

Parashat Bereshit

Growth Rings of the Fruit Tree

Who was first to sin in the Book of Genesis? Long before Adam and Chava ate the forbidden fruit, it turns out that the earth itself rebelled against God. In a perplexing teaching, the Sages relate that originally the entirety of a fruit tree was supposed to bear the very same taste as its fruit. For example, the bark or wood of an apple tree was intended to taste like apples. But the contumacious trees resisted God's design, and so we find that the only palatable part of the tree is the fruit.¹

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook read this mysterious Midrash symbolically: the tree represents the means or process, and the fruit, the end or product.² In this imperfect world, we often give our greatest appreciation to the gratifying or delectable accomplishment, while failing to duly recognize the growth and toil that gave rise to it. The student who attains the highest grades receives our vocal admiration; the one who diligently studies and makes significant strides is acknowledged with muted, sporadic applause. We venerate results but often overlook the requisite discipline, the hard work, and the slow, sometimes imperceptible, growth, required to yield them.

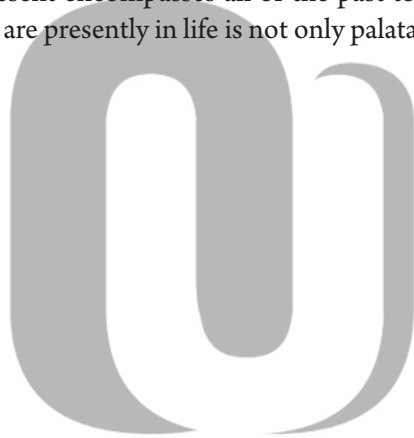
What is true of our perception of others is true of our self-perception as well. We often neglect our incremental accomplishments and fail to enjoy what should be satisfying achievements. We are convinced that joy will only come when and if our ultimate goals are attained. Sadly, as our boughs flourish and reach out to meet our life goals, we expectantly,

1. Rashi on Genesis 1:11, s.v. עץ פרי.

2. *Orot ha-Teshuvah*, 6:7.

almost single-mindedly, await the delicious fruit instead of making laurels from our impressively sustained growth.

This is the unfortunate plight of man, the “sin” of the tree that fails to make its constantly expanding growth rings as savory as its ripest seasonal produce. But Rav Kook’s interpretation boldly teaches that we harbor the potential to overcome this deficiency. The sure remedy is to respect the tortoise as much as the hare. It is to recognize how the elastic present encompasses all of the past tough growth. With this, where we are presently in life is not only palatable but worth savoring.



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Parashat Bereshit

In the Beginning, There Was Humility

As we begin rolling the Torah scroll from the beginning again, if we attune ourselves to the nuances of the Torah's text we can discern God's humility even during His uniquely creative act of bringing the universe into existence. In one Midrash, the Sages noted that the word order of the first verse reveals God's humility: The text reads "In the beginning, God created" (בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים) rather than "God created, in the beginning" (אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא בְּרֵאשִׁית). Instead of putting Himself first, as a prideful human sovereign would, God delays mention of Himself.¹

And if we zoom in on the letters, we find the same humility. The *Zohar* says: "the Torah begins with [the word] *bereshit* (בְּרֵאשִׁית), that is to say, *bet* (ב') is first (רֵאשִׁית)." ² Rabbi Pinchas Friedman of Belz, one of the premier contemporary teachers of *Chassidut*, elaborates on this idea. The natural letter with which to begin the Torah, the blueprint of all Creation, would have been *alef*, but because *alef* alludes to God's absolute unity and to His dominion (as in the appellation אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים), God specifically chose the second letter, *bet*. This serves as a lesson to mankind: humility above, and before, all.³

The Creation narrative further teaches us that humility must remain a guiding principle. On the sixth day, as Creation reached its pinnacle, God declared *na'aseh adam*, "let us make man," reflecting His polite

1. *Genesis Rabbah*, 1:12.

2. *Zohar Chadash*, 10b.

3. *Shevilei Pinchas, Bereshit* 5776.

consultation, as it were, with the angels during the creation of man.⁴ The message is clear: Just as Creation began and ended in humility, so must all our endeavors.

This is not the only virtue embedded in the profound opening of the Torah. Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov noted that thirty-two (ל"ב) words precede the first appearance of the word "good" (טוב) in the Torah. This intimates that a "good heart" (לב טוב) is the foundation and embodiment of all positive character traits man must pursue.⁵ *Pirkei Avot* confirms that having a "good heart" is the noblest character trait in man: "Go out and find the best path a person should follow . . . Rabbi Elazar says: A good heart."⁶ What constitutes a "good heart"? The *Midrash Shemu'el* defined it as someone who is modest and unpretentious, forgiving of and sympathetic to others.⁷

Two great masters, the brothers Rebbe Meshullam Zusha of Anipoli and Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, were once discussing humility. Rebbe Elimelech said, "If a man contemplates the greatness of the Creator, he will arrive at true humility." Rebbe Zusha disagreed: "No! A man must begin by being truly humble. Only then will he recognize the greatness of his Creator." They asked their teacher, Rebbe Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the famed Maggid, to decide between them. He ruled, "These and those are the words of the living God. But the inner grace is his who begins with himself, and not with the Creator."⁸

Part of the greatness of the legendary Chassidic rebbes was their unusual, and therefore unforgettable, comportment. Upon arriving in a city, Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg was greeted with great fanfare by a throng of adherents and admirers. Before meeting the crowd, he retired to a private room. A curious Chassid followed him and put his ear to the door. He heard the voice of his rebbe uttering expressions of adulation: "Welcome to our city, honorable rabbi. It is our great privilege to have you here. Thank you for coming, holy tzaddik." Later, he asked Rebbe Shmelke what he was doing, and he explained: "I anticipated what my Chassidim would say to me. I therefore said it to

4. Rashi on Genesis 1:26.

5. *Benei Yisaschar, Iyar*, 3:1.

