

PARSHAS NOACH

תשפ"ז

Bechiroh and the Responsibility of a Neshomo

Parshas Bereishis and Parshas Noach describe what Chazal call אלפיים. שנה תהו. What does that mean? A world in chaos. At the beginning of creation, Hakodosh Boruch Hu created the raw material and then formed it into the universe. Humanity, too, had all the raw materials to serve Hakodosh Boruch Hu. But what did people do with them? That is the story of these two parshiyos, and it is very much the story of our lives today.

First, we have to understand what a human being is. Someone recently wrote a blog for Parshas Bereishis claiming that evolution is consistent with Torah, supposedly according to the Rambam and my rebbe, zecher tzaddik livrocho. This person did not learn the Moreh Nevuchim properly, and he did not pay attention to what my rebbe himself wrote. Evolution has many aspects. Whether Hakodosh Boruch Hu created a thousand animals from which twenty thousand developed, or whether cats somehow produced dogs, is not the relevant Torah issue. Probably not true, but that is not the issue. The issue is the human being.

Odom HoRishon was created from האדמה, and then נפח. באפיו נשמת חיים. The Rambam, in the second perek of Hilchos Beis HaBechiroh, says הכל היא ביד הכל, there is an undisputed mesorah, that the place where Dovid HaMelech built the mizbeiach was the place of the Akeidah, where Noach brought a korban after leaving the teivah, and where Odom HoRishon brought a korban on the day he was created, ומשם נברא. That is where and from where he was created: אדם ממקום כפרתו נברא. The earth came from the makom hamizbeiach on Har HaBayis. Anyone who claims that the Rambam held that human beings came from monkeys does not know what he is talking about.

Our body resembles an animal's body in many ways. We have a heart; they have a heart. Not a problem. But Odom HoRishon was the yetzir kapov of Hakodosh Boruch Hu. A body capable of receiving a neshomo required a special act of creation.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu put him in Gan Eden and took care of all his physical needs. Just spend your days serving Him. And Odom HoRishon messed it up. He was created on the sixth day, sinned that day, and left Gan Eden as the sun was setting on Erev Shabbos. Humanity still had what it needed to serve Hashem, but it began going down and down.

There is a fundamental machlokes between us and a completely materialistic view of the world. According to that view, we are a bunch of atoms governed by the same fixed laws as everything else: חוק נתן. ולא יעבור. But a human being has a neshomo, something of a different type, and therefore has bechiroh chofshis. That is very powerful, and very indicting. There is no one else to blame. It is you.

As I said on leil Yom Kippur, people say, "I really want to want to learn." Want to learn? Go learn. "But the rebbe screamed at me. My mother forced me. I developed complexes and resentments." Yes, there are pressures. But you have a neshomo, a tzelem Elokim. You can take your life in your hands and decide what to do with it. Your background does not take away that bechiroh. It is up to you.

Hashgochah and the Appeal of Avodo zoro

Bechiroh brings something else with it: din. Odom HoRishon did an aveiroh, and there were consequences. Reward and punishment – s'char va'onesh – began with him, continued with Kayin, and governs everything that happens to us. That is why Chazal say, הרואה יסורין,

באין עליו יפשפש במעשיו. Something negative happened; I became sick. I have to make a cheshbon hanefesh. What did I do wrong? That is a very heavy reality.

After Odom came Sheis, and then Enosh. In Enosh's generation, avodo zoro began. But Enosh knew his grandfather, Odom HoRishon, had no parents. He knew Hakodosh Boruch Hu created the world. So what was avodo zoro about?

The answer is simple. Hakodosh Boruch Hu created many forces that affect our lives: the sun, the moon, the rain. So why deal with Him? I will deal with His generals! He is above everything and has delegated authority to them. I will get what I want from them. The claim was not that these forces had independent power, but that they had been given authority. That is a very convenient belief. You can get what you want without confronting the One Who judges how you live.

No. When we say Hashem Echod, we mean that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is in charge of everything. Hashgochah protis means that whatever happens to me is directly from Him, and I have to go straight to Him. During the summer I had a serious medical procedure. I chose two frum doctors because they saw themselves as His messengers. When everything went well, the main doctor came to me and said, "Siyata diShmaya." He is an expert, one of the gedolei hador in his field, and he knew Who made him successful.

People prefer to believe everything is in the doctors' hands, in science. They push Hakodosh Boruch Hu out of the picture. And He responds: "You think you are in charge? I will make sure you realize Who is really in charge." That is what was happening as the world becomes more and more corrupt.

