

Let

*The story of Noach,
a lone tzaddik in
a corrupt world*

My World

*A compilation
of Talmudic
and Midrashic
sources*

Survive

Y O S E F D E U T S C H

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1 The Age of Noach

Mesushelach was three hundred years old when Chanoch died. He was a good and righteous man who had absorbed his father's wisdom and teachings for most of his life. Even during Chanoch's years of withdrawal from civilization, his door remained open to Mesushelach. And when Chanoch left his self-imposed isolation and emerged as a leader of the people, Mesushelach was at his side, conveying his father's message to the broader populace.

After Chanoch died, the people looked to Mesushelach to provide enlightened leadership, and he responded to the challenge to the best of his abilities. Words of praise to Hashem constantly fell from his lips, especially when he spoke in public. He was a great role model. By his actions and by his words, he taught the people to love Hashem and to be in awe of Him. He also taught them the wisdom and knowledge he had received from his father.¹

Mesushelach lived for another 669 years after the death of Chanoch, and he was recognized and respected as a truly righteous man for the rest of his life. Even as the respect and admiration for

1. Rokeach, *Bereishis* 5:24.

him endured, however, his influence on the behavior of society steadily declined. He was not a strong enough leader to stem the tide of corruption indefinitely.

Over time, the people of Mesushelach's generation turned away from him. They rejected his teachings, and they rejected Hashem. They robbed and plundered, and they polluted the earth with their immoral behavior. In retribution, Hashem spoiled their stores of seeds for planting.

When Adam and Chavah had sinned, Hashem had cursed the earth, and from then on, agriculture was difficult. Thorns and thistles often appeared where crops were planted. Oxen resisted being harnessed to plows. Even when people managed to plant grains with their bare hands, many of their furrows produced no yield. To make matters worse, subterranean waters often overflowed, devastating fields and even destroying burial grounds so that decomposing corpses floated onto the land. The people struggled mightily to grow food for their families, managing to produce just enough to keep them from starvation.²

Now, with Hashem's destruction of the seeds, a terrible famine descended on the land. There were simply no crops, and the people were forced to subsist on wild berries and roots as long as they could. Chaos and panic ensued.

A New Light Appears

When Mesushelach was 187 years old, his wife bore him a son, whom he named Lemech. Lemech grew up and married the daughter of his uncle at the age of 181; and in the year 1056 after Creation, he fathered a son.³

From the moment he set eyes on his newborn son, Lemech knew that this child was extraordinary.⁴ The boy was born

2. *Bereishis Rabbah* 25:2; *Tanchuma*, *Bereishis* 11; *Sefer haYashar*.

3. *Sefer haYashar*.

4. See *Imrei Shefer*, *Bereishis* 5:29.

circumcised⁵ and was bathed in an otherworldly aura, as if the *Shechinah* hovered over him.⁶ His eyes glittered with a level of intelligence never seen in infants.⁷ Lemech showed the baby to his father, whose eyes widened in amazement.

“Let’s think of a good name for this special little lad,” said Lemech.

Mesushelach held up his hand. “Not so fast,” he said.

“Why the delay? A baby needs a name.”

“This is a wonder child,” said Mesushelach. “Look, he was born circumcised. That is an important sign. According to a tradition handed down from generation to generation, the first boy born circumcised after the death of Adam will bring an end to the curse imposed upon the earth because of Adam’s sin.”⁸

“That is wonderful news,” said Lemech. “I can’t believe the curse is about to be lifted. I’m ecstatic, and that’s all the more reason to name this baby right away.”

“Show me your hands, Lemech.”

Lemech was puzzled, but he lifted his hands anyway. Mesushelach lifted his own hands and held them up beside Lemech’s.

“Look,” he said, “our hands are webbed. There is no separation between the fingers.”

“So?”

“Look at the baby’s hands, and tell me what you see.”

Lemech moved the swaddling blanket slightly. He examined the baby’s hands and froze. He looked up at his father with a stunned expression.

“He has fingers! My son has fingers!”

“That’s right. Not only is this a wonderful development for humanity, it is also an important sign of our destiny. Separate

5. *Tanchuma, Bereishis* 11.

6. *Zohar, Bereishis* 58a.

7. *Pesikta Zutrasa* 5:28.

