

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight (Portion of Noach)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Contrary to popular myth, there is no better or worse way to lose someone close to you, but there is definitely a worst way to find out about it.

It had been a long day, and I was finally taking a few moments to relax, sitting in our small living room watching the evening news. There had been a terrible tragedy. An elite unit of the paratroopers, on a mission, deep in Lebanon, had gotten a little too spread out, and there was a heavy fog. Somehow, without realizing it, the officer leading the unit was allowing them to gradually curve around until the front of the unit was almost heading back in the direction whence they had come.

Suddenly, the men on point saw silhouettes in the fog and, assuming them to be the enemy, opened fire. As it turned out, they were actually firing at their own comrades, as the patrol line had gotten split up in the darkness, and the ultimate nightmare: a 'friendly' firefight ensued.

As I was watching the story on the news, Dvir's picture flashed across the screen, and I felt like the wind had been sucked out of me. I must have cried out a horrible cry, because my wife came running out of the kitchen. There is no more horrible way to discover that someone special has been killed, than to see his picture on the evening news.

D'vir Mor-Chaim had been a real project. Years earlier, I had taken a job on the educational staff of an Israeli High School, and as I was waiting outside the principal's office for what would be the last interview, I struck up a friendly conversation with a boy who was sitting in one of the waiting chairs. He looked like he was waiting for an unpleasant talk with the principal, and I always have a soft spot for the troublemakers, so we started talking. With a tousled mop of blonde hair and green eyes, he had the rugged good looks the girls always swoon over, and you could tell he was a real rebel. But you couldn't help liking the kid, as soon as he flashed his mischievous, winning smile.

He was in tenth grade, and obviously waiting for a serious meeting dressing down. He seemed pained, as though he knew he didn't belong in a chair in an office, but outside somewhere navigating the Judean hills he loved to explore.

A short while later, as I concluded my interview with the principal, I was told I had the job, and that I would be working with the eleventh grade when the next year began. So I asked whether D'vir, whom I had just met, would be one of my students.

"Oh, don't concern yourself with him; he's a real trouble-maker, and it looks like he's on his way out. We're probably going to expel him from the school; he doesn't really fit in."

I don't know whether I simply wanted to impress the principal, or this kid had touched something, but I offered to take him on as a project.

"Why not give him a couple of months (the current school year was a week away from being over), and I'll take him on as a project? I think we hit it off..."

And so, when I began the school year, I was reminded that he was my project, and his future was in my hand....

And project he was, but D'vir not only made it through the system, he became one of the leaders of his class. And over the next two years that I had the privilege of teaching him, I learned the value of a little faith in an individual.

Five years later, I watched as his coffin, draped with an Israeli flag, and surrounded by his fellow paratroopers, was lowered into the ground at Har Herzl, Israel's national military cemetery.

Of all the things D'vir Mor-Chaim represented to me, there is one thing that stands out.

I recall, on one of the hikes we took as a class deep in the heart of the Negev, walking in a creek-bed deep in the southern desert, asking him whether he planned to leave Israel after he finished his army stint.

He gave me one of his winning smiles, and, picking up a rock as we talked, said he could not understand all his friends who felt such a need to travel to the farthest corners of the world.

"It's not that I am walking in this nachal (creek bed); this nachal is walking in me."

One wonders: what is so special about this land, that we would carry the dream of returning to it for so long?

Why do the Jews, with all the best reasons to pick up and find a quiet life in Arizona or California, continue to persist, determined to make of this country a home?

Hidden between the lines of this week's portion, **Noach**, there is a powerful idea that gives much to think about regarding this question.

Noach, more than anything else, represents the power of potential. In the entire Torah, no other individual is actually described as a "*Tzaddik*", a righteous person, as Noach is. (Genesis 6:9)

In the entire world, the one and only individual worthy of being saved, and in fact, the individual who becomes, essentially, the father of the entire world as it is born anew after the flood, is again, Noach.

So one wonders why in the end, is it Abraham who becomes the first Jew, and not Noach?

And tradition notes that the verse (6:9) describes Noach as "*...Tamim Hayah Bedorotav*", A man who was "*complete in his generation.*" And the Rabbis (see Rashi ad loc.) note that this may mean Noach was certainly righteous in his generation, but that in the generation of Abraham, he would not have been so righteous (it not being a big deal to be righteous relative to the generation that merited the destruction of the world). But it may also mean that if Noach was righteous in his generation, then he most certainly would have been considered righteous in any other generation.

So why wasn't Noach the one to start it all? What went wrong with Noach?

