

The Shameful Failure of a Shameful Culture

Noach 2017

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

A few moments ago, we read about the **מבול** that took place in the days of Noach; but another type of floodgate was recently opened. In the wake of revelations out of Hollywood, reports and allegations of misconduct are being aired at a staggering rate. Harassment, objectification and worse are acts so anathema to the principles and values we consider sacred, they repulse us to our core. But beyond a feeling of outrage at the perpetrators and empathy for the victims, this morning I'd like to think with you not just about how we might react, but about what we can do.

Following the story of the flood is an enigmatic coda – a coda our grade school teachers probably glossed over. Very briefly, the Torah tells us that Noach plants a vineyard, becomes intoxicated and debases himself in the privacy of his tent. Cham immodestly gazes upon his father in the moment of his compromised state and ultimately becomes the subject of his father's curse. Shem and Yaphet take the high road, cover their father and remain above reproach.

So just what is this story about? It's so bizarre and so bewildering. What is it doing here? What does it mean?

Chazal are quick to point to the connections between Noach and Adam. After all, Noach is the new Adam. He's the first person to be born after Adam's death. And in the aftermath of the flood, he becomes the father of civilization. He's the one who picks up Adam's baton and bears the command to be fruitful and multiply.

But the connection goes even deeper.

Our tradition suggests four identities for the forbidden fruit in the garden and prominent among those suggestions is the notion that the **עץ הדעת** was not a tree at all, but actually a grapevine. On this reading: Just as Adam ventures out into his new world and partakes of the forbidden fruit, Noach ventures out into his new world and does the same – except this time around, Noach has transformed grapes into wine.

The question is: Noach surely knows the tale of Adam in the garden. Given the tragic consequences of that story, why would he begin his new life by making the same mistake?

What I'd like to suggest is this: The key to understanding this puzzling text is to appreciate the effects of the vine. In the case of Adam, the Torah is quite explicit. Before they ate from the tree:

וַיְהִיו שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים, הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ; וְלֹא, יִתְבַּשְׁשׂוּ.

Both Adam and Chava were naked and they were not ashamed.

But as soon as they eat from the tree,

וַתִּפְקְחֶנָּה, עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם, וַיֵּדְעוּ, כִּי עֲרֻמִּם הֵם; וַיִּתְפְּרוּ עֲלֵהּ תְּאֵנָה

They open their eyes and perceive their own bodies; and suddenly they're in need of clothes because now they are ashamed.

What I'd like to suggest is that Noah goes back to the vine because he's trying to turn back time. He's trying to return – not just to the pre-flood state, but to the pre-sin state! The idea of becoming drunk so intoxicates him because he thinks by taking the wine out of the bottle, he can put the genie back in.

Having borne witness to the destruction of humankind, Noah doesn't just want to forget what's happened; he wants to escape into the painlessness of naiveté and innocence. He wants to go back to a moment in time when man's perception was dim and distant.

Noah retreats to the privacy of his tent – to the place where he can be utterly exposed – like primeval man – without being seen. It's an attempt to recapture a solitary state in which human relatedness is rendered irrelevant; a state in which what other people think is of no concern.

When Cham appears and sees his father, he undoes Noah's plan by causing his father to be shamed. וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו. His great sin is the sin of seeing that which Noah had hoped would remain unseen.

The heroes of the story are Shem and Yafet – who clothe their father without seeing – avoiding the trap into which Cham had fallen.

In her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, anthropologist Ruth Benedict famously coined the notion of a shame culture – a culture in which everything is oriented around perception; everything revolves around the notion of image and how people will be seen.

It's an apt description of the world to which we're introduced in our parsha.

- Noah fails because he thinks he can revert to a time without shame.
- Cham fails because he has no sense of shame.
- And even the heroes fit the pattern. Yes, Shem and Yaphet ultimately act commendably; but they're motivated not by an innate sense of right and wrong, but by their sense of what will be shameful and will not.

The balance of Bereishit is taken up with the alternative: with אברהם העברי – the man willing to stand alone on one side of a river while the rest of the world stands on the other. I would say in Genesis, the alternative to a shame culture is not a guilt culture as Benedict suggests, but the culture of the inner compass. The way we act is not a function of what others will think or how we'll be perceived, but rather a function of what's objectively considered the right thing to do.

- That's Avraham preaching ethical monotheism in a world dominated by paganism;
- That's Yaakov rolling a stone off a well and performing an act of חסד when everyone told him it couldn't be done;
- That's Yosef identifying proudly as a man of God in a land bristling with xenophobia.

Movie producers are not the only guilty parties, but Hollywood attaches so much value to artifice and appearance that it's not surprising to discover some of the worst offenders emerging from such a place. To be clear: the perpetrators are guilty as sin and the culture in which they operate doesn't make them an iota less culpable. What I'm arguing is that a culture with no moral compass – a culture that privileges image above all else – will fail the morality test virtually every time: It won't protect the innocent; it won't rein in predators; and it won't stop abuse unless and until it happens to be popular to do so. As one commentator put it, "there are no permanent standards of justice or virtue, just the shifting judgment of the crowd." In a shame culture, what's objectionable today may be entirely unobjectionable tomorrow. The culture that's so proud of itself for vilifying these רשעים over the past two weeks is the same culture that gave them a pass for decades.

As citizens of the 21st century we have a role to play in shaping the kind of culture in which we live.

- It's not enough to call out bad behavior.
- It's not enough to be repulsed by indiscretions.
- It's not enough to be voices of decency.

We have to contribute to changing the grammar and vocabulary of our society.

No one wants to be self-righteous. So we're tentative. When we're witness to behavior that calls for censure, we have a choice. We can say, "How will that look?" or we can say, "That's inappropriate." The former is a relativized and qualified question that derives from a shame culture; the latter is a statement of moral judgment that emerges from a system of objective values – from the culture of the inner compass.

The antediluvian world was destroyed because its inhabitants blurred too many lines: כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על הארץ. As the Midrash puts it, sexual boundaries had come to mean nothing.

To preserve the eternal covenant – to develop past a world in which only appearances matter – we have to create a world with firm moral precincts; a world with acts that are objectively right and wrong. Changing a culture is no small task, but its degree of difficulty doesn't constitute an exemption. Each of us has a role to play.

In the face of such dastardly behavior – behavior that's so pervasive and widespread, it's hard to justify remaining passive. In our professional lives, in our communal live and even – and maybe especially – in our private lives – the way we act, the way react and the way we speak matter. Questions of popularity are best left to pundits and pollsters. Questions of morality and integrity are up to us.