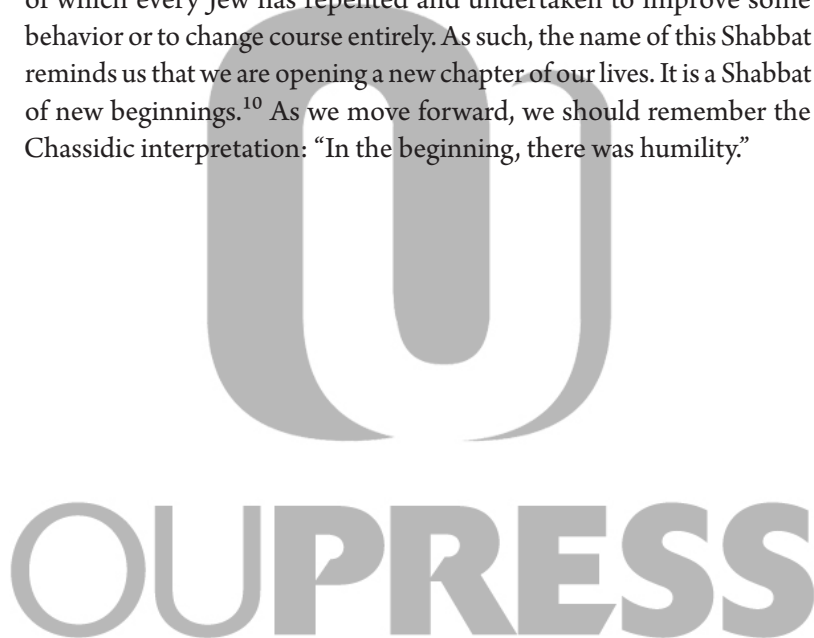
6. *Pirkei Avot*, 2:9.

7. *Midrash Shemu'el* ad loc.

8. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 1:243.

myself first, and it sounded so foolish, that when later they said it to me, it appeared equally ridiculous.”⁹

The Shabbat on which we read *Parashat Bereshit* is uniquely named after its Torah reading, *Shabbat Bereshit*. No other *parashah* lends its name to the Shabbat of its reading; there is no *Shabbat Noach* or *Shabbat Lech Lecha*. The Shinover Rav explained in his *Divrei Yechezkel* that we read *Parashat Bereshit* right after the Days of Awe, over the course of which every Jew has repented and undertaken to improve some behavior or to change course entirely. As such, the name of this Shabbat reminds us that we are opening a new chapter of our lives. It is a Shabbat of new beginnings.¹⁰ As we move forward, we should remember the Chassidic interpretation: “In the beginning, there was humility.”



9. Twerski, *Not Just Stories*, 300.

10. *Divrei Yechezkel, Bereshit*, s.v. טעם למה נקרא.

Parashat Bereshit

Insurgence in the Garden

Only one area in the Garden of Eden was off-limits to the first man and woman. Yet, as we know, they woefully could not help themselves, and ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik put in simple terms what we have all asked ourselves at one point or another: “What was the substance of the original sin? *Prima facie*, Adam simply wished to acquire a little intelligence. Why was that culpable?”¹ He answers that they did not simply desire more knowledge but the very power to determine what is good and what is evil:

They themselves wanted to determine what constitutes a crime and what does not constitute a crime; what is culpable and what is good; what is morally deserving and what is immoral. In a word, man wanted to write his own moral code. This was man’s rebellion against God. Man was unwilling to submit himself to God’s commandments.²

Drawing on the philosophical work of the Rambam, the Rav pointed out that the consumption of the forbidden fruit endowed man with the capacity to discriminate specifically between good and evil, rather than

1. Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:71.

2. *Ibid.* Evidence of this can perhaps be found in how the Torah describes Chava’s perception of the Tree of Knowledge. In Genesis 3:6, we read that it was a “desire” (תַּאֲוָה) for her eyes and understood to be a means to enlightenment (לְהַשְׁכִּיל). The combination may indicate that Adam and Chava wanted to be deciders of good and evil in areas of their own desire. For the Rav’s detailed exposition of these terms, see Soloveitchik, *Emergence of Ethical Man*, 95–128.

between truth and falsehood.³ The first man, emblematic of all mankind, sought to be master of his own moral domain by establishing his own moral code. He asked himself: “Why must I be bound by doctrines and practices that run counter to my own sensibilities and logic?” This was not only a rejection of the divine code for living, but a rebellion against God as King.

The Ongoing Rebellion against Heaven

This sin was not a one-off event but a paradigm. In a number of places throughout the world, this rebellion against God has been politically mandated and enforced. In the Rav’s words, “Marxism expresses itself through its denial of God’s sovereignty and its substitution of man’s sovereignty in place of God’s.”⁴ In the West, citizens are free to recognize God’s kingship and laws, but cultural norms and institutions are such that the choice to acknowledge God requires swimming against a riptide.

Psalm 24, which is dedicated to God’s kingship, is fittingly recited on the nights of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, holidays on which we coronate God. The end of the psalm mentions two apertures through which God is to be let in, the gate (שַׁעַר) and the opening (פֶּתַח). The Rav suggested that the Eastern Bloc had shut their “gates” to faith. God was barred from these countries, and still is from some of their successor states. The Western Bloc had no gates at all, but the openings through which God could enter were tiny indeed: “their concept of divinity is so narrow, so middle class, so selfish and so superficial, that God does not wish to squeeze through this opening.”⁵ Citizens of the free world “have rebelled against morality, against the fact that the human being must surrender himself to God and give God his full obedience.”⁶

(Re-)Coronating God

Rosh Hashanah is the day on which we undo the sin, so to speak, by accepting God’s sovereignty. We declare that God is the Creator who determines the laws of nature and the laws governing human life. One

3. See *Moreh Nevuchim*, 1:2.

4. Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:82.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 9:83.

of the emotional climaxes of the prayer is the *piyut* (liturgical poem), often festively sung, about how all the nations of the world will come to recognize God's kingship – “they shall give You a royal crown” (וְיִתְּנוּ לְךָ כִּתְרוֹ מְלִיכָה).