8. *Midrash Avkir; Tanchuma, Bereishis* 11; *Abarbanel, Riva, Be’er baSadeh, Bereishis* 5:29.

fingers make it possible to have a strong grip, to move and remove things that are difficult for us with our webbed hands. This is a sign that your son's grip will remove the curse that hinders our agriculture, and that his generation will produce tools that are easier to hold when we cultivate our fields. This boy brings blessings with him."⁹

"So why can't we at least give him a name?"

Mesushelach leaned forward. "It's not safe," he said in a low voice.

"Not safe? What are you saying? How can naming a baby be harmful?"

"We have to consider the sorcerers, Lemech. They are a dangerous lot."

"All right. I can't argue with that. But why should the sorcerers be concerned with my son?"

"Anyone who gets a look at this little boy will see immediately that he is something special. It won't be long before word reaches the idol-worshipping sorcerers. And what do you think they'll do?"

Lemech could hardly breathe. "Tell me," he whispered.

"They'll cast a spell on him to try to make him one of their own. And if they can't gain control of him, they'll try to kill him just so he won't walk down the path of righteousness."

"That's horrible," said Lemech, "but what does that have to do with giving him a name?"

"They need a name in order to cast a spell. As long as he remains unnamed he is beyond their reach."¹⁰

Time passed. When Mesushelach felt there was no longer a threat from the sorcerers, he named the boy Noach, because he had brought the world relief from the struggle to grow food in

9. Rosh, *Bereishis* 5:29.

10. *Yalkut Shimoni* 5:42; *Da'as Zekeinim, Bereishis* 5:28.

uncooperative soil.¹¹ Others suggest that his name was based on the prophecy of Adam¹² or Lemech¹³ that the boy would bring relief to the world. Yet others suggest that the name was actually a form of prayer that he would bring relief to the world.¹⁴ He was also called Menachem,¹⁵ because of the relief he would eventually bring.

The world did indeed change after Noah was born. The land suddenly became lush and fertile.¹⁶ Furthermore, Noah later invented efficient farming tools.¹⁷ As a result, the land produced bumper crops, and the people enjoyed abundance and prosperity—all in the merit of Noah.¹⁸ The people were relieved and consoled, as Noah's name had foretold.¹⁹ The righteous of the generation hoped that the improved physical conditions would inspire the people to be grateful to Hashem and reject the widespread idol worship. But if they failed, a new world would emerge from Noah and his progeny.

11. *Aggadas Bereishis* teaches that it was the people themselves who gave him the name Noah, because his birth signified a change in their farming outcomes. *Tanchuma Yashan* states that Hashem called him Noah as a sign that he was a *tzaddik*. See *Aderes Eliyahu*.

12. Ibn Ezra, *Bereishis* 5:29.

13. Radak, *Bereishis* 5:29. See *Tzeror haMor*, who says that it was Hashem Who named him Noah, because through him, after the Flood, the world would be saved from annihilation and be inhabited once again.

14. Seforno, Radak, *Bereishis* 5:29. The name Noah is also related to the word *nichoach*, meaning pleasant smell, reflecting the pleasure Hashem found in Noah in the face of the world's corruption; and it is also connected to the Ark that eventually "rested" once the Flood was over (*Bereishis Rabbah* 25:2).

15. *Sefer haYashar*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 5:42.

16. *Bereishis Rabbah* 25:2; *Tanchuma, Bereishis* 11.

17. *Tanchuma, Bereishis* 11; Rashi, *Bereishis* 5:29. According to Radak, *ibid.*, Noah made farming easier than before, but it was still difficult.

18. *Me'am Lo'ez, Bereishis* 5:29.

19. Malbim, Rashi, *ibid.*

An Unusually Small Family

When Noach grew into a young man he married a very distant cousin, Na'amah, a sixth-generation descendant of Kayin.²⁰

Her name suited her because her behavior and deeds were very pleasing (*na'im*) to Hashem and to other people.²¹ But the young couple was not blessed with children right away. Years passed, then decades, and even centuries, before Na'amah would present Noach, now five hundred years old, with his first child.

Why did the great *tzaddik* and *tzadokes* deserve to suffer the agony of such a long wait? Was it a punishment for something they had done?

