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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

PARASHAT NOACH

**Boundaries in Sefer Bereishit
By Rabbi Shimon Klein**

Crisis, disintegration and separation

Parshat Noach starts with a very harsh description:

“And the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And God said to Noach, The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” (Bereishit 6:11-13)

The earth is corrupt and filled with violence. God sees this, addresses Noach, and announces His plan. Prior to this Divine utterance, the text has already described the thinking behind the plan:

“And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord repented that He had made man upon the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, both man, and beast, and creeping things, and the birds of the air, for I repent that I have made them.” (ibid. 5-7)

God regrets having created man in the world; He is grieved, and He decides to wipe out all living things from upon the face of the earth. To the reader suddenly coming upon these verses, this is an unthinkable, inconceivable course of action: the world has already been created; now problems start to arise, and the reaction is – complete annihilation?! We must ask ourselves how and why it is that God resorts to such a seemingly “dis-proportionate” response. The context of our discussion will be a broad one, going far beyond the boundaries of this specific narrative. We shall examine the moral standards of God and of man in Sefer Bereishit, and seek to identify a method for dealing with moral dilemmas relating to the fundamental life circles in this Sefer.

We will look at another event described in our parsha – the project of the generation of the Dispersion:

“And they said, Come, let us build a city and a tower whose top is in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the earth” (11:4).

These people gather in a valley and seek to build a huge tower, lest they be dispersed. God comes down to see their city and their tower, and declares,

“Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do; now, nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do” (11:6).

God asserts that the power of unified mankind is such that perhaps nothing can stand in its way. The Divine response here is to undo this unity. God confounds their language and scatters them, and their plans come to nothing.

In these two different events in our parsha God breaks apart and dissolves a system of life. In this shiur we will expand on this idea and identify a much broader phenomenon whereby the fundamental circles of life in Sefer Bereishit fall apart at the critical moment. Values such as loyalty, morality, and equality, which underpin the existence of a system of life, are seen again and again to crumble in a second, to be replaced with division, killing, hatred, and dissolution.

Following the very first sin committed upon the earth, Adam casts the blame upon his wife: “The woman whom You gave [to be] with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (3:12). Adam fails to assume responsibility for his actions, accusing Chava instead. Chava, in turn, tries to evade responsibility by blaming the serpent: “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate” (3:13). Next, no sooner does the first pair of brothers appear in the world than the first murder within the family takes place. Kayin kills his brother, Hevel. This is followed by a long series of distortions and perversions that blur the most fundamental boundaries: “... the distinguished men (literally, “sons of God”) saw that the daughters of man were fair, and they took them wives of all whom they chose”; “The earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence”; “And God looked upon the earth and, behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.” God’s response to all of this is to set a limit on man’s lifetime, and also – to decree the destruction of all life upon earth. After the Flood, Cham reveals his father’s nakedness (chapter 9); Noach curses his son Cham, as well as his grandson Kena’an; and in our parsha, the world is divided into factions.

What about the forefathers? A review of the stories told about the forefathers reveals crisis after crisis; here, too, the disintegration of the most fundamental circles of life occurs over and over, generation after generation.

The period of the forefathers

Avraham: God wants Avraham close to Him, and this entails severing him from three life-circles: “Get yourself out of your country, and your birthplace, and your father’s house” (12:1). Why? Can Avraham not be brought close to God without severing him from his family and all his life-circles? Can there be no closeness to God with containment of the family circle in which a person lives? Later, Avraham and Lot find that they cannot live alongside one another: “And the land was not able to bear them dwelling together” (13:6). It is Avraham who thinks up the idea of separating, and he suggests it to Lot: “Is not the entire land before you? Separate yourself, I pray you, from me; if you take the left side, I shall take the right; and if you [take] the right, I shall take the left” (13:9); “And they separated themselves from one another.” No less painful is the story of Sara afflicting Hagar, to the point where the latter flees: “And Sarai afflicted her, and she fled from before her” (16:6).¹

Yitzchak: Yitzchak has twin sons, and even before their birth God states that they are destined for a separation that will be accompanied by ongoing struggle: “... And God said to her, Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger” (25:23). Yitzchak loves Esav, while Rivka loves Yaakov: “And Yitzhak loved Esav, for he relished his venison, but Rivka loved Yaakov” – there is unequal love on the part of the parents towards their children. Yaakov exploits a moment of weakness on Esav’s part to demand, “Sell me this day your birthright” (25:31). This attitude is a product and reflection of Rivka’s love for him, as described in the preceding verses. Yitzchak