It is one thing to pay lip service, however sincere, to the notion that God is our true King, but it is quite another to live it. The demands of our King can be onerous, and that is when our fervent declarations of Rosh Hashanah are put to the test. Is God really our King? The Rav once related the following personal story on the topic of conversion in an address to the Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni Organization in 1975:

The Torah summons the Jew to live heroically. We cannot allow a married woman, no matter how tragic the case is, to remarry without a *get* (divorce document). We cannot allow a kohen to marry a *giyoret* (female convert). Sometimes these cases are very tragic. I know this from my own experience.

I had a case in Rochester, N.Y. of a gentile girl who became a *giyoret ha-tzedek* [righteous convert] before she met the boy. She did not join our nation because she wanted to marry somebody. Then she met a Jewish boy who came from an alienated background and had absolutely no knowledge of *Yahadut*. She brought him close to *Yahadut* and they became engaged. Since he was now close to *Yahadut*, the boy wanted to find out about his family, so he visited the cemetery where his grandfather was buried. He saw a strange symbol on the tombstone – ten fingers with thumbs and forefingers nearly forming a triangle. So he began to ask – he thought it was a mystical symbol – and he discovered that he was a *kohen*.

What can we do? This is the Halachah. A *kohen* may not marry a convert (*Shulchan Aruch, Even ha-Ezer 6:8*). We surrender to the will of the Almighty. On the other hand, to say that the Halachah is not sensitive to problems and is not responsive to the needs of people is an outright falsehood. The Halachah is responsive to the needs of both the community and the individual. However, the Halachah has its own orbit, moves at a certain definitive speed, has its own pattern of responding to a challenge, and possesses its own criteria and principles.

I come from a rabbinical house – the *beit ha-Rav*. This is the house into which I was born. Believe me, Reb Chaim used to try his best to be *meikil* [lenient in his halachic decisions]. But there were limits even to Reb Chaim’s *kulot*. When you reach the boundary line, all you can say is: “I surrender to the will of the Almighty.”

With sadness in my heart, I shared in the suffering of the poor woman. She was instrumental in bringing him back to the fold and then she had to lose him. She lost him. She walked away.⁷

Hope for the Best

Not everyone possesses as much courage as this young woman. The demands of Halachah are great, and sometimes we fall short. The Rav noted that there is an uplifting motif in our Rosh Hashanah prayers, namely, that Judaism has faith in man. “It believes that man will finally change, and man on his own accord will recognize his folly and will begin to strive for God and move towards God.”⁸ This reflects, in turn, God’s faith in each and every one of us, because we are all endowed with the fortitude and resilience to amplify our positive, moral inclinations.

This is evident from the Eden story. After their disastrous downfall, Adam and Chava realize that they are naked and pick large fig leaves to fashion loin cloths and rudimentary clothes. The Talmud claims that these leaves came from this very tree with which they sinned.⁹ According to the Rav, the act of taking the leaves of the specific tree symbolized that they now “identified with the hedonic pseudo-personality that they had created through eating the fruit.”¹⁰ That is to say, man and woman further distanced themselves from God and were self-indulgent. But given that they had made themselves garments, why does it then say that “the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21)? One explanation offered by Rashi is that this was real clothing. It was soft and warm, affording both a measure of comfort and better protection from the elements.¹¹

7. Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:35–36.

8. Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 9:73.

9. *Sanhedrin* 70b.

10. *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:35.

11. Rashi on Genesis 3:21.

One midrashic reading, attributed to Rabbi Meir, reads “skin” (עֹר) as “light” (אֹר).¹² The Rav explains that God provided light for man and woman to illuminate their true essence, because God has faith that man will, in the end, demonstrate loyalty to his Creator.¹³

The Rambam expressed this same idea about our entire nation:

The Torah has promised that Israel will ultimately repent at the end of their exile and will be immediately redeemed thereafter. As it says, “It shall be when all of these things come upon you . . . You shall return to the Lord your God . . . The Lord your God shall bring back . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:1–3).¹⁴

We are not bidden in these verses to return to God in our exile, but we are promised that it will happen. If this is guaranteed on the national level, it is certainly within our individual reach.

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

Two complementary beginnings mark this time of year on the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah inaugurates the new year; its shofar blasts shake us awake so we can recognize and maintain a lasting awareness of God’s sovereignty and rededicate our lives to fulfilling His word. Around the same time, we restart the annual cycle of Torah reading with *Parashat Bereshit*. This Torah reading includes the tragic episode of the Garden of Eden, cautioning us against replacing the divine will with our own. It is our responsibility to surrender to God and His Halachah, the compilation of His royal edicts.

12. *Genesis Rabbah*, 20:21.

13. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, 204–208.

14. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 7:5.

Sources for *Parashat Bereshit*

✿ *Growth Rings of the Fruit Tree*

ר' אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק, אורות התשובה, ו:ז

מתחלת הבריאה ראוי היה טעם העץ להיות גם הוא כטעם פריו. כל האמצעים המחזיקים איזו מגמה רוחנית גבוהה כללית ראויים היו להיות מוחשים בחוש נשמתי באותו הגבה והנעם, שעצם המגמה מורגשת בו כשאנו מציירים אותה. אבל טבע הארץ, התנודדות החיים, ולאות הרוחניות כשהיא נסגרת במסגרת הגופניות, גרם שרק טעמו של הפרי, של המגמה האחרונה, האידיאל הראשי, מורגש הוא בנעמו והדרו, אבל העצים הנושאים עליהם את הפרי, עם כל נחיצותם לגדול הפרי, נתעבו ונתגשמו ואבדו את טעמם. זהו חטא הארץ, שבעבורו נתקללה כשנתקלל גם האדם על חטאו. וכל פגם סופו לתקון, ע"כ מובטחים אנו בברור, שיבאו ימים שתשוב הבריאה לקדמותה, וטעם העץ יהיה כטעם הפרי, כי תשוב הארץ מחטאה, וארחות החיים המעשיים לא יהיו גורמים לחוץ בעד הנועם של האור האידיאלי, הנתמך בדרכו ע"י אמצעים הגונים, המחזיקים אותו ומוציאים אותו מן הכח אל הפועל.

