

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter II: Noah (Gen. 6:9–11:32)

Essay 2. The sin of Noah

מדרש "אלה תולדת נח נח איש צדיק תמים", כל מאה ועשרים שנה הנה נוטע ארזים ומקצצן ואמרין ליה למה כדון, אמר להון כן אמר מרי דעלמא דהוא מייתי מבולא על עלמא, אמרו אי אתי מבולא לא אתי אלא על ביתא דהאי גברא עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash** on the verse, “**This is the line of Noah: Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age.**”

All one hundred and twenty years, Noah would plant cedars and chop them down [for timber]. They said to him: “Why are you doing this?” He said to them: “So said the Master of the world, that He is bringing a flood upon the world.” They said to him: “If He brings a flood, it will come only upon the house of that man [i.e., upon Noah himself]!”

- Gen. Rabbah 30:7

והקשו המפרשים דהדברים האלה אין להם שחר, היאך יאמרו דברים כאלה באשר המה ידעו שעברו על המצוות וקטאו בנפשותם ונח איש צדיק הנה, ומדוע אי אתי מבולא יבוא על נח ועל בניו. ויש לומר דאיתא בזוהר פרשה זו ששם חטא שלא התפלל על דורו לבטל הגזירה כמו שעשה משה, ומשום הכי נענש שנקרא המבול על שמו דכתיב "כִּי־מִי נֹחַ זֶה" ל"א, אכל איכא מאן דאמר נמי התם שמשה הנה לו זכות אבות לתלות בו ונח לא הנה לו ממי ללמוד ובמי לתלות ועיי"ש.

The commentators raise a difficulty with these ideas, which have no substance. How do they say such things, given that the people of Noah’s generation were fully aware that they had transgressed the commandments and sinned, whereas Noah himself was a righteous man. If so, why would a flood come upon Noah and his family?

One could say, as it is taught in the Zohar on this parasha, that Noah sinned by failing to pray on behalf of his generation to annul the decree, as Moses later did.¹ Because of this, Noah was punished, and the Flood was called by his name, as it says, “For this to Me is like the waters of Noah.”²

* English translation: Copyright © 2024 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are at <https://zstora.com>

¹ Zohar I:67b.

² Isaiah 54:9.

However, there is another view in the Zohar that says Moses had the merit of the Patriarchs to rely upon, while Noah did not have anyone from whom to learn or upon whom to rely.³ See further discussion there.

ואם כן יש לומר שדורו של נח היו סוברים שגם הנה לו להתפלל עליהם שלא יאבדו, ועתה שאינו מתפלל ואדרבא עושה הטיבה להגין עליו ואינו חושב כלום אם יהיו נאבדים, ראוי הוא למות לבדו וכל העולם יהנה ניצול, כמו ששלח מרדכי לאסתר "אם-הקראש פתרישי" וכו', ועוד אמרינו בזמן שהצבור שרוי בצער, אל יאמר אדם: אלהי לביתי וכו' ושלום עליך נפשי וכו', ואם עשה כן לא יראה בנחמת צבור וכו'.

If so, it can be suggested that Noah's generation believed that Noah should have prayed for them so they would not be destroyed. Now that he was not praying for them—instead, he was building the ark to protect himself and showed no concern for whether they would perish—they thought it would be fitting for him to die alone while the rest of the world would be saved. This is similar to Mordechai's message to Esther, "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish."⁴

It is also said, "At the time that the community is in distress, a person should not say, "I will go to my home and I will eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul." If he does so, he will not see the consolation of the community."⁵

ומכל שפן הקא שהוא הנה יכול להתפלל ולא התפלל, ונהרי זה דומה למי שיכול למחות ואינו מוחה שהוא נתפס על בני עירו. וכן מצינו בכהן גדול לפי שלא התפלל על דורו הנה בסכנה לפיכך אימותיהן של פהגים מספקות להם מחיה וקסות כדי שיתפללו על בניהם שלא ימותו, דהכי אמרינו התם לחד לישנא, ומשום הכי היו משיבין לו אי אתי מבולא לא אתי אלא על ביתא דהוא גברא.

This is all the more so in this case, where Noah could have prayed but did not. This is similar to someone who could protest wrongdoing but does not do so, as they are then held accountable for the actions of their city.

