

# Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

## Parashat Noach 5775

### Men Behaving Very Badly

The hope of a brand new world was quickly shattered. Sin eclipsed holiness and almost immediately, Adam and Eve were evicted from Eden. They had eaten the fruit of the one tree that had been forbidden to them. The sin, and its punishment, are both clear and unequivocal.

The sin of Cain, though far more devastating, is somewhat less straightforward: He took a life, but it is not clear if his act of fratricide violated an explicit commandment. While it should have been self-evident to him, as it should be to all of us, that murder – particularly of one’s own flesh and blood – is a sin of unparalleled magnitude, we may nonetheless imagine that a good defense attorney would have an easier time defending Cain. Adam and Eve defied God’s explicit instructions; they could not plead ignorance or incompetence.

But what of the generation of the flood, in which all of creation was found guilty and sentenced to annihilation? Their behavior was quite corrupt, but did they, in fact, break any “laws”? Was their sin like that of Adam and Eve, a flagrant violation of God’s explicit directive, or were they more like Cain, who was expected to have an innate appreciation for the sanctity of human life?

While the preamble to the flood speaks of a society riddled with corruption and violence, the Torah provides the backdrop for the situation, giving us insight into the state of mind that created this corrupt and violent society.

Man began to increase on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them. The sons of the powerful (*bnei elohim*) saw that the daughters of man were good, and they took themselves wives from whomever they chose. (Bereishit 6:1-2)

The inequity is stark and unmistakable: Here we have the first power struggle in history. This is no mere patriarchy; it is a society based on power and

victimization. *Bnei elohim*, the sons of the mighty and powerful, took the daughters – the most vulnerable offspring of lowly, weak, pedestrian man.

How different this is from the description of Adam's union with Eve:

The man said, 'Now this is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She shall be called Woman (*Ishah*) because she was taken from man (*ish*).' Therefore, man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Bereishit 2:23-24)

Adam does not objectify Eve; they come together as equals.

The man and his wife were both naked, but they were not embarrassed by one another. (Bereishit 2:25)

In only a few generations, man's moral deterioration is drastic, and it is rooted in the objectification of women. Powerful men regarded women in unnatural terms, not as equals but as commodities. They saw that "the daughters of man were good," and they "took" them, like so much property. Women were not courted or serenaded; no chocolates or flowers were offered, no poetry read. These were not marriages between soulmates. Men did not extoll the virtues of leaving their parents' homes in order to create new families. In this society, a man simply dragged the weaker women by the hair back to his cave. The description is cold and violent, and imparts no more regard for women than would be afforded any other object: "And they took themselves wives from whomever they chose."

This behavior was both indecent and displeasing to God; in addition, it may very likely have been a violation of a Divine commandment that lies at the heart of the creation of mankind.

On the sixth day, God made an announcement concerning the creation of man:

And the Almighty said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness...' (Bereishit 1:26)

**This is no mere patriarchy; it is a society based on power and victimization.**

To whom did God address this declaration? So many commentaries have suggested solutions to this textual challenge. Was it the heavens and the earth that the Almighty invited to take part in the creation of man? Was it the angels? This declaration is immediately followed by a description of the act of creation itself, using a very specific term that denotes *ex nihilo* creation, the creation of something from nothingness, of which only God is capable. Whereas the declaration uses the term “to make” (*na’aseh*), the act of creation itself that immediately follows is described as *vayivra* - “and God created.” To make matters even more interesting, in the following chapter, the creation of man is described as “formation,” *vayitzer*, denoting the use of preexisting matter.

These three different verbs are extremely precise, and very different from one another. God’s first act is *ex nihilo* creation of the human form, *vayivra*. But this creation is not complete: At a later stage, God imbues this human form with a soul. He breathes into man a part of His spirit, transforming the purely physical being into something more than the sum of its physical components. This is the act of *vayitzer*, which makes use of preexisting physical and spiritual components. What, then, do we learn from the declaration God made before this process began? What is the meaning of *na’aseh adam*, ‘let us make man’?

God’s declaration, His “invitation,” actually reveals an astonishing possibility: God called upon man himself, even before his creation – to take part in the making of man.<sup>1</sup> The image in which man is created, and in which he is invited to become an active participant, is the image of God reflected in the Divine Name of *Elohim*, -Almighty, possessing all powers. The Almighty God invites man, who is endowed with tremendous physical, intellectual and spiritual capabilities, to manifest this image of God, using these capabilities to create a just and stable society and rule over all of creation. It is these same capabilities that tempt man to subjugate and control others, to exert power and violence in a destructive manner, yet God, who is all-powerful, invites man to manifest the image of God within him, to be creative and use his capabilities to build and improve the world. God’s invitation, “Let us make man in our image and likeness,” is a declaration of intent that is the

**God called upon man himself, even before his creation – to take part in the making of man.**

---

<sup>1</sup> See comments of B’chor Shor to Berishit 1:26.

very foundation of the act of creation that will follow. It is an invitation to mankind to take part in creation by taking part in the perfection of human society and thus bringing the image of God within us to its full expression.

When the men of the generation of the flood used their power to dominate the weak, they rebelled against this first commandment, '*Let us make man in our image and likeness.*' When powerful men saw women as “goods,” objectifying their bodies and ignoring their souls, they turned their backs on the image of God that is the foundation of the creation of mankind.

The Torah recounts the creation of man as a three-step process: First, *bri'ah* – creation of the human form in an act of *ex nihilo*, Divine will. Next, *yetzira* – the formation of man as a spiritual being, infusing the physical form with the breath of God. And finally, there is the ‘making of man,’ a process which has been ongoing since the very dawn of history, a commandment that we must strive to fulfill each and every day. We are commanded to use our capabilities to create – to build and improve, to create partnerships and communities, families and friendships. We must never use our power to exploit or enslave others. This moral imperative is older than mankind; it is the declaration of intent with which mankind was created, and it is embodied in God’s invitation to us all to be active partners in creation: “Let us make man in our image and likeness.”

The generation of the flood abused their capabilities, and violated this most basic commandment. For this reason, they forfeited their right to exist. Like a giant *mikvah*, the cleansing waters of the flood “reset” the world and washed away the cruel and corrupt society they had created.

Fortunately for us, God vowed that He would never again bring a flood of these proportions upon the world. This does not indicate that the world does not deserve this punishment; in fact, we are far more similar to the generation of the flood than we would like to admit. Yet despite our own failures, God voluntarily removed this type of total eradication from His arsenal – disabled the restart button, as it were. In order to teach mankind not to abuse the power with which we are endowed, God states that He will not use His limitless power in this way.

And yet, powerful men and women continue to abuse their capabilities. As individuals and societies, we continue to misuse our own power. As we read the Torah, we would do well to remind ourselves that the image of God in which we

are created gives us the ability to rise to the challenge of the very first commandment; indeed – let us make man!

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/09/essays-and-audio-parshat-noach.html>