1 There are further instances of “crumbling” during Avraham’s time: the standards in Sedom, with its rejection of the other: “... the men of the city, the men of Sedom, encompassed the city around about, both young and old, all the people from every quarter, and they called to Lot, and said to him, Where are the men who came into you this night? Bring them out to us, that we may know them” (19: 4-5). Lot’s response to them is, “I pray you, now, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out to you, and do to them as is good in your eyes...” (19:8) - he is ready to abandon his daughters to the mob at the door. The measures that God decides to adopt with regard to the cities of Sedom are destruction and annihilation. Lot’s daughters engage in incest with him, desperate in view of the apparent fate of the human race: “There is no man in the earth to come in to us...” (19:31) – a blurring of family boundaries. There is a peculiar agreement between Avraham and Sarah: “And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you shall show to me: at every place where we arrive there, say of me, He is my brother” (20:13). Sarah, following the birth of Yishmael, demands, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son.” This results in Avraham’s own son being banished from his home: “And Avraham awoke early in the morning, and he took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away; and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer Sheva” (21:14). Ultimately, there is the akeda, in which Avraham almost kills Yitzchak (chapter 22).

follows his father's example: "And the men of the place asked him of his wife, and he said, She is my sister, for he feared to say, She is my wife - Lest [said he] the men of the place kill me on account of Rivka, for she was of fair appearance" (26:7).

Yaakov: Yaakov steals the blessings with cunning, under the guidance of Rivka, his mother: "And Yaakov said to his father, I am Esav your firstborn" (27:19) – a mother and son act behind the backs of the father and the other son. Yitzchak has two sons, and it is quite clear that only one of them will receive the blessings. To Esav's plea, "Bless me, me also, my father!" (27:38), Yitzchak responds helplessly: "Your brother came with cunning and has taken away your blessing!" Later he adds, "Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brethren I have given to him for servants, and with corn and wine I have sustained him; and what shall I do now for you, my son?" (27:37). Esav states, "Is he not rightly called Yaakov – for he has supplanted me these two times; he took away my birthright..." (27:36), recalling the previous injustice of Yaakov taking his birthright. Esav is bitter about his brother's trickery: "And Esav said in his heart When the days of mourning for my father are at hand, then I will slay my brother Yaakov" (27:41) – one brother is planning the murder of the other. Rivka overhears this plan, and instead of discussing the matter with Yitzchak, as would seem appropriate, she weaves another cunning plan – to have Yaakov slip away to Charan. The overt justification, as presented to Yitzchak, is "I am weary of my life because of the daughter of Chet; if Yaakov takes a wife of the daughter of Chet, such as these, of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life be to me?" (27:46).²

2 There are further instances of problematic relations in Yaakov's life: he has two wives; Rachel is beloved, Leah is hated: "and God saw that Leah was hated, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (29:31). The names of Leah's children bear testimony to her pain and her hope as a hated wife. Yaakov causes the flocks of Lavan, his father-in-law, to multiply, and then he flees: "And Yaakov outwitted Lavan the Arammean, in that he did not tell him that he was fleeing" (31:20). Lavan pursues him, planning to harm his family (31). Rachel steals her father's terafim and lies to him. There is a "barrier" between Yaakov and Lavan: "This heap will be witness, and this pillar will be witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and that you will not pass over this heap to me, for harm" (31:52) – a separation between father-in-law and son-in-law. In anticipation of the meeting with Esav, in the context of the danger facing his family, Yaakov organizes his camp in a way that clearly reflects degree of love and rank: the children of the maidservants proceed first, followed by the children of Leah, with the beloved Rachel and her son at the back (33). Esav proposes an alliance with Yaakov: "Let us take our journey and let us go...", but Yaakov responds, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord" (33:15) – he rejects the proposed bond; in fact, Esav is turned away from Yaakov: "... and he went to another country away from his brother, Yaakov. For their property was too great for them to dwell together, and the land in which they sojourned could not bear them because of their cattle" (36:6-7). Like Avraham and Lot, here too the land cannot bear the brothers together. There follows the episode of Shekhem, in which Yaakov's sons trick the men of Shekhem, and then annihilate the entire city: "The sons of Yaakov came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister" (34:27) – a shocking picture of the plundering of the dead. Reuven lies with his father's concubine: "And it was, when Yisrael