Ask any Jewish kid who ever went to Hebrew School, what the top ten Jewish stories are, and he'll include the Tower of Babel. Everyone knows there was a Tower of Babel. But the details of this story

often get overlooked, and there may well be, hidden in this story, one of the essential and basic truths of Judaism.

First of all, it is important to note, that despite the fact that this episode is indeed commonly referred to as the story of the Tower of Babel, the tower is, in fact, only half the story. Indeed the major issue is not the tower, but the city they built first.

*“And they said, let us build for ourselves **a city and a tower...**” (11:4)*

*And indeed, “G-d went down to see **the city and the tower that they had built.**” (11:5)*

However, most telling, is the fact that the result of G-d’s reaction was much more about the city:

*“.” (11:8)And G-d scattered them from there, across the face of the entire earth, **and they ceased to build the city***

Was there something wrong with building a city? The Bible is full of the dream of the city of Jerusalem, so what could be the problem with building a city?

Perhaps a closer look at the essence of this story is in order:

*“And the whole land (the earth) was **one language and one speech.** And it was, **when they journeyed from the East, (Mi’Kedem)** and they found a valley in the land of Shina’r and dwelled there. And they said to each other, each man to his fellow, **let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime for mortar.** And they said, let us build for ourselves **a city and a tower, whose top will be in the heavens, and we will make for ourselves a name, lest we are scattered upon the face of the earth.** And G-d went down to see **the city and the tower that the children of man were building.** And G-d said: ‘Behold, they are one people and one language and this is what they start to do? Behold, nothing will come of all that they plotted to do. Let us go down and **confuse (mix up) their language** there, that they will not hear (comprehend) each other’s tongue. And G-d scattered them from there, across the face of the entire earth, **and they ceased to build the city.** Therefore was its name called **Bavel (babble)** for there did Hashem mix up (balal) the language of the entire earth, and from there did Hashem scatter across the face of the entire earth.” (Genesis, Bereishit 11:1-9)*

One would have imagined that there was at least one redeeming factor about this group of people who got themselves into so much trouble: namely, the fact that they were all together. Whatever they may have done, at least they all shared the same goal, and they were all of one mind and one purpose.

Imagine how different the world would be, if we could all speak each other’s language. If every Jew spoke perfect Arabic, and every Arab spoke perfect Hebrew, wouldn’t there be so much more room for working things out together?

Recall that these were the descendants of Noach after the flood, such that, at least in the context of the Torah, this is the entire world, and they were essentially one family, living in one place. So the entire world was at peace! And the entire world shared the same goals. Isn’t that, in the end, the dream we are still waiting for?

“VeHaya Bayom Ha’hu Yehiyeh Hashem Echad U’shemo Echad.”
“And on that day will G-d and G-d’s name be One.”

And there we were thousands of years ago and we were already there! We were all together! So why is this the one thing that G-d actually undoes? Why is the consequence of whatever goes wrong here, that the world actually becomes *divided*?

Until now we were all one people with one language, in one place. It is here that we are split into separate nations, with different languages, living in different places. It is here that Hashem introduces the concept of separation and otherness. Why? What was so terrible about the one-ness that was in the world?

Perhaps the clue to what is really going on here is hidden in the second verse of this story:

*“And it was, **when they journeyed from the East**, and they found a valley in the land of Shinar and dwelled there.”*

What was this journey the Torah describes? Where are they all coming from? And where are they going? Why, indeed, are they traveling at all? Where was the entire world in such a hurry to get to? It seems that they were on a journey, but one wonders if they ever got to the place they wanted to get to.

Imagine, from a Biblical perspective, that Noah and his three sons and their families set forth from the ark in the mountains of Ararat. (8:4) It seems, (depending on which magazine article or Indiana Jones theory one accepts) that this was somewhere in Eastern or Central Turkey. So, if they then journey **from the East**, heading westwards, eventually stopping in what will become *Bavel* (Babylon) in Southern Iraq, they may actually have been heading towards the land of Israel!

Indeed, at the end of the portion (many generations later), one family, the family of Terach, decides, for whatever reason, to continue that journey that never arrived:

“And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot... and set forth with them from Ur Kasdim, going towards the land of Canaan. And they came as far as Haran, and dwelled there.” (11:31)

Although we like to believe Abraham set forth on that journey and initiated our relationship with the land of Israel, in fact he was only completing the journey his father had already begun. And, if we are correct, he was actually taking a journey, which emanated from the very beginnings of society itself. (the dawn of the new world, after the flood.)