The Nisoyon of Wealth

Now we come to Noach. ויקרא שמו נח לאמר זה ינחמנו מן העשן ומן העצבון. יקרא שמו נח לאמר זה ינחמנו מן העשן ומן העצבון. Was he named at birth because he would save humanity in a teivah six hundred years later? How did his father know? The Midrash asks, זכי למך נביא היה?

The Midrash tells us something we need to understand in our own generation. After Odom HoRishon's sin, parnassah became difficult: בזעת אפך תאכל לחם, וקוץ ודורדר תצמיח לך. After Kayin's sin, it became harder still: לא תוסף תת כחה לך. Perhaps people would realize they were not running the world, and that their suffering was a response to their aveiros. Instead, they deteriorated. The Midrash says they became so animalistic that they looked like monkeys: נעשו כקופים.

Then Hakodosh Boruch Hu said: They could not withstand the nisoyon of poverty. Perhaps tremendous wealth will turn them around. When Noach was born, he received the special neshomo that would enable him to save the world, and at that same time there was a tremendous change. Wealth came into the world. What would people do with it?

People today take wealth for granted. I grew up after the Second World War. There was no money. Trust me, I know what I am talking about. The frum community consisted of immigrants starting with nothing, or people like my father, who spent four and a half years in the army and came home to start his dental practice from scratch. For four and a half years, not a single automobile was manufactured in the United States. Everything in manufacturing went into the war effort. Imagine people putting up with that today! The price of gas goes up and they go crazy. People knew they had to work hard. Then, through the forties, fifties, and sixties, wealth increased until we reached the unbelievable wealth

we have today.

What happened in Noah's time? People used their wealth for taavah. מכל אשר בחרו. Rashi describes the deterioration: first eishes ish – forbidden ones, then mishkav zochor – unnatural ones, then mishkav beheimoh – totally unnatural ones. And society fell apart. כי מלאה הארץ חמס. Once you begin with taavah, there is no limit: יש לו מנה רוצה מאתיים. This taavah, that taavah, and then you want other people's money.

In America and throughout the Western world, leftists have made a comeback with the program, "We will take the money from the rich so we do not have to work." כי מלאה הארץ חמס. Hakodosh Boruch Hu brought overwhelming wealth into the world, and without Torah, life becomes the pursuit of taavos. Society descends into chaos. Finally, Hakodosh Boruch Hu says, קץ כל בשר. We have to start again.

Seeing the Yad Hashem in World Events

The Rambam explains that sometimes there is a din on a yochid, sometimes on a tzibbur, and sometimes on כול העולם. How do we know about a din on the entire world? From the Mabul. I used to read that Rambam and wonder: since the Mabul, when had anything affected the whole world? A war here did not affect everywhere – even a world war had safe places; a famine here was not a famine there. Then came Corona. I believe it was the first time since the Mabul that we saw something affect the entire world.

Whether suffering affects a tzibbur or the world, we have to make a cheshbon hanefesh. Hakodosh Boruch Hu is making it happen. People say the war between Russia and Ukraine happened because Putin decided. But why did he decide? לב שרים ומלכים ביד השם. The Gemara in Avodo Zoro says, מלחמות אני עשיתי. Hakodosh Boruch Hu decides whether there will be a war. He made Putin and Zelensky decide as they did. If both countries suffer devastation, He decided, in His infinite wisdom, that this should happen. The same applies to a conflict between America and Iran.

We have to see the yad Hashem and our own involvement. He runs the world through s'char va'onesh. People do not want to confront that. It is painful. But that is Parshas Bereishis and Parshas Noah in very clear terms. When I look at world events, I have to ask: What is Hakodosh Boruch Hu doing, and what does it demand of us?

The same applies to vicious anti-Semitism. It is not merely a historical or social dynamic. After the Holocaust, anti-Semitism became taboo. Eisenhower, after seeing the concentration camps, said, "In ninety years, no one will remember". In reality, it took only eighty. But the Holocaust did not happen because Hakodosh Boruch Hu went to sleep and woke up asking, "What happened?" ולא יישן שומר ישראל. He orchestrated it with infinite wisdom. And the anti-Semitism we see today is also under His direction. Why?

