SIDRA OF THE WEEK: נח

1. Although in the generations that went before No'ach there were, very exceptionally, a few individuals who were somewhat better than the rest of mankind, the general trend was downward. Mankind, dragging with it everything that shared its environment, had become corrupt and evil. Instead of aspiring to things spiritual and good as HaShem had intended, all human activity was centred only on seeking physical pleasures, even of the most immoral kind. But this state of affairs was made intolerably worse by a new development that saddened HaShem, Who in His goodness desires peace and harmony amongst His human creatures almost more than anything else. That new development was the cruel violence and robbery that had now become the main pursuit of a deranged mankind. HaShem saw that there was no hope that the world would be able, of itself, to return to the peaceful and harmonious existence that He intends for His creatures, and especially for man.

2. Even No'ach, the most righteous person in that generation, was righteous only when compared to the people of his time. Had he lived in the time of Avrohom he would have been considered a nonentity, no more than an ordinary person in the street. The fact that the Torah nevertheless calls him a righteous person gives us some indication of how terribly corrupt the world had become and why HaShem had to bring this all to an end. Yet at the same time, No'ach can indeed be seen to have been a truly good man in his own right, for to remain steadfast and righteous in his time was without a doubt a greatness: imagine what No'ach would have been like had he not had to contend with the wicked people of his time who tried their utmost to corrupt him, too.

3. HaShem told No'ach that because of their wickedness, He was going to destroy all the humans from off the face of the earth. Indeed, all the living creatures that shared the human environment had also become corrupt and HaShem was going to destroy them all. But to give them a further opportunity of repentance, HaShem commanded No'ach to build a large ark: the construction of this huge ark over many years and the reason for it might shock the people to better their ways. If the people will not repent, said HaShem, He will bring upon them all a Great Flood, much greater than anything experienced before. Only those in the ark shall be saved, to start the world again when the previous wicked and corrupt world will have been eradicated almost without trace. No'ach is commanded by HaShem to admit to the ark a male and a female of each species of animal, bird and insect and to bring into the ark also specimens of those more delicate plants that otherwise will be lost to the world for ever during the Great Flood. Of the kosher, that is, the more gentle, creatures, No'ach was told to take seven, for after the Great Flood many of these defenceless creatures would fall prey to the other animals and beasts: by saving more of them, HaShem ensured that they would be well-established in the world.

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Indeed, the merit of some of their number being brought as Korbonos would also help to ensure the continued wholesome existence of the world, too. Food and provisions, too, are to be brought into the ark, enough for No'ach and his three sons, Shem, Chom and Yefess, and for No'ach's wife and his sons' wives, and for those animals that will need them. (Most of the animals and birds and insects went into a state of hibernation when they were in the ark.)

4. At the command of HaShem, No'ach came into the ark. All those creatures that were to be saved came, too, and settled straightaway into the compartments that No'ach had constructed. Those that were not admitted into the ark miraculously formed a ring of defence around the ark, for the people had defiantly declared that if a Great Flood would come they would not allow the occupants of the ark to be saved, either. Indeed, when the rains came, they did remain unrepentant in their wickedness.

5. For forty days and forty nights the rains fell: the very windows of heaven poured forth their waters and all the waters of the greatest depths were thrown up, too. Poisonous gases brought to a speedy end all forms of life, and corrosive elements reduced to nothing the remains of the wicked culture that had existed. (Very few traces of the world that existed before the Great Flood are found today, for HaShem does not want wickedness to endure, nor even the ruins of wickedness. The same applies to the overturning of Sodom and Amorah, the only other instance of a culture and civilization which was based on wickedness and cruelty, and which HaShem destroyed.)

6. *Through a corrupt mankind the world itself had become corrupt till at last HaShem destroyed it all because of its terrible defilement. The incredible volume of water of the Great Flood that HaShem brought upon this planet after its physical destruction was the means by which He made the world spiritually clean and pure again: it was as if HaShem had taken the world and steeped it in a Mikveh.*

7. It was a very different world that No'ach saw when he emerged from the ark one year later when HaShem commanded him to come out. Unbelievable upheavals had occurred. Continents had shifted. New mountain ranges had been thrown up and others had sunk. New land-masses had risen up from the oceans and others had disappeared. Seas and lakes had formed where none had existed before, and other seas had vanished. The very atmosphere was changed. The world was now tilting on its axis, giving rise to different seasons and various climates. Furthermore, the world was now somewhat diminished: HaShem took away the superlative potential of the physical world so that it should not be abused as before.

8. And HaShem found pleasing the Korbon that No'ach brought, and He decided that He would not allow mankind to cause such ruin again: if there should again develop such an evil society, HaShem will punish those responsible and remove them before their influence can spread and bring misfortune upon the whole world. As a reminder of this closer contact between HaShem and His world, HaShem pointed out to No'ach the sign that he had already prepared — the rainbow — and

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its significance was now explained to No'ach. When the rainbow appears, HaShem told No'ach, let it be a reminder of the Great Flood, that people shall better their ways.

9. HaShem repeated to No'ach the blessings that He had originally bestowed upon man: they shall be fruitful and shall multiply and fill the world, for HaShem desires a fully-populated world.

10. The world of the animals shall again be under the mastery of man, and they shall once again fear man their superior (unlike the situation that existed in the depraved generations leading up to the Great Flood, when man lost his Divine Image). Because the strength of the earth was now lessened, its produce does not provide all that man needs to remain in peak physical condition, and therefore HaShem told No'ach that from now on, man is permitted to slaughter animals for his food. But this must be done in a considerate way and without cruelty and only if the human was deserving of this right and lived up to his responsibilities as the servant of HaShem.