Yaakov, Yosef and the brothers: The father shows favoritism towards one particular brother: “Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat with long sleeves” (37:3). The hatred and jealousy of the brothers towards Yosef reaches its climax in their plan to kill him: “And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him” (37:18). According to the original plan, they mean to kill him with their own hands, until Reuven manages to dissuade them. The agreed-upon proposal is that Yosef will be sold to the Midianites as a slave. There is profound crisis in the family in the wake of the sale of Yosef. Yaakov refuses to be comforted; Yehuda goes down from his brothers – yet another division in the family (38).³ The Sefer concludes with the family of Yaakov bereft of its patriarch, with the brothers fearful of Yosef, who may now repay them for their evil towards him. They decide to address this threat by lying: “Your father commanded, before his death, saying, So shall you say to Yosef: Forgive, I pray you now, the trespass of your brothers, and their sin, for they did evil to you. And now, we pray you, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father” (50:16-17). Another element in the redemption of the brothers is Yosef’s spiritual outlook, viewing all that happens as a reflection of God’s will: “And Yosef said to them, Fear not; for am I in the place of God?” (50:19).

All of this makes for difficult reading. There is so much behavior that goes completely against the most elementary and cherished values. Our Sages taught, “the deeds of the fathers are an example for their descendants” – and we must ask whether what we have here is not perhaps an example of how not to behave. This long list of problematic conduct invites us to review these episodes, examining each one in depth with a view to understanding what was actually going on and what these events really signified. At the same time, it would seem that there is an overall story that is being told here, relating to the infrastructure and covert assumptions of Sefer Bereishit: a systematic response to a tremendous collection of undesirable actions.

On our path to seeking answers, we will assume the mission of revisiting our lengthy list of questions and seek the ultimate outcome of the actions of the people concerned. We might also formulate the opposite question: What would

dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father’s concubine, and Yisrael heard of it; now, the sons of Yaakov were twelve” (35:22).

3 There are more incidents worthy of mention in connection with Yehuda, who descends a slippery slope after severing contact with his father’s home. He marries the daughter of a Canaanite; there is an allusion to his “disappointing” (*keziv*) his wife (38:5) at the birth of Shela, whose name alludes to an “illusion” (*ashlaya*). His two elder sons die (“And Er, Yehuda’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of God, and God slew him” [38:7]), the continuity of his family is obstructed (Tamar is not given to Shela as wife), and following the death of his wife he visits a prostitute, who insists that he leave the symbols of his identity – his signet and his cord – as a pledge.

have happened had these people behaved as we would expect them to, in a moral manner? Simple logic suggests that a wicked act produces wickedness, while a good act produces goodness.⁴

The answer that presents itself is a fascinating one. The behaviors in these situations produced a reality that is the foundation of human existence in its different circles. Had these personalities not acted in these apparently unseemly ways, the fundamental structure of the world as we know it would not exist.

Building in place of destruction

Adam, in the Garden of Eden, received one single command – not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge – and he ate. Had he refrained from eating, he would have remained in the Garden of Eden, in the “world that is all good”, without the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil. The failure on his part to accept responsibility led to the Divine decree, “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” (3:19). This represents a punishment but also a destiny: the labor and responsibility that underlie existence of the new world, outside of the Garden. The punishment meted out to the woman – “In sorrow shall you bring forth children, and your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16) – is likewise a statement of destiny and meaning. One brother murders another, and through this act Hevel is disqualified, Kayin is disqualified, and a third son, Shet, is born; he achieves a spiritual level that his brothers had not attained: “And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and he begot a son in his own likeness, in his image, and he called his name Shet” (5:3). Sara demands that Yishmael be banished, and here Yishmael embarks on his cursed path as a nation and a race, alongside the Jewish People. Similarly, the prophecy of the two peoples in Rivka’s womb represents the first step on the path of two nations – Am Yisrael on one hand; Esav and his descendants on the other. The measures that Rivka adopts to keep Esav at a distance – like a measures adopted by Sara in relation to Yishmael – ultimately turn out to have laid the foundations for humanity. Yaakov’s household is characterized by great tension, arising from his spiritual perception: “And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat with long sleeves” (37:3). The name “Yisrael” denotes the place of identity. It is not Yaakov’s loving feelings towards his son Yosef that cause the uproar, but rather the insight of “Yisrael” which identifies Yosef’s great qualities and views him as his successor in Avraham’s great vision.⁵ Hence the great tension between the