Likewise, we find, in Makkot 11a, that the High Priest, who did not pray for his generation, was endangered. That is, the High Priest should have prayed that no involuntary manslaughter should occur. Someone who accidentally killed another could flee to a city of refuge, where he would be safe from the relatives of the deceased, and he would have to remain there until the High Priest died. This is why the mothers of the priests would provide food and clothing for those who had fled to cities of refuge, so they would pray for the lives of their sons, instead of praying for the High Priest to die. Why would a prayer against the life of the High Priest be effective? Because of his own share of the blame for the involuntary manslaughter, for not having prayed for the generation. Thus it is said there in the Gemara, according to one interpretation.

³ Zohar I:68a.

⁴ Esther 4:14.

⁵ Ta'anit 11a.

Therefore, [Noah's generation] responded to him, saying, "If He brings a flood, it will come only upon the house of that man [i.e., Noah himself]," implying that Noah's lack of prayer for his generation made him responsible for any punishment that might occur.

אָבֵל עָדִין קָשָׁה לָמָּה בְּאֵמֶת לֹא הִתְפַּלֵּל נִחַם עַל בְּנֵי דֹרוֹ, וְאַף אִם לֹא הָיָה לוֹ זְכוּת אָבוֹת לְתַלּוֹת בּוֹ זֶה אֵינּוּ תִירוּץ מְסַפֵּיק, שְׂפוֹף סוּף הָיָה לוֹ לְהִתְפַּלֵּל סְתָם, וְאִם לֹא תִהְיֶה תַּפְלָתוֹ מְקוּבָּלָת אִזּוֹ לֹא הָיָה לוֹ שׁוּם חֲטָא וְעוֹן, מִה שְׂאִין בֶּן עֵתָה שְׂלֵא הִתְפַּלֵּל, וְכִדְאֻמְרֵינוּ בְּבִרְכּוֹת דְאָמַר לֵיהּ יִשְׁעֵיהּוּ לְחִזְקֵיהּוּ מֵאֵי דְמִפְקֻדָּתָהּ הָנָה לָךְ לְמַעַבְדַּד וּמֵאֵי דְבַעֵי קְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לִיעֲבִיד.

However, it is still difficult to understand why Noah indeed did not pray for the people of his generation. Even if he did not have the merit of the Patriarchs to rely upon, this is not a sufficient excuse, as he still should have prayed regardless. If his prayer would not be accepted, then he would not bear any sin or guilt for their fate, which is not the case now that he didn't pray at all.

This is similar to what is said in tractate Berachot 10a, where Isaiah told Hezekiah that he was being punished because he didn't marry. Hezekiah responded that he avoided this because he foresaw that his offspring would be wicked. Isaiah answered, "What you are commanded to do, you must do; and what the Holy One, Blessed be He, wishes to do, He will do."

וְנִישׁ לֹדַם דְאִתָּא בְּבִרְאשִׁית רַבָּה עַל פְּסוּק "כִּי טִבַּת הַנְּהָה", עַל הַכֹּל הַקַּב"ה מְאַרְיָד אֶפְיָה חוּץ מִן הַזְנוּת וְכו'. וְאַפְשָׁר שְׂמִשׁוּם הַכִּי לֹא הִתְפַּלֵּל נִחַם עֲלֵיהֶם לְפִי שְׂעָקָר פְּנוּנַת הַתַּפְלָה הוּא לְהִתְפַּלֵּל לְהַקַּב"ה שְׂיִזְכּוֹר אֶת הַרְחֻמִּים אֲף לְאַחַר שְׁנַתְמַלְא סְאָתָם, וּבַעֲוֹן זֶה שְׂאִינוּ רוּצָה לְהִאָרִיךְ אִפּוֹ אֵין מְקוּם כָּלֵל לְתַפְלָה, וּמִכַּל שְׂכֹן שְׂהֵיָה בְהֶם אֲף עוֹן גָּזַל שְׂהֶם עֲבִירוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְחִבְרִי שְׂהִתְפַּלָּה אֵינָה מוּעֵלַת בְּהֶם כָּלֵל.