So what was this journey? Why were they all headed westwards, towards the land of Israel? What if, in fact, they were actually headed towards the land of Israel? The Midrash (Jewish Rabbinic legend, a part of our Oral tradition), suggests in various places that there was already a connection to the land of Israel, and certainly to the mountain that would one day become the site of the binding of Isaac, and later the Temple itself.

Adam supposedly offers his sacrifice in what will later become Jerusalem, as do Cain and Abel, and Noah too, (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 34:9) supposedly journey to this land. And while these ideas need not be taken literally, there is a sense that the connection of the world to the land of Israel begins long before there ever was an Israel. Indeed, Jewish tradition suggests that on Mount Moriah, (the Temple Mount) there is a rock, known as the Foundation Rock (or the rock of emanation, the *Even Yetzirah*) whence the

entire world was created. (Today's Muslim Dome of the Rock actually is built on top of this slab of rock, hence the name.) *All* beginnings emanate from this place.

Ever wonder why half of the world's population (The Christian & Muslim communities of the world amount to over three billion people) is so fascinated by this little piece of real estate we call Israel?

What is so special about this place, such that we, as a people, can only truly become all that we are meant to be in that place, in that land?

In fact, there is a mystical idea, that it is no accident that the first thing G-d tells Abraham to do, in next week's portion (*Lech Le'cha*), is to journey to that land. If you are going to begin a people with the potential to change the world, you need to begin in that place; leave your land, and your birthplace and the home of your father, (see Genesis 12:1) and finish what he (and indeed the world) began so long ago. Leave the place where they got stuck, and even the place where your father's journey was left unfinished, and go to where all beginnings must emanate from.

Indeed, there is a mystical idea that what makes us special as a people, is that our beginnings are in that place. Beginnings are a powerful thing; the way something starts creates the paradigm for how it will ultimately be. That is the reason first impressions are so important, and it is the reason we are meant to be so careful about what and how we experience the first year of marriage, because that beginning sets the pattern for all that will come to be.

So the fact that Abraham journeyed to that special place, the land of Israel, and that we therefore began our history as a people, and later as a Nation in that place, has enormous ramifications, on a spiritual and mystical level. The energy, says Jewish tradition, of our beginnings in the land of Israel, infused all that we are, wherever we are, forever, and is part of the essence of what makes us different, and special (*note: not better*) as a people.

Perhaps this was really G-d's plan. What if the entire world was actually meant to begin in that very same place? While we are still left with the question of what makes *that* place so special, imagine what might have been.

If we, as a people, are so impacted and affected by our beginnings in the land of Israel, imagine what might have been if the entire world had begun in that place! And remember, this place is called the land of Israel (by everyone, until about the late nineteen sixties...) because the people of Israel came and conquered it three thousand years ago. But if the world had begun there it might have had a very different name.

And, incidentally, consider that we had to conquer the land, redeeming it from the nations that were no longer worthy of dwelling there. But if the world had arrived there after the flood, there would have been no conquest, because there was no one there! They would have just walked in! What might have been the implications of that significant difference, in the beginnings of the world?

(Consider, for example, the fact that King David, the author of *Tehillim*, the book of Psalms, and a prophet in his own right, was nonetheless not granted by G-d the right to build the Temple, the *Beit HaMikdash*, simply because his hands had spilled blood, however righteous his wars to protect the Jewish people may have been. So what might the difference have been for the world, if our beginnings had emanated from pure journey, rather than war, conquest, and conflict?)

It is also interesting to note that unlike Abraham, who is commanded to journey to the land of Israel, the world, if our hypothesis is correct, simply *sensed* that they were meant to go there. Where did this desire, this intuition come from?

In fact, this is really the question we face all the time: sometimes we know what is right, but we can't quite define how we know that to be true.

Like marrying the right person. How do you know he or she is the one? Often, trying to explain or define that intuitive sense, gets in the way of getting to where you are need to go; if a person spends too much time trying to define why it is that they want to marry a particular person, they may end up never getting married.

Even more, at the root of this idea is the question of whether there really is one special person for everyone. Why must there be one place, which is the place we are meant to be? Why can't a person live any place? What difference does it make where we are? Shouldn't what really matters be who we are, and not where we are, or who we are with? Why do we need to belong to a particular nation, or group of people? Shouldn't it be enough that we are in the end, all citizens of the world? Like John Lennon wrote in his song *Imagine*:

"Imagine all the people, living life as one..."

What was so terrible about our being one large family, all one and together, sharing the same dreams and goals, all speaking the same language, that caused G-d to transform the world from one family to so many different and often conflicting, nations?