4 Obviously, the picture is not purely dichotomous, and its complexity would appear to depend, to a considerable degree, on the fact that in this world good and evil are intermingled, such that even an act that is essentially evil can have an element of good embedded in its depths, and likewise vice versa.

5 He need not necessarily have viewed the destiny of the brothers as following the same pattern as that of Yishmael and Esav. The verses testify again and again to his favoritism towards

brothers, and its result: the creation of two leaders, Yosef and Yehuda. Yosef is chosen by their father, while the natural leadership of Yehuda is acquired through the confidence that the brothers (and, later, Yaakov himself) have in him. These two leaders are poles in the tension between two different forces in Am Yisrael, and they are interwoven in the nation's history throughout the generations.⁶

In a similar way, we can go back to each of the other crises in Sefer Bereishit and explore the world and the new foundations that were built as a result of it.

A Book that is all “beginnings”

We may now return to the distinction that we drew in our shiur on parshat Bereishit, between the world that is “created” and the world that is “formed”. We identified two opposing fundamental acts underlying them: in chapter 1, the existential movement that brings things into existence is one of separation; in chapter 2, the fundamental act is one of joining. Separation allows each creation

Yosef, but not to any rejection of the other sons. It seems that he had no clear conception with regard to their status, which was gradually clarified over the course of the events.

⁶ At the end of Sefer Bereishit, both are serving as leaders: Yosef as viceroy in Egypt, while Yehuda is the leader of Yaakov's household. In the broader context, both are key public figures throughout the generations. There will be shifting divisions between the tribes, but Yosef and Yehuda will always find themselves in opposition. During the journey through the wilderness they were on opposite sides of the camp; Yehuda in the east and the sons of Yosef in the west. In the episode of the spies, their representatives behaved differently from those of all the other tribes. The representative of Yehuda was Kalev, whose words uphold the ability of the nation to go up and fight: “He said, Let us go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it!” (Bamidbar 13:30). The representative of the tribe of Yosef, Yehoshua, is silent here. Both speak of the goodness of the land: “And Yehoshua bin Nun and Kalev ben Yefuneh, of those who spied out the land, tore their garments. And they said to the entire congregation of Bnei Yisrael, saying, The land which we passed through, to spy it, is an exceedingly good land” (ibid. 14:6-7). Upon the nation's entry into the land, the leader is from the tribe of Yosef – Yehoshua. Later, the first king is Shaul, likewise a descendant of Rachel. Finally, leadership shifts to the tribe of Yehuda, starting from the period of David. Even prior to this shift, during Shaul's reign, the tribe of Yehuda found expression as an independent tribe, and when they go out to war they are numbered in their own right, not as part of the national total (Shemuel I 11:8, ibid. 15:4). As during the period of Ish Boshet, with a division of the kingdom between Yehuda and Yisrael, during the reign of Yeravam the kingdom is divided between Yehuda and Yisrael. The future vision of Yechezkel sees a reunification or reconnection of these two branches: “And you, son of man, take yourself one stick, and write upon it, For Yehuda, for the children of Yisrael his companions; then take another stick and write upon it, For Yosef, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions, and join them one to the other to make one stick, and they shall become one in your hand... So says the Lord God: Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the nations into which they have gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land, and I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all; and they shall no more be two nations, nor shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all...” (Yechezkel 37:16-17, 21-22).

to exist without being swallowed up or having its essential identity blurred or overshadowed. This is the first movement. Only as a second stage, after the consolidation of identity and existence, can there be an encounter with the other, and a possibility of jointly weaving a meaningful life texture.