It can be said, as is brought in Bereishit Rabbah (26:10) on the verse, "that the sons of G-d saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose."⁶ The Midrash there says that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is patient with all sins, except for sexual immorality. It's possible that because of this, Noah did not pray for them, because the main purpose of prayer is to appeal to the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He should remember mercies, even when the measure [of sin] is full. For this sin of sexual immorality, He does not want to be patient, and there's no place for prayer at all.

Moreover, the people of Noah's generation were also guilty of robbery, which is a sin between individuals, and prayer does not help with such sins. Thus, Noah refrained from praying on their behalf.

⁶ Gen. 6:2.

ומשום הכי אמר הכתוב "כִּי־מִי נָח זֹאת לִי אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעֵבֶר מִי־נֹחַ", כְּלוֹמַר כְּשֶׁם שֶׁבִשְׂבוּעַת הַמַּבּוּל אָף עַל פִּי שָׁלֵא אֲמַרְתִּי אֵלֶּא "מֵעֵבֶר מִי־נֹחַ" וּמִשְׁמַע דְּנִקְא מַיִם, וְאָף עַל פִּי כֵן אִי אֲפֹשֶׁר לְהִבְיֵא מִבּוּל שֶׁל אֵשׁ מִשּׁוּם שֶׁנִּקְרָא מַעְרִים עַל הַשְּׂבוּעָה. כֵּן מֵה "נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מִקְצֵף עֲלֶיךָ" וְכו' אִי אֲפֹשֶׁר לִי לְהַעֲרִים וְלוֹמַר שָׁלֵא נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֵלֶּא כְּשֶׁאֵינָם רְשָׁעִים גְּמוּרִים, וּמֵה שֶׁרְצָה לְכַלּוֹתָם בְּשַׁעַת עֲשִׂיית הַעֲגָל לְפִי שֶׁכָּבַר הָיָה מֵעֵמִיד הָאוּמָה מְזַרַע מֹשֶׁה שֶׁהָיָה גַם הוּא מְזַרַע הָאֲבוֹת. וּבְזֵה נִקְשָׁר הַיֵּטֵב עֲנִין שְׂבוּעוֹת אֵלֹו יַחַד.

Therefore, to counter this possibility, the verse states, “For this to Me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth.” This is saying, just as in the oath regarding the Flood, although I only said “the waters of Noah”—which specifically means water—I am nevertheless unable to bring a flood of fire because that would be seen as violating the oath.

So too, regarding the second oath, “I swore not to be angry with you,” that means “it is impossible for Me to avoid [the oath] by saying that I only swore it to apply when they were not completely wicked.” That too would be seen as violating the oath.

As far as Him wanting to destroy them at the time of the making of the Golden Calf, it is because He was already planning to instead establish the nation through Moses, who was also descended from the Patriarchs.¹⁰ But Moses reminded G-d of His oath to the Patriarchs to make them a great nation that would inherit the Land of Israel.¹¹

In this way, these two oaths of Isaiah 54:9, are connected. G-d doesn't want to be accused of finding loopholes for His oaths: He won't bring fire instead of water, and he won't (completely) destroy the people because they are wicked.

וְאֵם תֹּאמַר אָף פַּעַם אֲחֵרֵת אֲפֹשֶׁר שְׂיַעֲשֶׂה כֶּף לְכַלּוֹת חַס וְשְׁלוֹם אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְהַשְׁאֵר צְדִיק אַחַד לְבַד מִטַּעַם שֶׁגַם הוּא מְזַרַע הָאֲבוֹת, יֵשׁ לוֹמַר דְּזֵה אִי אֲפֹשֶׁר, שֶׁהָרִי כְּשֶׁאֲמַר לוֹ הַקַּב"ה לְמֹשֶׁה "וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי" וְכו' אָמַר מֹשֶׁה "זָכַר לְאַבְרָהָם" וְכו'. וּמֵאִי קִשְׁיָא לִיָּה לְמֹשֶׁה וְלִמָּה הוּצָרָה לְכָה, וְהֵלֵא אָף אֵם יִתְקַנְיִים "וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי" שֶׁפִּיר מְקַרֵי שְׂזוֹכֵר בְּרִית אֲבוֹת שֶׁהָרִי מֹשֶׁה הוּא מְזַרַעֵם.