What is really at the root of this whole story?

We live in a world that places equality on a pedestal. All men are created equal, suggested a brilliant group of men some two hundred and thirty years ago, and based on that fact; all people have certain inalienable rights.

One hundred and fifty years later the women of America would finally bring the rest of the country (and eventually the world) around to the idea that this concept applies to the relationship between men and women as well. Women and men are equal, and deserve the same rights and privileges. The equal rights movement in America is one of the most important movements in American history, and has accomplished many great things. And in truth, there is still a ways to go. There is no reason a woman should be paid less salary than a man for the same job, and people should be judged, in all things, by the color of their deeds, and not the hue of their skins.

To be sure, equality is a valuable idea, except for the fact that it simply isn't true. Because, thank G-d, we are not all equal, not any of us. Two pennies are equal, because essentially they are exactly the same. They have the same value, serve the same purpose, and most often, cannot be told apart. But any two people are anything but the same. We are all so very different. We have different characters and personalities, different loves and likes, fears and concerns, we even look different. In the entire world, with all of its billions of people, you will not find two people who are or even look, exactly alike.

How could anyone assume men and women are equal, when we are so obviously different? This is not, of course, to say that one is better than the other, which is equally absurd. We are simply different, and it is good that we are different, because we bring different things to the table, as it were, and the fact that we are all different, is what tells us that each and every one of us has what to contribute.

If we were all equal, then we could all be replaced. You can always substitute one apple for another. But people can never be replaced. And the world, without any single one of us, simply would not be the same.

Judaism suggests that while there is great value in building up the whole, whether the whole community, nation, or even the world, such that no one individual supercedes the next, it is only as great as the value inherent in each individual.

The world today speaks of equality, but Judaism begins by stressing individuality.

It is no accident that the world, according to the Torah, is begun with one single person. And then, when things go wrong, and the world sinks to an abyss of evil that precludes any value to the continuity of society, the world begins again, with one person, and one family; Noach is, in fact, is Adam two.

This one of the dangers of an atheistic philosophy; if we are all random, having arrived simply as the evolution of what preceded us, in the end it is all too easy to arrive at the idea that the whole is the greater good, and that the people, and indeed the world, is a cause worth losing a few individuals over. It is no accident that the societies that left religion and the idea of purposeful creation behind, very soon resulted in so much human misery. More people were killed in our century as a result of humanistic societies, (Nazism, Communism, the Khmer Rouge, to name a few) than in all the combined history of the world until now. Because if each human being is just part of the large test tube of life, then in the end, what is one more or less when weighed against the goal of the common good?

But if every human being is created in the image of G-d, then there is a little bit of G-d inside every one of us, and if you can't see a little bit of G-d in the person sitting next to you, you'll never find Him anywhere else.

This is part of the message of the land of Israel. After all, what is the difference between one piece of land and the next? Dirt is dirt, right?

The land of Israel teaches me that each place is special, and different, and that for whatever the reason we each have our special place. Not better, just different, and certainly not equal. And it is not necessarily something we will ever fully understand.

Why in the end, did I marry my wife? Why is she the one for me? It is obviously not because she is any better than any other woman in the world, neither do I think there is another woman in the world equal to her. She is the one, the only one, for me. To paraphrase Billy Joel, *she is my home*.

Each person and each people is unique and special, and we each have our place, given us by G-d, for whatever the reason. And spending too much time trying to figure out why any one place is right for any one person or people, is like spending too much time trying to define why *she* is right for *me*. In the end, the computer program will never quite get it, so you just won't get married. And then you will never become all that you are meant to be.

Five thousand years ago, at the dawn of civilization, an entire world was in touch with that inner voice, the one that tells you who is your soul mate, and where you are meant to be.

And then they got stuck, in a valley. Which is what happens when you stop listening to that inner voice. This is the first mistake (the first chet) of the new world. The issue wasn't the city they built, it was the reason they were building the city.

“Lest we are scattered upon the face of the earth.” They so loved the beauty of their oneness; they forgot the secret and the beauty of their otherness. Soon they no longer saw each other as individual worlds in the image of G-d. All they saw were the bricks, which were the vehicle for creating a society where the individual was forgotten in the search for the greater good of the whole. And very soon, they were so focused on creating their own one-ness, focused as they were on the beauty and the power inherent in the one-ness of their own (and indeed any) community, they lost sight of the value of the otherness, the individuality of every one around them.

Indeed, the constant awareness that we all are born of the same great One is what reminds us constantly, that every one is a reflection of that great One.

