashat Bereishit.*

But what is the source of the prohibition of cursing God? The obligation falling upon us to recite blessings at every step of our lives teaches us the centrality of blessing God. But from where do we derive the severe prohibition regarding cursing God, and how does the prohibition relate to the descendants of Noach?

It is possible that the primary source of *Chazal* is the book of *Iyov*, which deals at length with the issue of cursing God. According to the plain meaning of the text, Iyov was not a Jew, but rather a gentile – "a descendant of Noach," who lived before the time of the giving of the Torah.[[2]](#footnote-2) The plot opens with a suspicion, which apparently had a basis, that the sons of Iyov in their great joy and abundance cursed God. Iyov tried to atone for their sins with sacrifices:

And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Iyov sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt-offerings according to the number of them all; for Iyov said, “**It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.”** Thus did Iyov continually. (*Iyov* 1:5)

Satan attempts to cause Iyov to stumble precisely on this sin, which adhered to his family. Indeed, this is what Satan says to God:

But put forth Your hand now, and touch all that he has; **surely he will curse You to Your face.** (*Iyov* 1:11)

But put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; surely **he will curse You to Your face.** (*Iyov* 2:5)

At the time of the great troubles that befell Iyov and his family, an argument developed between him and his wife:

Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? **Curse God,** and die!” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the impious women speaks. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” **For all this, Iyov did not sin with his lips.** (*Iyov* 2:9-10)

Iyov stands firm before his wife and does not sin. However, he "curses his day." It would appear from his words that he cursed not only his day, but also He who created that day. Either way, the issue of blessing-cursing is clearly a central issue in the book of *Iyov*, and it is certainly possible that it is from here that *Chazal* learned that cursing God is a Noachide prohibition.

We have found, then, a biblical source for all seven *mitzvot* that *Chazal* said are binding upon the descendants of Noach.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Among the commentators, we find three different interpretations of the verse, "For in the image of God made He man" (*Bereishit* 9:6). Some explain that in the image of God, He made the murder victim – and therefore there is an obligation to avenge his death. Others explain that in the image of God, He made the murderer – and therefore he has free will and must be punished for his actions. Yet others explain (see *Chizkuni* and *Meshekh Chokhma*) that in the image of God, He made the judge, who is authorized to judge others and even to impose the death penalty upon them. (This is the most novel explanation.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The question of the time of the book of *Iyov* is beyond the scope of our present discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)