✿ *In the Beginning, There Was Humility*

ר' פנחס פרידמן, שבילי פינחס, בראשית תשע"ו

פתח דברינו יאיר להתבונן בפסוק הראשון שבחר הקב"ה לפתוח בו את התורה שבכתב: "בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ" (בראשית א:א). ופירש רש"י בשם המדרש: "ברא אלקים, ולא אמר ברא ה', שבתחילה עלה במחשבה לבראותו במדת הדין, וראה שאין העולם מתקיים והקדים מדת הרחמים ושתפה למדת הדין, והיינו דכתיב 'ביום עשות ה' אלקים ארץ ושמים' (שם ב:ד)".

ידוע מה שתמהו על כך בספרים הקדושים [של"ה הקדוש, ערבי נחל ועוד], איך יעלה על הדעת לומר על הקב"ה, שבתחילה עלה במחשבה לברוא את העולם במדת הדין, ואחר כך כשראה שאין העולם מתקיים הקדים מדת הרחמים ושתפה למדת הדין, הלא ברור כי הקב"ה היודע מראשית דבר אחרית דבר, כבר ידע מראש שאין העולם יכול להתקיים במדת הדין, אם כן מה ראה על ככה להעלות במחשבתו תחילה לברוא את העולם במדת הדין.

חשבתי דרכי להעלות על שלחן מלכים רעיון חדש בדרכ עבודה, על פי מה שדרשו במדרש (ב"ר א:יב) הטעם שפתח הקב"ה את התורה בפסוק: "בראשית ברא אלקים", כי בכך ביקש הקב"ה ללמדנו על מדת ענוותנותו, שלא פתח בהזכרת שמו "אלקים" כמנהגם של מלכי בשר ודם: "שמעון בן עזאי אומר

'וענותך תרבני' (תהלים יח:לו), בשר ודם מזכיר שמו ואחר כך שבחו, פלן אגוסטולי, פלן פראטאטא [ערוך: מיני שררות הן], אבל הקב"ה אינו כן, אלא משברא צורכי עולמו אחר כך מזכיר שמו, בראשית ברא ואחר כך אלקים".

ונראה פשוט כי שמעון בן עזאי נתכוון ליישב בכך הפליאה, מה ראה הקב"ה לפתוח את התורה באות ב' באומרו: "ב'ראשית ברא אלקים", ולא באות א' כפי שהיה ראוי לומר: "אלקים ברא בראשית", וכבר עמד על כך ב"תנא דבי אליהו" רבה (סוף פרק לא): "ומה נשתנה הבית מכל הכ"ב אותיות, שבה ברא הקב"ה את עולמו, שנאמר 'בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ', והלא אין ראוי לומר אלא אלקים ברא בראשית, ומה תלמוד לומר 'בראשית ברא אלקים'". ומתריך: "התורה נאמרת תחילה בב' שהוא לשון ברכה, ולא נאמרה באל"ף בתחילה שהוא לשון קללה של ארור".

אך לפי דברי שמעון בן עזאי למדנו תירוץ על כך, כי בכוונה תחילה פתח הקב"ה באות ב' של "בראשית ברא אלקים" ולא באות א' של "אלקים ברא בראשית", כדי ללמדנו בכך על מדת ענוותנותו שלא רצה לפתוח את התורה בהזכרת שמו, עד שהזכיר תחילה את מעשיו בבריאת העולם.

יומתק לפרש בזה מה שכתוב בנגעי בתים (ויקרא יד:לה): "ובא אשר לו הבית והגיד לכהן לאמר כנגע נראה לי בבית". על פי מה ששנינו בגמרא (ערכין טז.) כי הנגעים באים על גסות הרוח, והנה המתגאה פוגם באות ב' של "בראשית", שפתח בה הקב"ה את התורה כדי ללמדנו מדת ענוותנותו. הנה כי כן זהו שאומר בעל הבית שלקה בנגעים לכהן: "כנגע נראה לי בבית", נראה לי שבגסות רוחי פגמתי באות "בית" של "בראשית".

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Parashat Noach

Making a World of a Difference

Two legendary figures: Noach and Avraham. For generations, great minds have compared and contrasted their lives. Some have argued for Noach's remarkable righteousness, as he rose above the mire of depravity and sinfulness that surrounded him. Others have minimized his spiritual accomplishments, which pale in comparison to Avraham's. Rashi draws our attention to the fact that Noach is said to have walked "with God" (Genesis 6:9), while Avraham walked "before God" (Genesis 24:40 and see 17:1). He explains that Noach needed help to be righteous, while Avraham drew strength from within to follow his path of righteousness unassisted.¹

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook perceived a more profound difference reflected by the Torah's choice of words.² Penetratingly, he said that walking "with God" is fulfilling God's spiritual demands of the generation – no small feat – but no more. Noach did not take the initiative and elevate those around him; he boxed himself in, psychologically and physically on the ark, satisfied at having strenuously maintained the status quo. The opening verse emphasizes that Noach was "righteous in his generation" (Genesis 6:9), suggesting that he was resigned to the fact that little could be done to pull his contemporaries out of their quicksand of immorality. Avraham, on the other hand, although absolutely loyal to God's word, struck out on his own. He risked acting independently and creatively to better the world around

1. Rashi on Genesis 6:9, s.v. את האלוהים התהלך נח.

2. The remarks below are based on *Midbar Shur, derush* 13.

him, as when he appointed himself the defense for an urban confederacy of sinners.

The Sages say that Avraham observed the entire Torah even before it was revealed at Sinai.³ Rav Kook took this to mean that Avraham was determined to speed up the process of divine revelation, to hasten the existential perfection and rectification of the world that in the divine plan was meant to occur only later. He laid the groundwork for this by sharing divine wisdom with and raising up the spirit of his generation. Walking “before God” is to act independently while bearing God’s teachings and goals in mind, and, in a way, it is even to precede God.

Avraham’s expansive idealism enabled him to recognize the raw spiritual potential latent in himself and in his generation. He firmly believed that every individual could strengthen and stretch their spiritual muscles to meet Olympic benchmarks. Not only was he convinced that humanity could better itself, but he believed that humanity could be catapulted to awesome heights. Avraham entertained visions of grandeur about the world.