It now becomes clear that the movement of separation transcends the boundaries of the story of Creation in the first chapter, and characterizes the Sefer as a whole. This movement of separation sets up boundaries; it tells the essential, profound story of Sefer Bereishit. It is this movement of separation that creates reality in many different spheres, establishing fundamental concepts in the spiritual world,⁷ as well as nations and the basis for the relationships between them. The logic behind the existence of this movement is that Sefer Bereishit describes the origins of humanity. Human development, and the connection between human beings that is the basis for human society, are still in their earliest stages. The bonds between people are based on language, creative action, common history, a binding legal system, and a culture that connects them to a common circle of belonging. These areas are still in embryonic form; the connection between human beings has nothing to rest on. There is no properly-developed legal system to regulate the complexity of life; science is still very primitive; there is no dependable basis for principles upon which social life might be based; the laws of the spiritual world are also in primal form. The world is a place of paganism in which every form of power is a prime concept. In the midst of all the warring forces of nature stands man. There is as yet no consolidation of national frameworks, in which each group of people has its own shared common denominator and awareness that connects its members and creates cohesion, defining its members as a single organ. There are no bridges between worlds; the world is, to a considerable extent, one-dimensional. In addition, there are no creative solutions to the conflicts raging within it.

All of the above turn the dominant movement in the world to existential questions, to the placing of boundaries between the different forces existing in the world. There are no major movements of joining or connection in Sefer Bereishit; they first appear in Sefer Shemot. “These are the names of the children of Israel...” – the opening verse indicates a transition from a divided family, as presented in Sefer Bereishit, to the “nation of the children of Israel”; the beginning of the formation of a unified organism.

We will now note two phenomena that are unique to Sefer Bereishit, and that express the primal, embryonic nature of this Sefer.

Speaking with the One

⁷ In the final section of the shiur below we will illustrate the existence of movements in the spiritual world that are molded in this process of separation and clarification.

It is interesting to note that throughout Sefer Bereishit, God speaks, during any given period, only with one person, or with a man and his wife, but not with separate people simultaneously.⁸

It would appear that this fact is a function of the overall picture arising from the Sefer: as yet there is no structured life system in the world; there is no convention of spiritual experience, culture or legal system that might give rise to social life. In other words, there is not yet any platform that could connect the contrasts and opposites to become limbs of a single world. To illustrate this situation, let us imagine a scenario in which God would have maintained contact, at this stage of the world, with two different people. Two people means two different paths.⁹

During this period when the world does not yet contain the insights that bestow meaning on this separateness, Divine communication with a person through one spiritual path precludes His communication with another person

8 During the time of Adam, God speaks with Adam and with his wife. Thereafter He speaks with Kayin. During the ten generations that follow there is always one son who is mentioned by name, and some of these individuals maintain contact with God. God speaks with Noach, and later commands Avraham to cut himself off from all of his life circles on the road to the joint mission that he will undertake with God. God does not reveal himself to Yitzchak until after the death of Avraham: "And it was, after the death of Avraham, that God blessed Yitzchak..." (Bereishit 25:11) – He then appears to him and to Rivka (at this stage Yitzchak is 75 years old). Yaakov leaves Be'er Sheva for Charan, and God tells him, "Behold, I am with you, and I shall watch over you wherever you go, and I shall bring you back to this land, for I shall not leave you until I have performed that of which I have spoken to you." Throughout all these years there is no mention of Yitzchak, or of any Divine communication with him, although we know that he lived almost sixty years after Yaakov's departure. Yosef goes down to Egypt and the Divine Presence accompanies him: "And God was with Yosef..."; "and whatever he did, God caused to flourish" (Bereishit 39:2). Throughout his years there, there is no mention of Yaakov or of any Divine revelation to him. It is only when he hears the news, "Yosef is still alive", that his spirit returns to him – "And the spirit of Yaakov, their father, was revived". The midrash comments, "Some say that the Divine spirit, which had left Yaakov, rested upon him at that time, as it is written, 'And the spirit of Yaakov was revived'." (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, chapter 30).

The exception to this rule is Avimelekh, to whom God speaks during the period that Divine speech is directed only to Avraham. It would seem that the meaning of this deviation relates to the content of the message: it is a warning against any harm to Avraham, in view of Avraham's tremendous stature: "And now, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, that you may live; and if you do not restore [her to him], know that you will surely die – you and all that are yours" (Bereishit 20:7).