It was not. It was actually a blessing. In those days, life spans were magnified almost tenfold. Today, people live into their seventies and eighties; in those days, they lived for centuries. Today, people begin having children in their late teens or early twenties; in those days, they began at the age of seventy or eighty. Today, a person has a grace period during which he is exempt from divine punishment until the age of twenty; in those days, they were exempt until the age of one hundred.²²

The Flood arrived when Noach was six hundred years old. Since no children had been born to him before he was five hundred years old, none of them had yet reached the age of one hundred, and therefore none of them could be excluded when it was time to enter the *teivah*. Had he fathered children before the age of five hundred, those children would have passed the age of one hundred by the time of the Flood. If some of them had been corrupted by their environment they would have perished in the Flood, causing great pain and sorrow to Noach and his wife.²³

20. Rashi, *Bereishis* 4:22.

21. *Bereishis Rabbah* 23:4.

22. *Me'am Lo'ez*, *Bereishis* 5:32.

23. This isn't to say that no minors perished in the Flood; on the contrary, everyone young and old on the face of the earth would perish. Rather, Noach's

Moreover, had Noah fathered children when he was still a young man, maybe not more than one hundred years old, he would have seen the exponential proliferation of his family over the next five centuries until his descendants numbered in the thousands. It would not have been unlikely that some of these numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren would have been drawn into idolatry and condemned to perish in the Flood. Here too, Noah would suffer the pain of having his descendants die before his eyes.

Furthermore, had Noah been given the opportunity to begin having children at an early age, these thousands of descendants, most of them loyal followers of Hashem, would have formed a great multitude by the time of the Flood. Noah would have been faced with the impossible logistics of building numerous *teivos* to house just his immediate family. As it was, at the time of the Flood, Noah had only a small family, all of whom were worthy of being saved, and one large *teivah* was sufficient to save them.²⁴

In another version of the story, Noah was reluctant to bring children into the corrupt world in which he lived. He knew that if the people of his generation did not repent they would perish in a great flood, and why bring children into the world just to be corrupted and perish? Therefore, he put off getting married until he was nearly five hundred years old, because he didn't want to die without leaving behind any children at all.²⁵ Hashem then assured him that he and his entire family would be saved from the Flood.

children were saved in his merit, which minors in other families couldn't rely on because their fathers were sinners. Had they been adults they would have been saved or would have perished on their own merits (*Midrash Tehillim* 1; *Nachalas Yaakov*).

The Alshich asks why Noah's adult children couldn't rely on his merit the same way Lot relied on Avraham's merit. He explains that Avraham's merit was stronger than Noah's because he influenced his generation toward serving Hashem, something Noah couldn't claim.

24. *Bereishis Rabbah* 26:2; Rashi, *Bereishis* 5:32.

25. *Chizkuni*, Radak, *Bereishis* 5:32; *Tanchuma Yashan* 39; *Sefer haYashar*.

Noach was five hundred years old when Yefes, his first child, was born. Over the next two years, Cham and Shem, his two other sons, came into the world.²⁶ Although Shem was the youngest, the Torah lists him first among the brothers because he was first in righteousness and greatness.²⁷ And like his father before him, he was born circumcised.²⁸

The stage was now set for great events that would change the course of history.

26. Rashi, according to Mizrahi (*Bereishis* 10:21), and Ramban (*Bereishis* 6:10) argue regarding the birth order of Shem and Cham. According to the former, Cham was older than Shem, while the Ramban holds that Shem was the elder of the two.

27. *Sanhedrin* 69b; *Midrash Aggadah*, Rashi, *Bereishis* 5:32. *Midrash haBei'ur* states that initially Noach loved Cham more than he loved Yefes, until the fateful day when Cham sinned against Noach.

28. *Bereishis Rabbah* 26:3. *Sha'arei Aharon* suggests that the reason Hashem didn't bless Noach with daughters was because the only available men to marry at the time were wicked. Had they married, they would have perished in the Flood due to their husbands' evil influence.

The numerical value of the Hebrew name "Shem" is 340. In the merit of Shem's righteousness, Hashem would be patient with the next generation and their sins for 340 years, from the Flood until the building of the Tower of Bavel (*Bereishis Rabbah* 26:4).