

# Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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## Noach's Repair

*Rabbi Reuven Boshnack, based on Izhbitzer*

Before the world was created, it was so close to Hashem that at any moment it could return to nothing at anytime. Once the world was broken by Adam and Chava, the world became more permanent, as it screamed out for repair, and therefore the world needed to stay in existence.

Now we can understand who Noach was. says "that the Rabbis approved of him." (The word for "approved" is *nocheh*, which is related to the name Noach.) This phrase is also used when a person considers buying something. If he hasn't given the seller money, he can retract, but after the funds have changed hands, the Rabbis don't approve of retracting. Creation existed, but it was as if "the money" hadn't been paid. Noach came into the world after the transaction had taken place. He came to make sure the transaction was permanent, and therefore the Rabbis approve of his actions.

The Midrash (Tehillim 62) and Zohar (Beshallah 54a) explain that the soul, by its very nature, wants to return to its source. When it sees that Hashem fills all of the world, then it returns, descending and raising the body. In the first generations before the flood, people made a grave error. They assumed that whatever happened was according to Hashem's will, and therefore they did whatever they wanted. Each name of Hashem represents a different way by which he runs the world. Those early years were associated with "kindness," which is the source of all reality. Hence the name which was used to describe that mode of interaction was "Havaya," the four-letter name that is read, but not pronounced. The name "Havaya" literally means "to exist." We know that this name is never pronounced under normal circumstances. But one could describe the generation preceding the flood as one that "misread Hashem's name." They misread the existence of their actions as Divine approval of their actions. They read Hashem's name "as it is written." They saw the existence (as spelled out by the word *Havaya*) and assumed that is how He wants us to interact with Him.

Noach was the first person who submitted to Hashem's authority. As a result, Hashem began to be seen not just as the source of everything (*Havaya*) but also as a Master to

the World. This is the root of our common practice to read the name "Havaya" as "Adnus," which means "my Master." It demonstrates that despite the fact that Hashem creates and sustains all of existence, He has demands as well. Existence is not lawless.

*Adapted from Rabbi Reuven Boshnack, Pathways to the Heart*

## The Terrible Secret of the Tower

*Rabbi Ari D. Kahn*

The story of the Tower of Babel is well known: Mankind unites to build an edifice that will reach the heavens. God descends and frustrates the plan; man is dispersed, and a language barrier, not a tower, is erected.

We are not told why God deemed it necessary to halt the project, although rabbinic sources reveal that there was something so heinous about this plan that the record of the entire episode was censored and its shocking details suppressed. In order to unveil the dark heart of this episode that lies behind the terse language of the text, we must first ask a basic, obvious question regarding the scant information we have been given: If the plan was to reach heaven—perhaps to "declare war" on God, as some scholars have suggested, why build in the low terrain of the valley and not on a mountain? If the plan was to prevent the destruction of a future flood, again—why not build on higher ground?

Traditional sources provide us with a small but crucial bit of information. This valley was the lowest area, and it became the drainage route for the waters of the flood. The ecosystem in this valley was comprised of the debris from the flood. The shocking implication is that the new tower was built using the physical remains of the previous generation. The bricks were made from the sediment in the valley—sediment created when an entire generation was eradicated. What motivated them to create their tower on these foundations? Apparently, the new generation had developed some type of animosity towards a God whom they perceived as merciless and destructive. Careful consideration of what is not in the text shows that God is not part of their narrative; this is why some scholars have characterized their cause as a "war against Heaven." Perhaps they saw the tower as a type of memorial for the victims,

made out of the very victims it was intended to memorialize. Alternatively, their behavior may have been no more than callous disregard. Infatuated with their new technology, history held no interest for this generation. Stories of the past were of no consequence, and they concerned themselves only with progress and the future.

Other rabbinic traditions take on a new light when considered through the prism of this gruesome episode: Elsewhere, our sages recount that our patriarch Avraham was thrown into the furnace when he expressed belief in one God. The very same furnace used to create these ghoulish bricks was meant to quell Avraham's voice of dissent.

The generation of the tower, unified in trampling upon the remains of the previous generation as well as the rights of dissenters amongst them, was fated to lose the unity which they abused.

As for us, we prefer Avraham—who emerges unscathed from the furnace, committed to decency and kindness. We reject the voice of the mob, the united but tyrannical masses who trampled their fellow man and desecrated the remains of those who came before them in order to build an edifice they believed would bring them honor and glory.

*Adapted from Rabbi Ari D. Kahn, Healing & Repairing*

## The Longevity of the Ancients

### Mitchell First

We all wonder about those long lifespans recorded at the beginning of Genesis. For example, we are told that Adam lived 930 years, that Shet lived 912 years, and that Metushelach lived 969 years. How have Jewish sources understood these numbers over the centuries?

R. Saadiah Gaon writes that the longevity of these early generations was part of God's plan for the rapid proliferation of mankind on the earth. The longer people lived, the more children they could have. It would seem that he believed that everyone in those early generations lived a long lifespan. R. Yehudah Ha-Levi (12th century) believes that it was only the individuals listed who lived long. Each of the individuals listed was the heart and essence of his generation and was physically and spiritually perfect. The Divine Flow was transmitted from one generation to another through these exceptional individuals. Rambam, in a famous passage in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (2:47) writes: "I say that only the persons named lived so long, whilst other people enjoyed the ordinary length of life. The men named were exceptions, either in consequence

of different causes, as e.g., their food or mode of living, or by way of miracle."

Ramban (on Gen. 5:4) quotes Rambam's view and then disagrees, calling Rambam's words *divrei ruach*. Ramban writes that the individuals with long lifespans named in the Bible were not exceptional in their lifespans. Rather, the entire world had long lifespans before the Flood. But after the Flood, the world atmosphere changed and this caused the gradual reduction in lifespans.

Rashbatz also mentions the idea that the early generations were close in time to Adam and Adam was not born from a *tippah seruchah* like the rest of us, but was made by God from the earth. Those early generations inherited his superior bodily constitution. Another idea found in some of our Rishonim is that those early individuals did not chase after *taavat ha-guf*, which reduces the lifespan. See, e.g., the commentary of the Radak to Gen. 5:4.

But there were some Rishonim who were unwilling to take the Genesis lifespan numbers literally. The earliest such source that we know of was R. Moses Ibn Tibbon (late 13th century). He suggests that the years given for people's lives were actually the years of *malkhutam ve-nimmuseihem*, i.e., the dynasties and/or customs that they established.

Another figure who took such an approach was R. Levi ben Chayyim (early 14th century). First he mentions several of the possibilities to explain the longevity, e.g., good and simple food and "marrying late" (!). But then he concludes that in his opinion the names mentioned were just *roshei avot*. In other words, the number of years given for each individual reflects the total of the years of the several generations of individuals named for that first individual.

In modern times, Prof. Natan Aviezer of Bar-Ilan University has written much on this topic. For example, in one of his writings he explains that modern science has figured out that aging is largely caused by genes, and not by a wearing out of our bodies. He suggests that when God stated that Man would be limited to 120 years (Gen. 6:3), this was when God first introduced the gene for aging into the human gene pool.

If you have not found any of the above answers satisfying, I have some good news. R. Saadiah Gaon writes (*Emunot Ve-Deot*, chapter 7) that in the era of the redemption the human lifespan will be approximately 500 years. Presumably, at that time we won't be bothered by those long lifespans in Genesis anymore!