Not long ago, Rav Kook, himself an Avraham, followed in our forefather’s footsteps and walked “before God.” He discerned the amazing vitality and profound potential of the soul of the Jewish nation. After our tortuous and torturous exile, his lofty teachings, which radiate love for others, have been a boon to the rejuvenation of our national spirit. Two great Avrahams, the first Jew in history and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, had the firm conviction that every individual has the power to effect revolutionary change.

We are all called to walk Avraham’s path. Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world. To be a Jew is to seek to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal the scars of our fractured world. We are not meant to ride the tide, alone, but to be a tide that raises all boats.

3. Mishnah, *Kidushin*, 4:14.

Parashat Noach *Tzaddik im Peltz*

In a world overrun by depravity, violence, and corruption, the Torah introduces Noach as the last righteous man on earth (Genesis 6:9). The Torah continues: “And Noach sired (וַיֹּלֵד) three sons: Shem, Cham, and Yefet” (Genesis 6:10). Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk read this verse symbolically in his *No’am Elimelech*: what are ostensibly three personal names are actually three degrees of spirituality that a tzaddik worthy of the name begets or generates (וַיֹּלֵד) in his lifetime. Shem, literally “name,” represents the first degree, fearful obedience and devotion to God that sanctifies His holy Name. Cham, which means “warm,” alludes to Noach’s cultivation of love and closeness towards the Creator. The third and final degree is Yefet, a reflection of the *yofi*, the “beauty” of one’s pure, perfect service of the Almighty.¹

Notwithstanding this characterization of Noach as a tzaddik of the highest rank, rabbinic sages throughout the ages have detected certain imperfections in his overall performance. Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev drew a memorable distinction between two types of tzaddikim. One serves God with great fervor but is so focused on his own spiritual aspirations that he bears no one else aloft in his ascent. The other serves God and brings others to serve God as well, raising them up with him. Noach is the first type of tzaddik, because the Torah says he “walked with God” in his divine service, meaning he did not “walk with people” to draw them closer to Him.²

1. *No’am Elimelech, No’ach*, s.v. ‘וילוד נח שלשה בנים את שם כו’.

2. *Kedushat Levi, No’ach*, s.v. אלה תולדות נח.

Chassidim have a characteristically sharp, pithy way of making this point in Yiddish, often attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe. They call Noach *a tzaddik im peltz*, “a righteous man in a fur coat.” The idea is that there are two ways of keeping warm on a cold night: by wearing insulating layers or by lighting a fire. Don a fur coat and you warm yourself; kindle a fire and you warm others as well. We are supposed to spread warmth and light in our own service of God.

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak himself embodied this beautiful, compelling, and enduring principle of *Chassidut*, the responsibility to reach out to others and actively draw them closer to the Creator. He was compassionate and gentle, and loved every Jew just as they are. He reportedly said,

If ever I pass away and I have the option of being alone in paradise or going to purgatory in the company of other Jews, I would certainly choose the latter. As long as I am together with other Jews!³

Helping others must begin with appreciating them for who they are. The Berditchever was always judging people favorably, as an oft-told story illustrates:

A teamster in Berditchev was saying his morning prayers, and at the same time, was greasing the wheels of his wagon. He was indeed an interesting sight, praying with his grease-covered hands, and townspeople snickered. “Look at this ignoramus. He doesn’t know better than to grease his wagon wheels while he is praying.” The great Rabbi Levi Ytitzchak then came along and said, “Master of the Universe, look at your servant, the teamster. Even while he is greasing his wagon wheels he is still praising Your great and holy Name.”⁴

When it comes time to bring people closer to God, which requires correction, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak teaches that we must use pleasant words and display compassion. The key is to see the lofty soul in every

3. Chana Lewis, “Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740–1809): A Brief Biography,” https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1007604/jewish/A-Brief-Biography.htm (accessed March 7, 2021).

4. Kaplan, *Light Beyond*, 5.

Jew and remind them of it: “One says, ‘Every single Jew is of great stature and the Jewish soul is truly hewn from a place above the Throne of Glory. . . . The one who encouragingly reproves the Jewish soul uplifts it higher and higher.’”⁵ In the words of a contemporary Chassidic teacher, “Were we to see the image of God in the other, could we ever show anger to another human being?”⁶

Our forefather Avraham exemplified the second, outwardly directed tzaddik, who is determined to view and treat everyone favorably. Among the many rabbinic sources that contrast Noach with Avraham is the following Midrash. Psalms 45:8 states: “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your fellow.” The Sages read this homiletically as a description of Avraham. Of course, being a moral, God-fearing person Avraham must have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore, the verse is actually telling us that he loved discovering the good in others and hated accusing them on account of their wrongdoing. In this way, his conduct was “beyond” that of his “fellow,” namely, the figure with whom he is naturally compared – Noach.⁷

When the prophet Yeshayahu hearkens back to the incident of the Flood, he rather unexpectedly refers to the episode as “the waters of Noach” (Isaiah 54:9). Based on the *Zohar*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik taught that the Flood and Noach are inextricably linked, since, in a certain sense, he was partially responsible for it. He neither prayed to God to spare others nor took the initiative to inspire them to repent. Knowing that he and his family would be saved, he failed to act on behalf of others.⁸ Compare this with the conduct of Avraham in *Parashat Lech Lecha*, where he goes to great lengths to save cities unquestionably filled with evil and malice: “The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin very grievous” (Genesis 18:20). Avraham is filled with mercy and compassion and seeks out the bright spots – righteousness even – in dark dens of wickedness.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of *Chassidut*, urges us to consider

5. *Kedushat Levi, Chukat*, s.v. 'ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם גו'.

6. See further *Parashat Chukat*, “Natural Feedback.”

7. *Genesis Rabbah*, 49:9.

8. *Machzor Mesoras HaRav*, 402.

the teachings of the Torah not as stories from days gone by, but as lessons to be internalized and lived. We are called on to perceive the image of God in our fellow man and be steadfast in our belief that the spark of holiness in every Jew can be made into a fire. It is a profound act of love to pursue the vindication of others and a foremost mitzvah to relentlessly search for virtue in our fellow man.