You might say, but at a different time, is it possible that He'll do that, to destroy Israel, G-d forbid, and to leave only a single righteous person, since that person is also a descendant of the Patriarchs? It can be said to that question that this is impossible, that when the Holy One, Blessed be He, told Moses, “Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation,”¹² Moses said, “Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Yourself and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.”¹³

What was Moses' difficulty with G-d's proposal and why did he need to give this answer? For even if [G-d] had fulfilled His words “Now, let Me be,” it would have been fine,

¹⁰ Ex. 32:11.

¹¹ Ex. 32:12–14.

¹² Ex. 32:11.

¹³ Ex. 32:13.

that He had remembered the covenant with the Patriarchs, for Moses was a descendant of theirs.

אֵלָא נְדָא צָרִיךְ לִזְמַר שְׁפִנּוּנַת מֹשֶׁה הִיְתָה לִזְמַר לְהַקְבִּי"ה שְׁבִנָּה אֵינּוּ יוֹצֵא יְדֵי שְׁבוּעָתוֹ, שְׁגָנְאֵי הוּא לְאַבּוֹת הָעוֹלָם שְׁלֵא יוֹעִיל זְכוּתָם לְבַד אֵלָא בְּהַשְׁתַּמְךָ זְכוּת אַחַר עֲמָהֶם, כְּמוֹ שְׁפִירָשׁוּ הַמְּפָרְשִׁים עַל הָאֵי דְאַמְרִינָן וּמָה כִּסָּא שְׁלֵ שְׁלוּשׁ רַגְלִים אֵינּוּ יָכוֹל לְעֻמּוֹד וְכוּ', וְאִם הִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה כֵן בְּנִדְאֵי הִיָּה נִקְרָא מְעָרִים עַל הַשְׁבוּעָה, שְׁהָאָבוֹת לֹא קִבְלוּ אוֹתָהּ שְׁבוּעָה בְּמַחְשָׁבָה זוֹ, וּמַעֲתָה כְּשֵׁם שְׁבָאוֹתוֹ הַפַּעַם חָזַר בּוֹ מְלַכְלוּתָם כֵּן יִהְיֶה תָּמִיד שְׁלֵא יַעֲרִים כָּלֵל עַל הַשְׁבוּעָה. וְעַיִן עוֹד בְּאוּרְךָ עַל מְדָרְשׁ זֶה לְקַמְן פְּרֻשַׁת וַיִּרְא.

Rather, we must certainly say that Moses' intent was to argue before the Holy One, Blessed be He, that [by choosing to spare only him], [G-d] would not truly fulfill His oath to the Patriarchs, that it would be a dishonor to the Patriarchs of the world if their merit alone did not suffice and had to be supplemented by the merit of someone else. This is as the commentators interpreted on the statement:

Rabbi Elazar said: Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, **if a chair with three legs** [i.e., the collective merit of the three forefathers], **is unable to stand** before You in Your moment of wrath, all the more so a chair with one leg [i.e., my merit alone, would be unable to withstand Your wrath].

- Berachot 32a

If [G-d] had done so, it would indeed appear as if He were attempting to sidestep the oath. For the Patriarchs hadn't accepted the oath with this thinking, and now, just as in that instance [G-d] turned back from destroying Israel, so too He will always uphold the oath. See more, at length, on this Midrash, further, in Chapter IV, parashat Vayeira (Essay 10).