9 Even Avraham and Yitzchak are two opposite worlds. Admittedly, Yitzchak is Avraham's successor and continuation, but a distinction must be drawn between two different spheres: in the sense of a model, Yitzchak continues his father's path. But in term of his inner movement and spirit, he tells a completely different story. Avraham embarked on a new path; his inner movement is one of beginning. Yitzchak's inner movement is one of continuity; following a path that has already been paved. The Sages capture this distinction most eloquently in the midrash by attributing to Avraham the quality of loving-kindness, while Yitzchak is characterized by strict justice and might.

through a different spiritual path. In the background, in contrast to the multiplicity of gods existing in other cultures, God invites the world to a place of unity, a place that is all-inclusive. This being the case, at this stage of the world, God limits His communication with one individual at a time.

Choice of the one

To focus on a different aspect of the same idea, in our long list of questions about the morality of many of the choices and actions in Sefer Bereishit, we made mention of a choice that repeats itself in every generation: the chosen son who will continue his father's path. We may now define this more clearly: in Sefer Bereishit there is a fundamental assumption that a man has a family, he has children, but only one of them will be defined as his spiritual successor.

“This is the book of the generations of Adam; on the day that God created mankind, in the likeness of God He made him; male and female He created them, and blessed them, and called their name Adam, on the day of their creation. And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begot a son, in his own likeness, after his image, and called his name Shet. And the days of Adam after he had borne Shet were eight hundred years, and he begot sons and daughters. And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died.” (5:1-5)

Adam is created in the image of God; Shet is his successor, being in the image and likeness of Adam. Neither Kayin nor Hevel was described in these terms; certainly, no such description is attached to Adam's offspring, who are referred to simply as “sons and daughters”. This pattern is repeated over the course of ten generations, until Noach, and then for another ten generations until the appearance of Avraham. It is a pattern that characterizes the Sefer to its conclusion.¹⁰

This phenomenon is addressed in the *Sefer ha-Kuzari*. The Rabbi identifies the chain of generations documented in the Torah as a list of those embodying

¹⁰ It is maintained in the generations of the forefathers, too: Lot is rejected in favor of Avraham (chapter 13). “Banish the son of the maidservant,” Sara demands, and God's response is, “All that Sara says to you- obey, for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called.” God supports Sara's position, rejecting the more inclusive, containing view of Avraham. Esav is rejected in favor of Yaakov – at first he is separated from the birthright, and then the blessing is taken from him, too. Yosef is at first chosen by Yaakov as his successor, but – contrary to the ritual that has repeated itself thus far – a family comes into existence in which there is place for everyone. This place is not assured in advance, and the crises that the family must deal with demonstrate the degree to which the status of each member is not to be taken for granted.

the Divine mandate, from Adam to the time of the forefathers.¹¹ The focus is always on the individual through whom there passes that special Divine quality, from generation to generation, until Yaakov; from him onwards, all are included under the category of “Am Yisrael”. This interpretation focuses on the inner quality that leads to the creation of Am Yisrael, rather than as an overall spiritual social phenomenon. It is difficult to free oneself of the description on the plain level of the text, which does not confine the phenomenon specifically to the “Divine quality”, and which would seem to be essentially something broader. It describes an order of values that attaches great importance to the firstborn,¹² who is meant to continue the father’s path. One son continues the path of one father. The thought that two or more might continue the father is inconceivable, since they are different – in some respects even mutually contradictory; how, then, could two continue one? Thoughts of this sort are clearly an expression of a conceptual system suited to the world of Creation, a primal situation in which all processes of formation and connection are still in their earliest stages.

Adam vs. “a living soul”

Let us now return to the Flood and the generation of the Dispersion, and seek to understand what changed in the world in these two events.¹³

11 “...whilst since Adam only isolated individuals had been inspired till then. Adam was perfection itself We call him God's son, and we call all those who were like him also sons of God. He left many children, of whom the only one capable of taking his place was Abel, because he alone was like him. After he had been slain by Cain through jealousy of this privilege, it passed to his brother Seth, who also was like Adam, being [as it were] his essence and heart, whilst the others were like husks and rotten fruit. The essence of Seth, then, passed to Enoch, and in this way the divine influence was inherited by isolated individuals down to Noah. They are compared to the heart; they resembled Adam, and were styled sons of God... The essence of Abraham passed over to Isaac, to the exclusion of the other sons who were all removed from the land, the special inheritance of Isaac. The prerogative of Isaac descended on Jacob, whilst Esau was sent from the land which belonged to Jacob. The sons of the latter were all worthy of the divine influence, as well as of the country distinguished by the divine spirit. This is the first instance of the divine influence descending on a number of people, whereas it had previously only been vouchsafed to isolated individuals.” (Translation at <http://www.shechem.org/torah/kuzari/>)