Parashat Noach

Vice and Virtue in the Vineyard

Immediately after the deluge comes a brief episode of Noach's ignominy. "He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself in his tent" (Genesis 9:21). First on the scene was Cham, who "saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside" (9:22). Shem and Yefet then covered Noach respectfully. After waking from his drunken stupor, Noach cursed Cham – by way of Canaan – for his conduct (9:25). What exactly did Cham do that was deserving of a curse?

Schadenfreude . . . or Worse

The Ramban opined that Cham sinned by not modestly covering his father and by not concealing from others the shameful condition in which he had found him. He actively sought to demean his father in a public forum, which is why it says that he broadcast it "outside" (Genesis 9:22).¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik took this a step further. Cham seemed all too pleased to discover a deficiency in his father and make it public knowledge. Cham was the type of person eager to disabuse people of their false impressions, to scratch off the veneer and reveal the tin under what turns out to be only thin gold plate. "Show me a saint and I'll show you a sinner," say the Chams of the world.²

1. Ramban on Genesis 9:18 (end). Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno similarly suggested that he rejoiced at the indignity of his father and eagerly spread the word to his brothers. Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor found fault with Cham's failure to cover Noach himself.

2. See Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, 128–129.

The fact that Cham was cursed, the Rav emphasized, does not mean that Noah's behavior was excusable, but it was understandable. Cham should have been considerate and taken into account that his father survived the destruction of a world he had lived in for half a millennium. People have drunk themselves silly for less. His misstep did not deserve to be circulated for public scrutiny. Only the mean-spirited would expose their own father and blow a private peccadillo out of proportion. Both father and son showed poor judgment, but only one acted out of malice.³

The Talmud has two interpretations conveying that a more heinous sin took place. "Rav and Shmuel: one says that he castrated him, the other says that he sodomized him."⁴ Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, a grandson of the Rav and a *rosh yeshivah* at Yeshivat Har Etzion, understands these opinions to be communicating ways in which Cham rejected his father. Castration indicates that Cham felt his father's vitality had ebbed and that he was no longer an influence in his life. Sexual exploitation represents Cham's belittling his father and acting in a superior manner. He took advantage of his father to make himself more powerful.⁵

Ethics vs. Etiquette

In contrast to Cham, his brothers acted laudably. "Shem and Yefet took (וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וַיִּפֹּת) a garment and laid it on both their shoulders, and they walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned away, so that they did not see their father's nakedness" (Genesis 9:23). Although the general impression is that they acted in tandem, the verb for taking the garment is in the singular (וַיִּקַּח) and followed by Shem's name, which alludes to the fact that Shem took the initiative in performing the meritorious deed.⁶ This is particularly noteworthy since many commentators understand Yefet to have been the eldest of Noah's sons.⁷

3. *Chumas Mesoras Harav*, 1:62–63.

4. *Sanhedrin* 70a, quoted by Rashi on Genesis 9:22, s.v. וַיִּרָא אֶת עֲרוֹת אָבִיו.

5. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, "Noach and His Sons," <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/noach-and-his-sons> (accessed March 7, 2021).

6. Rashi on Genesis 9:23, s.v. וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וַיִּפֹּת, quoting *Midrash Tanchuma* and *Genesis Rabbah*.

7. See, e.g., Rashi on Genesis 10:21 and Ramban on Genesis 6:10.

The Midrash identifies the rewards of the sons with specificity. Shem's descendants, the Jewish people, receive the garment which bears tzitzit, and Yefet's descendants receive burial. More specifically, the people of Gog, descendants of Yefet, will be given proper burial in the war of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 39:11).⁸ In what way are these rewards appropriate recompense for the brothers' actions?

The Rav sees in these rewards a reflection of each one's motivations: ethics and etiquette. Shem covered his father out of ethical duty, which applies even where there are no onlookers to applaud. Ideally, the garment of tzitzit is intended to be worn underneath one's clothes (with only the tzitzit in view),⁹ which represents acting ethically even in private. Yefet, on the other hand, only acted out of concern for what Shem would say. He acted out of etiquette, which changes in different times and places, and is only observed in public. Since etiquette is, at its base, about human dignity, his descendants merited burial, the ultimate act of respect for human beings. Clearly, Shem's motivation was the greater of the two.

This explanation also clarifies Noach's blessing to the two sons: "May God bring beauty to Yefet, and may He dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27). Yefet was concerned with outward appearances, which is the realm of aesthetics. Therefore, beauty and aesthetics shall be the heritage of his progeny. Shem was driven by moral considerations, and so his offspring receive the *Shechinah*, the divine presence, in their midst. One who acts ethically and morally, especially when others do not, is deserving of God's direct rewards.¹⁰

Exploring the Rav's Insight

The episode analyzed above occurred right after the cataclysmic Flood. Man set about reestablishing his presence on the Earth. The passage

8. Rashi on Genesis 9:23, s.v. ויקח שם ויפת.

9. See *Magen Avraham*, 8:13.

10. Schachter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 272–273. The basic analysis might owe a debt to the commentary of the Netziv in his *Ha'amek Davar* on Genesis 9:23. He comments that Shem's alacrity in covering his father and not waiting for assistance, was an expression of his feeling that he had to act, akin to performing a mitzvah in which one is obligated. Yefet only stepped in to help after seeing his brother struggle alone to cover his father.

describing this episode is traditionally set apart from surrounding ones with spaces, and its first two verses read: “The sons of Noach who left the ark were Shem, Cham, and Yefet... These three were the sons of Noach, and from these was the Earth populated” (Genesis 9:18–19). To extend the Rav’s thoughts, perhaps Noach’s sons represent three types of people.

Cham promulgates hate and destruction, even against his own family. The Mishnah warns: “Shmuel the Younger used to quote: ‘Do not rejoice in the downfall of your enemy’ (Proverbs 24:17).”¹¹ How much more is this true regarding a friend or family member.

Yefet’s prime interest is the respect and honor that should be accorded all mankind. While this is valuable and merits reward, it is not intended to be the ultimate pursuit of man.