אַמְנָם עַדְיִין יֵשׁ לְהַקְשׁוֹת שְׁכָשֶׁם שְׁשְׁבוּעַת הַמַּבּוּל לֹא הִיְתָה אֵלָא עַד שִׁיְהֵא נִגְמַר הַגְּבוּל שְׁלֵ יָמֵי הָאָרֶץ, כְּדַמְשַׁמַּע מִדְּכַתִּיב "עַד כָּל־יָמֵי הָאָרֶץ" דִּהְיִינוּ הַיָּמִים שְׁכָכְר נִגְזְרוּ לָהּ מַעַת הַבְּרִיאָה, וְאֵינָה שְׁבוּעָה לְעוֹלָם שְׁהָרִי לְעַתִּיד יִחְזוֹר הָעוֹלָם ל"תְּהוֹ וְבַהּוֹ". וְכִדְאַמְרִינָן בְּמְדָרְשׁ עַל פְּסוּק הַנ"ל, אָמַר ר' אַחָא מַה סְבוּרִים בְּגֵי נֵם שְׁבָרִיתָן פְּרוּתָהּ וְעוֹמְדָתָ לְעַד, כְּךָ אַמְרִיתִי לְהֶם "עַד כָּל־יָמֵי הָאָרֶץ" כֹּל זְמַן שְׁהִיּוּם וְהַלִּילָה קַיִמִין, בְּרִיתָן קַיִמַת, כְּשִׁבּוֹא אוֹתוֹ יוֹם שְׁכַתוּב "וְהָיָה יוֹם־אֶחָד הוּא יִנְדַע לָהּ לֹא־יוֹם וְלֹא־לִילָה" אִזְ לֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד בְּרִית שְׁבוּעָה עַכ"ל.

However, one could still raise the question that the oath regarding the Flood was only valid until the end of the ordained lifespan of the earth, as implied by the verse, "So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease."¹⁴ That means the days decreed for it from the time of Creation. It is not an eternal oath, for in the future, the world will still revert to be "unformed and void."¹⁵ As it is said in the Midrash on the above verse:

¹⁴ Gen. 8:22.

¹⁵ Gen. 1:2.

Rabbi Acha said: What do the descendants of Noah believe? That the covenant made with them will last forever? This is what I said to them, “So long as the earth endures,” [meaning] as long as the day and night exist, their covenant exists. When there will come a day for which it is written, “but there shall be a continuous day—only the L-rd knows when—of neither day nor night,”¹⁶ then there will no longer be the covenant of the oath.

- Gen. Rabbah 34:11

הכי נמי היינו יכולים לטעות בשבועת האבות שלא תהיה לעולם אלא עד שיתקנים זכות אבות, כדאמרין בפירק ה' דשבט מאימתי תמה זכות אבות? בימי חזקיה או בימי אליהו וכו'. משום הכי הוסיף הכתוב "כי הנהרים ימושו" וכו' "ונסודי" וכו'. ועוד שההרים אלו האבות, והגבעות אלו האמהות שאף אם לא תהיה זכות אבות ינהי סודו של הקב"ה עמנו, וכמו שכתבו שם התוספות שאף על פי שתמה זכות אבות, ברית אבות לא תמה, וזהו "וברית שלומי לא תמוט". וכן הוא במדרש על פסוק "ונכרתי את בריתי יעקוב", אם ראית זכות אבות ואמהות שנתמוטטה, לך והטפל בתסדים דכתיב "כי הנהרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטנה" הרים אלו האבות והגבעות אלו האמהות ואם כן "ונסודי מאתך לא ימוש".

Similarly, we might have erred regarding the oath to the Patriarchs, that it would not last forever, but only as long as the merit of the Patriarchs endures. This is as it is said in the 5th chapter of tractate Shabbat, “From when did the merit of the Patriarchs cease? In the days of Hezekiah, or in the days of Elijah.”¹⁷ For this reason, the verse adds, “For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but My kindness shall never move from you, and My covenant of peace shall not be shaken—said the L-rd, Who takes you back in love.”

Here, as will be explained below, “mountains” symbolizes the Patriarchs, and “hills” represents the Matriarchs, meaning that even if the merit of the Patriarchs were to end, the kindness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, would be with us. This is as the Tosafot wrote there in Shabbat 55a, that although the merit of the Patriarchs may end, the covenant with the Patriarchs does not end. This is the meaning of “My covenant of peace shall not be shaken.”

Thus it is written in the Midrash on the verse “And I will remember My covenant with Jacob.”¹⁸

Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Berechya: If you see that the merit of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs has failed, go and cleave to acts of kindness. That is what is written: “For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken.” The mountains are the Patriarchs and the hills are the Matriarchs, and afterward, it is written: “My kindness shall never move from you.”

- Lev. Rabbah 36:6

* * *

¹⁶ Zech. 14:7.

¹⁷ Shabbat 55a.

¹⁸ Lev. 26:42.