11. No'ach, the father of all mankind and the protector of all living creatures, was moved to show his gratitude to HaShem for the new world that he saw. He was extremely happy and thankful to HaShem to see that the fertility of the earth was not taken away and when he replanted the vine, he drank of its juice so as to better express his feelings of joy before HaShem, for it is the purpose of wine to enhance one's joy by relaxing man's natural sense of reserve so that his happiness can be more freely expressed, without the usual self-control and constraint that is built-in in man. But No'ach underestimated the strength of the wine, and he became drunk. When he felt the effects of the wine taking hold, he retired to his tent, to sleep off his intoxication. Chom, the son of No'ach, went in to see his father in his degraded state and then told his brothers outside. Upon hearing of his father's condition and anxious to protect his dignity, Shem, assisted by Yefess, went into their father's tent backwards, taking care that they should not see him as he was, and covered him with the garment. When No'ach awoke, he became aware of what had happened.

12. In a vision of the farthest-reaching prophecy, No'ach saw clearly through this incident the particular characteristics special to each of his three sons and how these characteristics would variously manifest themselves in the future generations of all mankind who will descend from them. All nations that will emerge from them will have within themselves a combination of his sons' traits of character. In some nations, one characteristic might be more dominant; in others, that particular characteristic might be less pronounced but another will be prominent instead, and all in different degrees and various ways. Thus would each folk and ethnic group develop its own character, and indeed each individual member of each people differ from all others. The descendants of Shem, No'ach saw, would inherit Shem's abilities of mind and noble spirit to understand the true nature of a thing as

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summed up in its name ('Shem') and thus will recognize its potential goal ('Shom') that it should be utilized properly in the service of HaShem. From Shem, therefore, there will emerge the moral teachers and religious leaders of mankind. The descendants of Yefess ('easily impressed' by things of 'beauty') No'ach saw, will bring culture and an aesthetic sense to things human. But grace and beauty in themselves can never be the ultimate goal of mankind, and man is always a seeker and cannot rest contented until he finds true fulfilment and spiritual happiness in closeness to HaShem. Mere beauty and art will never in themselves give man the spiritual fulfilment that he seeks. Chom (meaning 'heat') who embodied the hot impetuosity and the excited action of the senses, would pass on to his descendants this uncontrolled sensuality: Chom's descendants, inheriting as they do his unrestrained and coarse nature, bereft of any reserve, lacking in themselves any respect for things spiritually high or noble, must place themselves under the descendants of Shem and Yefess if they are to ennoble themselves and raise themselves to a truly spiritual height. They will never achieve this in freedom, by themselves. Never will the people of Chom be acknowledged as noble rulers of mankind, for they are not worthy to rule others who are not in control of themselves. Only when Chom places himself at the feet of Shem and Yefess does he (and his descendants) learn how to be sensitive to things beautiful and become refined and dignified and spiritually elevated. If not, then Chom indeed remains low and inferior to his brothers. In the same way, only if the peoples of Yefess are guided by the moral and religious teachings of Shem can the aesthetic sense and culture of Yefess add up to anything more than a veneer of civilization, or have any true spiritual content and genuine G-dliness. Only if the peoples of Chom and Yefess willingly place themselves at the feet of Shem can they become truly ennobled and moral and spiritual beings. No'ach, the oldest ancestor of the new human race, saw the strengths and weaknesses of his three sons and he prayed that together they should unite into a humanity that is full of vitality and warmth (Chom) and cultured and sensitive to beauty (Yefess) but all guided by the moral and religious teachings of Shem.

13. The Sidra continues with the lists of the groups of peoples that descended from the three sons of No'ach, and from whom there eventually emerged the seventy principal nations of the ancient world and from whom all humankind is descended.

14. As the years and centuries passed, the Great Flood became only a memory. As time passed, the people chose to interpret the Great Flood not as the work of HaShem but as a natural catastrophe, something which 'just happened' and which very likely will recur. Thus it came about that under the tyrant Nimrod, mankind was brought together to build a great tower with a vast metropolis at its base. A great tower, they reasoned, would afford them a refuge when "the heavens' supports again collapse."

15. This colossal undertaking was possible only because of the great degree of unity and harmony that prevailed, and, although this project represented an open rebellion against HaShem, He did not punish the people, for they were at peace with each

other and HaShem is willing to forgive anything if He sees that there is harmony and peace among people. But since it was this very harmony — they all spoke the one language — that made this rebellion possible, HaShem confused their language so that they could not understand one another. Thus did HaShem halt the project, for organized rebellion against HaShem eventually leads to terrible conflict amongst His creatures.

16. And so the people abandoned the tower and spread over the face of the earth, and this was when different languages started to develop. Slowly but surely, men will have to learn again how to communicate with each other so that they will all once again be at peace, but that they shall utilize their harmony for good.

17. When No'ach and his family again settled the earth, he divided up the territories between his sons. To Yefess and his descendants he gave the northern lands. To Shem and his descendants he gave the lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, with the lands to the east. And to Chom and his descendants he gave the hot countries of the continent of Africa, for Chom was now suited to these tropical countries more than his brothers were. The rest of the world, said No'ach, would be settled by future generations as their needs grew. (Later, Chom's descendants spread northwards and unlawfully appropriated the lands belonging to the descendants of Shem. When HaShem helped the Children of Israel, who are descended from Shem, to drive out these 'squatters,' the land returned to its rightful owners, as HaShem promised to Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov.)

18. The Sidra continues with the list of the succeeding generations of Shem, leading up to the family from which Avrom came. Because of Nimrod, Terrach, the father of Avrom, had to move away. Taking his family and a considerable number of followers, he made his way towards the Holy Land. But when they arrived at Chorron they stayed there, and later Terrach died in Chorron.

And with the coming of Avrom, the world was to find relief in a new age.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra נח please go to HAFTORAHS.

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