12 At the point of departure Kayin is the firstborn, but his actions invalidate him. Over the chain of generations starting from Shet and extending down to Avraham (with the exception of the three sons of Noach) the Torah focuses on the firstborn, after which the text notes, “and he begot sons and daughters.” Esav is the firstborn, and his birthright is a significant subject in its own right. In Yaakov’s household, Reuven is the firstborn son of Leah, while Yosef is the firstborn of Rachel; the tension between them is clearly manifest.

13 The story of the Flood is molded in the form of two intertwined narratives: one uses the Divine Name Y-H-V-H and reflects the concepts arising from the second chapter of Bereishit; the other uses the name “Elokim” and reflects the concepts arising from the first chapter. The separation that we will discuss here is described in the verses conceptually linked with the first chapter.

A fundamental difference between the world that preceded the Flood and the world as it is afterwards, concerns the question of man's attitude towards and relations with animals. Previously, man was described as eating only plants; animals, too, ate only plants, and there was no sanction for taking the life of any living thing:

“And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, on which is the fruit yielding seed; to you it shall be for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for food – and it was so.” (Bereishit 1:29-30)

God intends man to eat of the herbs of the field and the fruit of the trees, and the animals are meant to eat “every green herb for food”. After the Flood, this changes:

“And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon all that moves upon the earth, and upon all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, even as the green herb have I given you all things.” (9:2-3)

A new fear of man is cast upon the animals of the field and the birds; the fish, too, are given into his hand. From now onwards, the eating of meat is permitted. What is the significance of this change? Why is this the moral and message of the story of the Flood? The picture would seem to be as follows: prior to the generation of the Flood, man was superior to the animals by virtue of the Divine image in which he is created. However, the animals, too, have intrinsic value, as “living things” (or “living souls” – *nefesh chaya*), and hence killing them was prohibited. Ten generations later, the world has degenerated and become corrupt:

“And God looked upon the world and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And God said to Noach, The end of all flesh is come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” (6:12-13)

“Corruption” means a blurring of boundaries. “All flesh had corrupted its way” means that the boundaries of life are no longer clear. The Sages offer the following description in the midrash:

“... Because the generation of the Flood had caused all flesh to corrupt its way upon the earth: they caused beasts to mate with animals, and animals to mate with beasts, and mated all of them with man, and man

with all of them. Therefore it is written, with regard to them, ‘Behold, I will destroy them with the earth...’ (Midrash Tanchuma, parshat Noach 5).¹⁴

In the generation of the Flood all flesh has become corrupt, and Chazal identify this corruption as a disordering in the realm of sexual relations – a complete blurring of boundaries. This amounts to a blow to the act of Creation, to the attribution of each species, as set forth in chapter 1 of Bereishit. What, then, is the solution to this degeneration?

A new boundary is set up between man and “living souls”. No longer will they both follow a vegetarian diet. The boundary between them comes in the form of the permission granted to man to eat meat. This gap creates a tangible difference between the value of the life of a human being created in the image of God, and the life of any animal. At the same time, the text goes on to say,

“But your blood of your lives I shall require; at the hand of every beast I will require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man’s brother will I require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood – by man his own blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.” (9:5-6).

Here the Torah introduces for the first time the prohibition against murder, setting up a clear boundary between the life of a “living soul”, which may be taken, and the life of a human being, which is now very precious, and a supreme value.

This measure joins the chain of separation that we have referred to in Sefer Bereishit – a separation that proposes two values, one alongside the other, and draws a distinction between them in the most tangible possible way.

“He set the bounds of the nations”

Let us now consider the generation of the Dispersion.