The gedolei Yisroel who wrote about the vicious anti-Semitism in Russia explained it through the principle attributed to Rav Chaim Volozhiner: "When Jews do not make kiddush, goyim make havdoloh". When Jews become comfortable among the nations and identify with them, they stop seeing themselves as a קדוש וגוי. Hakodosh Boruch Hu reminds them that they will not be accepted as one of the nations.

The Netziv explains through what follows: והיא שעמדה לאבותינו ולנו. What enabled us to survive? The nations pushing us away. Unless we define ourselves as different, they will make the distinction for us. The more we insist that we are one with them, the more vicious the rejection becomes.

Look at Spain. Before 1492, Jews had reached the highest levels of society. Then came the expulsion. Don Yitzchok Abarbanel ran the finances of the Spanish Empire. They asked him to stay, but he left for Italy. Yet his son, raised in the world of the royal court, converted to Catholicism after the family left Spain. That is what happens when

you become part of that world. Similarly, the Netziv, the Beis HaLevi, the Malbim, and the Meshech Chochmah explained anti-Semitism as a response to assimilation.

Secular Zionism offered the opposite explanation: We are hated because we are not a normal nation. Nobody hates Guatemalans or Hondurans. Give us our own land, language, and culture, and we will be accepted. It was assimilation on a national basis. And now, a hundred and forty years later, what is the cause of all the anti-Semitism in the world? Zionism. Hakodosh Boruch Hu says we are not a regular nation. We are a קדוש וגוי. Attempts to deny that end in disaster.

Avrohom Ovinu and Following Through

ונוח מצא חן בעיני ה'. Humanity begins again with Noah, but he does not succeed in transmitting his beliefs and way of life to his generation. They return to avodo zoro. At the end of the parshah, Avrohom Ovinu enters the picture. He recognizes the falsehood of avodo zoro and the truth that Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs the world.

Avrohom lives in Ur Kasdim, where Nimrod is spreading avodo zoro. Their confrontation leads to the kivshon ho'eish. The miracle should have shaken up the world. Unfortunately, people do not change. But Terach was shaken up. He realized he had to leave. He knew there was a yeshiva of Sheim ve'Eiver in Be'er Sheva, where they taught the truth of Hakodosh Boruch Hu and the falsehood of avodo zoro.

Ur Kasdim was in southern Iraq, near the Persian Gulf. To reach Eretz Canaan, he could not simply cross the Iraqi desert. He had to travel north and then come south. But the truth is hard to live by. Terach began the journey, reached Choron, and fizzled out. People get a hisorerus and then fizzle out. וימת תרח בחרן. He could not finish the job. Then Hakodosh Boruch Hu told Avrohom, לך לך.

This is about our lives. Hakodosh Boruch Hu gave you a neshomo. What will you do with it? "I grew up in luxury. Why work? Just enjoy the good life." No. The Rambam says you can be a tzaddik like Moshe Rabbenu or a rosho like Yerovom ben Nevot. It is up to you. You can make yourself a superior individual. But you have to follow through.

What Our Generation Must Do with Its Brocho

Remember who you are. אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים. Why did He choose us? To be a קדוש וגוי, to represent Him: ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש. כי שמך הגדול. People worship money, science, all sorts of powers. Twice a day we say Shema Yisroel and declare that there is only one power: אין עוד מלבדו. That has to govern how we use what He gives us.

Our generation has unbelievable wealth. When I grew up, becoming a millionaire meant achieving success. Today that is nothing; you have to be a billionaire to be considered successful. Now Elon Musk has become a trillionaire. He says that in twenty years there will be so much money that nobody will need to work. Someone still has to collect the garbage and bake the bread! But the shefa brocho is enormous, and so is the nisoyon. Much of the world uses it exactly as people did in Noah's time, pursuing every crazy taavah until society falls apart.

But there is another result: an extraordinary amount of limud haTorah, the greatest in the history of the world, a precursor to the coming of Moshiach - ביאת הגואל. That is possible because of the money in our tzibbur. We are beneficiaries of this abundance, and that is a mechayev. Hakodosh Boruch Hu has given our generations something previous generations did not have. He expects us to use it for avodas Hashem, not to follow the goyim and twist our lives as they do.

We live in very important times. In twenty years, people will look back and be shocked by how different the world has become. Where is it going? That is up to us. From the Nefesh HaChaim we learned that we control what happens to the world: וחיי עולם נטע בתוכנו. We have to take the opportunity to be a קדוש וגוי. כי שמך הגדול. We represent the Borei Olam in this world. והקדוש עלינו קראת.