Shem is sincerely dedicated to morality and virtue. This is the loftiest human ideal and especially praiseworthy when it is put into practice. No wonder, then, that Avraham, who defended unrepentant sinners, was his direct descendant. Additionally, Shem is traditionally known for having established a bet midrash, a house of study. Yaakov studied there for fourteen years to inculcate a moral compass that would guide him in his long exposure to Lavan’s shiftiness.¹²

As Jews we are both the physical and spiritual descendants of our ancestor Shem. His moral, principled conduct laid the foundation for a noble way of life which would be developed and perfected by his esteemed descendant Avraham. Indeed, Shem’s ethical code formed the spiritual bedrock of the Jewish nation for all time.

11. *Pirkei Avot*, 4:24.

12. See Rashi on Genesis 28:9, s.v. אהרות נביות.

Sources for *Parashat Noach*

✿ *Making a World of a Difference*

הרב אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק, מדבר שור, דרוש י"ג

"נח איש צדיק תמים כו' את האלהים התהלך נח", אמרו חז"ל שמעלת האבות היתה גדולה ממנו שנאמר בהם: "התהלך לפני", "האלהים אשר התהלכו אבותי לפניו". והנה מצאנו עוד לשון שלישי בתורה: "אחרי ד' אלהיכם תלכו". וצריך לבאר תוכן אלה שלש המעלות והבדלן, מה נקרא התהלכות לפני ד', ומה היא התהלכות אחרי ד', ומה ההתהלכות את האלהים. ולכאורה כיון שלשון התהלכות את האלהים הוא ערך נשפל נגד הלשון של התהלכות לפני האלהים, א"כ נראה שלשון "אחרי ד'" הוא מדרגה עוד יותר קטנה. ויש לפי זה לשאול למה צוה ד' אותנו בלשון "אחרי ד' אלהיכם תלכו", והי' ראוי להזהירנו בגדולה שבמעלות: לפני ד' אלהיכם תלכו, ועל כל פנים: את ד' אלהיכם תלכו, כמעלת נח לפחות. אבל נתבונן בדברים, כי השי"ת שיצר את האדם ועשהו ישר ונכון לבא אל תכלית שלמותו, הנה אחר שאבינו הראשון חטא והסדרים נשתנו, לא הי' רצון העליון ב"ה לתקן כל מה שנתקלקל כאחת ובכח אחת, רק שילך מהלך התיקון במעלות ומדרגות, ויהי' נתון תחת מסיכות שונות לעלות, ולפעמים לרדת ג"כ בסולם ההשתלמות, לצורך עלי', עד שלבסוף יגיע הדבר לתכלית התיקון היותר שלם שיהי' לע"ל שתמלא הארץ דעה את ד', ויהפך אל העמים כלם שפה ברורה לקרא כלם בשם ד'. והנה השי"ת הנותן לרוח משקל, נותן ג"כ משקל לרוח האלהי של צורך ההשתלמות האנושית הכללית, כמה יופיע בכל דור ודור, וכדחז"ל במד"ר: "אפי' רוח הקודש ששורה על הנביאים אינו שורה אלא במשקל", וה"ה לכל אור רוח הקודש וחכמת אלהים כמה תוכל להתפשט בכל דור, וכמה תהי' פעולתו של כל דור על העתיד. והנה כל הזמן שמחטא אדה"ר עד מתן תורה הי' מצב החינוך האנושי עומד בשפל, ולא הי' אפשר לעולם לקבל מדתו של אור התורה בשלמותה, ע"כ הי' גילוי אור ד' בעולם רק כפי זו המדה שהם יכולים לקבלה. אמנם הרי הי' כח טמון בעולם שיצא לעתיד למדרגה יותר רוממה ויהי' ראוי ג"כ לאור התורה. א"כ במדרגות ההדרכה לעצמו ולזולתו, הי' אפשר שני דרכים. הא' הוא שישמור צעדיו כפי דרך החינוך הישר הראוי אל הדרות כפי מצבם בעת ההיא, מבלי שישתדל להרחיב יותר את השלמות, עד שיהי' הזמן של ההשלמה היותר מעולה, שהיא אור התורה, מתקרב יותר. והדרך השני הוא, שהי' אפשר אז שישתדל להשלים עצמו וזולתו באופן יותר נשגב מכפי מצב הדור אז, כדי לבנות יסוד אל השלמות העתידה שתתקרב יותר. והנה אלה ב' המדרגות, ההולך במעלה הא' נקרא שהולך את האלהים ושוה להילוך הנוסד מאת הבורא יתברך בטבע הדרות וסדרם, כפי המדה שאור ד' מופיע בזה הזמן