The commentators note the difficulty of defining precisely what their sin was:

“And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in

¹⁴ The midrash goes on to recall the first chapter of Bereishit, describing the precise order of Creation and the commandment concerning the individuality of each species: “From whence do we know that at Creation, the animals, the beasts, the birds and the creeping things were commanded not to intermingle? For it is written, ‘And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind...’ (Bereishit 1). God said to them, ‘Each kind shall cleave to its own kind; it may not cleave to that which is not its own kind.’”

the land of Shin'ar, and they dwelled there. And they said to one another, Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly; and they had brick for stone, and slime they had as mortar. And they said, Come, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." (Bereishit 11:1-4)

"The whole earth was of one language, and of one speech" – this is an image of unity, with few words; there is no complexity, nor any differentiation between the people. They find themselves in a plain, a given space that holds them all, and here they formulate a two-stage plan: First, "They said to one another, Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly; and they had brick for stone, and slime they had as mortar." With a sort of fraternal consensus they produce building materials. In light of their success, as a second stage they set themselves a more challenging, spiritual objective: "And they said, Come, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." They want to build a city in which they can live together, and a tower representing a sort of pinnacle, a symbolic "heaven" for the city; and they seek unity – lest they be scattered all over the earth.

God sees the tower, and the power of unity, which may indeed advance them well along on their path:

"And God said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do." (11:6)

God proposes His response:

"Come, let us go down and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth, and they ceased to build the city. Therefore its name is Babel, because God confounded there the language of all the earth, and from there God scattered them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

God intervenes, and in place of the great unity that had been displayed in the city, He brings a spirit of divisiveness; there is an awakening of the spirit of stubborn contrariness that creates different languages, drawing divisions between people, until they are scattered from there over the entire earth.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ This view of the situation, which does not pinpoint any apparent sin, is adopted, for example by the Orach Chaim, in his commentary on the Torah: "And the entire world was one language...' – we must address ourselves to the question of what the generation of the Dispersion were hoping to achieving in building the city and the tower. For if their intention concerned some sort of heretic denial, then the heresy involved is not made clear; in addition,

total of seventy offspring of Shem, Cham and Yefet, enumerated previously in the parsha, now assumes new significance: these seventy descendants are the seventy nations that are scattered throughout the world, representing the origins of humanity.

In summary, we started out by seeking to understand what God was achieving in His actions towards the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Dispersal. The next stage was to extend our questions to the entire panoply of events in Sefer Bereishit. We identified a widespread phenomenon whereby the fundamental life circles in Sefer Bereishit fall apart the moment they are put to the test. This phenomenon certainly characterizes the human behavior, but in many instances God seems to follow the same pattern. To this picture we might add a further link, a question: Where do these acts or processes of disintegration lead to? The overall impression of the stories gives the impression of actions that create a boundary, drawing distinctions between living things and human beings, while at the same time laying the foundations for the world. The seemingly destructive or divisive actions in fact created nations and cultures, and facilitate the foundation upon which the world stands.

This description adds to a more in-depth understanding of Sefer Bereishit as the Book of Creation. Chapter 1 tells the story of the creation of the heavens and the earth – in general; about chaos and formlessness, and from this point onwards about separation after separation that will eventually give rise to the world, continuing the process of Creation. This process is a central axis around which the events of Sefer Bereishit turn. Ultimately, the elements of this world achieve stability and stand firm upon the world stage.

God would not have stopped at merely dispersing them... Perhaps it was because when God created the world, He meant for one third to be inhabited, and one third wilderness... Therefore it says, 'And the entire earth was of one speech and of one language' – they wished everyone to be gathered together in one place and not scattered this way and that, and that there would be one place specifically designated for habitation. It was for this reason that they build themselves a city – meaning, a single city for everyone. And in order to address the concern lest they be scattered throughout the world, or that any one of them might head this way or that, they made a tower, to serve as a sign that this was their place, which was named after them – and so that they place might be visible from afar, so someone could draw near to it. And this is as it is written (verse 4), 'Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth' – for they did not wish to be scattered, with few here and a few there. And therefore God said that this thing was not proper in His eyes; it was an aim that they might actually attain... And therefore He decreed that their intention be thwarted, and their language be confounded – for then they would of necessity be separated, and each would seek a place for himself. This is why the text says, 'And from there God scattered them upon the face of the entire earth...'. ”

A similar exegetical direction is adopted by Rabbenu Bechaye.

Translation by Kaeren Fish