

## **"THE DISAPPOINTING AND THE DISAPPOINTED"**

*(On Parshat Noach, for "Eynayim LaTorah"—October 2000)*

There is a certain pathos in the fate of Noah. He has survived the cataclysmic deluge, witnessed the vast destruction of the civilization that once flourished and now was no more, and managed to save his family. And now, at the end of his days, after a life of suffering and heroism, he is disgraced by his youngest son Ham, who owed his life to him in more ways than one. The Torah mentions Ham's leering comments when he finds his father exposed while in his drunken stupor. The Sages took this as a euphemism for a far more heinous act of filial betrayal. They were of two opinions in identifying the sin of Ham against his father—that it was homosexual rape or castration. But however one interprets the sin, it is a brutal case of humiliation of a father.

Did Noah deserve such a bitter end to his dramatic life? Was there any justice to the events that befell him? I believe the answer is yes, if we view it in context rather than as an isolated incident.

When Noah was born, his father Lamech called him נח because ינחמנו ממעשנו זה ומעצבון ידינו מן האדמה אשר אררה ה'. He had great hopes for this boy, that he would restore the world to its pristine beauty and bounty. For ten generations--since the sin of Adam and Eve which resulted in the pain of childbirth and raising children and in the diminished capacity of the earth to bear fruit for man—human beings had labored under the curse and suffering had been their common lot. Now, Lamech hoped, this son would reverse the fate of mankind and would bring man closer to its Creator. He had great dreams for this youngster, dreams of consolation and solace for all the suffering that people had endured—and so he named him נח because ינחמנו, he would comfort and redeem his fellow humans.

But Noah, despite his many virtues (איש צדיק היה), failed in this historic mission. He was supposed to bring succor and comfort to the world, but he neglected the world and tended to his own family. He was intended to be a redeemer and in the end was merely a survivor. He was passive, introverted, and even callous towards others. He offered no balm for their back-breaking labor, no cure for the earth's accursed refusal to yield its bounty. Instead of calling people to תשובה in a passion for universal love, he built his private ark, gathering in his family and samples of animal life, preferring the company of the beasts to those of his fellow humans. And so Noah, nestled in his floating menagerie, disappointed his father, frustrating his most cherished dream.

Noah's punishment was מדה כנגד מדה, measure for measure. The disappointing son was to become the disappointed father of *his* son. The Noah who rejected the dream of his father was now to experience the nightmare of a treacherous son who humiliated his father, mocked him, and in place of Noah's ambitions to flee from a world of corruption and venality, reintroduced these same evils in even greater intensity.

So filial disappointment leads to paternal disappointment. The wheel turns, and what Noah failed to do for Lamech, Ham now does a hundred-fold to Noah.