And so, on their journey to discover and tap into the beauty of individuality, and the value of the individual, as represented by that special one mountain, in that special land (a mountain, after all, stands alone...) they got stuck in the valley of oneness. In the valley, you don't really see, because the mountains surround you. In a valley, everything seems to come together, and to blend into one.

And there is a very real danger when we get so focused on all of us being one that we will forget how much each one has to contribute, and how much every one is needed, to make the world a better place, the place it is meant to be.

So right there, at the beginning of the world, Hashem separates us, to teach us that we are all different, and that even when we speak the same language, we all speak different languages, and that's actually O.K.

Incidentally, there are many allusions to this in the text. Often, one can discern the most powerful ideas from the words themselves.

Take, for example, the word *“Mi’Kedem”*, *“From the East”*: When you learn Torah, it's not just about reading, it's also about listening. (Kind of like learning people...)

The Rabbis clearly heard echoes of past ideas in coming across the terminology of a given section of the Torah. Hence, as an example, the Midrash or rabbinic legends on the story of Moses are full of allusions to Noach. The word *Teivah* (an ark) only appears in two places in the Torah. The *Teivah*, or 'Ark' of Moshe, which carried him on the waters of the Nile, and was the instrument of his salvation so that he could become the instrument of salvation for the entire world, and the *Teivah*, or 'Ark' of Noach, which carried *him* on the waters of the flood, and was the instrument of *his* salvation so that he could become the instrument of salvation for the entire world.

When the Rabbis see the word *Teivah*, in the book of Exodus, they hear the echo of the same word, from all the way back in the book of *Bereishit* (Genesis). Because of course, it's all one book.

One finds the same word, *“Mi’Kedem”*, *“From the East”*, when Lot, the nephew of Abraham, leaves his uncle's tent for the fertile valley and wickedness of Sodom. “

“Va’Yisah Lot Mekedem”, *“And Lot traveled from the East.”*

Rashi points out that Lot was leaving behind much more than just the tents of Abraham high up in the Mountains of Hebron; he was traveling *“Mikadmono Shel Olam”* “from the Source of the world”. (Bereishit 13:12) He was leaving G-d behind as well.

When Adam & Eve have to leave the Garden of Eden, they too, dwell “**MiKedem Le’Gan Eden**”, “**To the East of Eden**” (Bereishit 3:24) because there too, man, as a result of his actions, has become distant from G-d.

So the journey described here as being Mi’Kedem, may well be alluding to the fact, simply by word usage, that something has gone awry.

And just like we need to hear the words and not just read them, we need as well, to learn to hear each other, each and every one of us, and appreciate the inner and innate beauty that every one of us has to offer.

That is why this story, with all of its challenges has such severe consequences. Because all the way back at the beginning of civilization, the Torah is telling us not just how the world came to be, but how we need to be in the world.

Noach, says Jewish tradition, forgot this simple lesson. In the end, Noach was indeed the most righteous man in the world, but he was righteous on his own. When the rains began to fall, Noach entered the ark alone.

Perhaps he became so focused on the world as it was meant to be, he forgot all the people the world was meant to be for.

The **Ohr Sameach** (Rav Meir Simchah of D’vinsk) in his *Meshech Chochmah*, points out that the sign G-d gives Noach after the flood, indicating that He will never again rain such destruction down on the entire world, is the rainbow.

Why a rainbow? Why not a lightning bolt? A rainbow you, see, is the opportunity to see all the different colors of the spectrum. But you only get to see all those different beautiful colors, when the light is refracted through the clouds. Only when light comes through the darkest clouds do we get to see the beautiful colors of the rainbow. Perhaps, suggests the **Ohr Sameach**, this is to remind us that even in the darkest clouds, one can still find the most beautiful colors. You just have to shine a little light in there. And again, when you take the time to shine that light, you see the beauty of all the different and individual colors. All the different D’vir Mor-Chaims.

I will always wonder whether D’vir actually meant this, or just intuited it, as he picked up that rock in that creek-bed, trying to express to me the inexpressible: why and how unique and special the land of Israel was to him.

Just one rock, one piece of earth, like any other rock, and yet unlike any other rock, because it was that rock and only that rock, which, like D’vir, was one very special part of the whole picture that is the tapestry of the world we hope to build.

May the memory of D’vir (who always saw the beautiful colors in every dark cloud, person, place or thing) and all the other special rocks we all miss so much, continue to be a part of the world that we build, where once again, please G-d, rocks will be for building, and not for throwing.

Shabbat Shalom,

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