בעולם ולפי דרך השלמות הראוי לזה הדור, כי הדורות כשהם מתעלים יותר, נעשים ראויים למעשים יותר נשגבים הפועלים להשלמה יותר גדולה, אבל זה ההולך את האלהים, אינו נותן את לבו כ"א אל מצב השלמות שבדור אשר הוא עומד בו, לא כן ההולך לפני ד', הוא דואג על הדורות העתידיים ועושה פעולות איך להדריך את העולם בשלמות כזו שיהיו ראויים אח"כ לחינוך יותר גבוה. ודבר זה היה החילוק שבמדרגת אברהם והאבות בכללם, ונח. נח הי' צדיק תמים בדורותיו, עושה הטוב והישר לפי חוקי השלמות הראויים לדור ההוא, אבל לא שם אל לבו להעלותם אל מעלה יותר רמה עד שיהיו קרובים יותר להיות ראויים לחינוך התורה. משא"כ אברהם, הוא העיר צדק ושכלל שלמות העולם ומכש"כ שלמות עצמו, לא לפי מדרגת מצב העולם בעת ההיא לכדה, כ"א היה משתדל להכין הכנה שיהי' ראוי אור אלהי יותר גדול להופיע בעולם. ע"כ "קיים אברהם אבינו כל התורה כולה עד שלא נתנה", כי בודאי לא הי' העולם ראוי לזה כיון שלא נתנה התורה, אבל היו פעולותיו הטובות גורמות ומכינות את השלמות העתידה שתתקרב. ע"כ נקרא מתהלך לפני ד', פי' הפליג להתקרב אל נקודת השלמות יותר מהמדה שהציב השי"ת לאור האלהי לפי מצב הדור ההוא. ע"כ הי' הוא באמת הצור שעם הסגולה שקיבל את השלמות הקדושה האלהית, ממנו יצא. אמנם כל אלה הרברים לא נתנו להאמר כ"א עד מתן תורה, אבל כשהגיעה עת דודים לתן התורה, אז נתעלו ישראל במעלה היותר עליונה בדרך פלא, עד שלולא קלקול העגל כבר היתה השלמות היותר עליונה נכונה ומזומנת מאת ד'. רק לא הי' אפשר שזו השלמות תמשך תמיד מפני הבחירה, והי' צורך בכמה סבות וצירופים עד שיוכלו לעמוד על האור של שלמות התורה שהאירה עלינו. וכיון שכבר נתגלה עלינו השי"ת באור האלהי היותר שלם, ואין עינינו צופות כ"א שיאיר לנו את פניו ונזכה לראות באור ההוא שכבר נתגלה אז ונעלם, וכרחוק"ל ע"פ: "ושמחת עולם על ראשם" שכל אותן עטרות שזכו ישראל במתן תורה ונטלו מהם כולן חוזרות להם לע"ל, וזהו "שמחת עולם" שמחה שמעולם על ראשם, א"כ כל הליכותינו אינן כ"א לרדוף אחרי האור האלהי המגולה לנו מכבר ונתרחקנו ממנו אחרי שהיה כבר קרוב לנו. ואין שייכת אצלנו כלל השתדלות להיות ראויים לאור יותר שלם ממה שהאיר בתורה. כי יודעים אנחנו שבתורה שהנחילנו, חמדה גנוזה זאת כוללת כל השלמות הראוי' לאדם עד הגיעו לתכלית תעודתו שהיא המנוחה האמתית. א"כ עלינו לא ניתן להאמר שנלך את ד', דמשמע כפי ערך הגילוי שנתגלה לנו, שאי אפשר לנו בשום אופן לבא למעלה זו, שנהיה כפי מצבנו הנאור שהיה לנו במתן תורה, כל זמן שהקלקולים עוד לא נתקנו לגמרי, ושאר שבעיסה ושיעבוד מלכיות מעכב. ומכש"כ דאין שייך לומר כלל אצלנו שנלך לפני ד', דמשמע להכין למצב שיתגלה האור ביותר עד כדי להדריך בחינוך יותר עליון, כי התורה"ק היא כלל השלמת החינוך היותר מעולה, אשר יאתה לאדם ברום מעלותיו. ע"כ אחת היא האזהרה לנו, אחרי שנתרחקנו בעונינו מהאור האלהי שהופיע עלינו, עכ"פ נלך אחריו להשיגו,

ולחכין את עצמנו וזולתנו להיות קרובים אליו, עד שיחדש ית' ימינו כקדם, ע"כ אין שייכת אצלנו כ"א אזהרה זאת של "אחרי ד' אלהיכם תלכו".

♣ Tzaddik im Peltz

ר' לוי יצחק מברדיצ'ב, קדושת לוי, פרשת נח, ד"ה אלה תולדות נח
 אלה תולדות נח (בראשית ו:ט). נראה דהנה יש שני מיני צדיקים שעובדים את הבורא, צדיק אחד יש שעובד הבורא ברוך הוא בהתלהבות גדול והוא לעצמו ואינו מקרב הרשעים להיותם גם כן מעובדי הבורא ברוך הוא רק שהוא בפני עצמו לכבוד עובד הבורא, ויש צדיק אחד שעובד הבורא ומחזיר הרשעים להיות גם כן מעובדי הבורא כמו אברהם אבינו שהיה מגייר גרים. ואיתא בכתבי האר"י ז"ל שעל זה נענש נח על שלא היה מוכיח הרשעים שבדורו והוצרך לגלגל במשה ומשה היה מתקן שהיה מוכיח תמיד כל ישראל. וזהו הפירוש שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל (קידושין מ.) טוב לשמים וטוב לבריות, כי זה הצדיק שעובד ה' ומקרב את הרשעים גם כן להיות עבדי ה' נקרא טוב לשמים משום שהוא עובד הבורא ברוך הוא וטוב לבריות גם כן בשביל שהוא מקרב הבריות לעבוד ה' אבל נח לא היה מקרב הבריות לעבוד ה' כנ"ל. וידוע מה שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל (סנהדרין יט:) כל המלמד בן חבירו תורה כאילו ילדו, כמו שכתוב אצל אברהם אבינו "ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן" (בראשית יב:ה) נמצא לפי זה אברהם אבינו שהיה מגייר גרים הרבה לכך לא נאמר אצל אברהם אלה תולדות כמו שנאמר אצל נח משום שלא היה לו תולדות רק מה שאמר הכתוב "ויולד נח שלשה בנים את שם וכו'", ולא יותר כנ"ל (וזהו פירוש הכתוב "אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו וכו' ויולד נח וכו'", רק אלה תולדות נח מה שאמר הכתוב להלן ויולד נח שלשה וכו'). והטעם "את האלהים התהלך נח", רצה לומר רק את האלהים היה מתהלך נח, נח לכבוד היה עובד הבורא ברוך הוא אבל לא היה מתהלך עם הבריות לקרבם להיות מעובדי הבורא ברוך הוא לכן נאמר שוב ויולד נח רק שלשה בנים את שם וכו', ושייך שפיר אלה תולדות נח. וזהו פירוש "ונח מצא חן בעיני ה'", היה לו לומר ונח היה לו חן בעיני ה', ולפי הנ"ל אתי שפיר, כי ידוע שאנשי דור המבול שטופי זימה היו ונח היה צדיק תמים והיה מעלה אותו החן לקדושה כי דור המבול הביאו אותו חן לקליפה ונח לא היה מוכיח אותם. וזה פירוש "ונח מצא חן בעיני ה'". ונח מצא חן, רצה לומר ראה שיש מציאת חן בזה העולם והוא מצא אותו חן בעיני ה', רצה לומר היה מעלה אותו לקדושה אבל לא היה מעלה רק בעיני ה' אבל לא בעיני הבריות כנ"ל.