

Peninim On The Torah

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Parashat Noach

Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation. (6:9)

What is the meaning of the term tzaddik, righteous? The idea of righteousness has a number of connotations, all revolving around the concept of piety. Horav Tuvia Lisitzin, zl, suggests that the Torah intimates the characteristics which rendered Noach a tzaddik. Hashem told Noach to enter the Ark in order to be saved, "for it is you that I have seen to be righteous before Me in this generation" (Ibid 7:1). In other words, in comparison to the members of his generation and their activities, Noach appeared to be a tzaddik. The members of the generation of the flood were guilty of a number of improprieties, but it was *gezel*, robbery, that was the source of their downfall and destruction. Their lack of respect and caring for their fellow man sealed their fate. Thus, a tzaddik is one who stands out, who rises above his generation, who is sensitive to the needs and feelings of the members of his generation. A tzaddik is one who exemplifies positive commitment to *bein adam l'chaveiro*, relationship between man and his fellow. Noach was such an individual, and this is why he was selected to be the one to rebuild the world. He cared about people, and the essence of the world is people.

In the Midrash Tanchuma, Chazal comment that we find two people who earned the appellation of tzaddik: Noach and Yosef. They had one common trait: they both sustained a world. Noach rebuilt the world after society was destroyed by the flood. Yosef sustained an entire world during his generation's great famine. Furthermore, during the year that Noach spent on the Ark, he saw to it that each and every creature was fed in a timely fashion, despite the toll on his personal life and welfare. As a result of this devotion, the animals survived to see the light of another day, and they had the opportunity to rebuild the world that had been destroyed.

A tzaddik is one who cares about others, who does not live for himself but, rather, views himself as a conduit for helping others. He emulates the Almighty, Who sustains the world purely for altruistic reasons. Man is supposed to learn from Hashem: "As He is compassionate, so should you be compassionate; as He is gracious and kind, so should you be gracious and kind." Noach derived his *tzidkus*, righteousness, from Hashem. A tzaddik is one who follows Hashem's lead. This is the meaning of walking in Hashem's ways. This is the path that Noach chose to follow.

Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth had become filled with robbery. (6:11)

Noach spent one hundred and twenty years building the Ark. It was no secret. During this entire time, he did everything possible to engage people in conversation so that he could convince them to do teshuvah, repent. They did not, however, listen. They ignored Noach for one hundred and twenty years. This tells us about Noach's perseverance. He was relentless in his commitment to bring the people back. It also says something about the people of that generation. In fact, it is a sad commentary on their obtuseness and rebellious nature. Nothing could sway them away from sin. Why? Were they really that evil?

Perhaps the answers lie in the Abarbanel's commentary to the above pasuk. He explains that "the earth became corrupt before G-d." It was only before G-d that they were considered corrupt. Hashem saw their corruption. They did not. In their eyes, they were going about business as usual. They were doing no wrong. When a person does not concede to having sinned, when he does not recognize his guilt, for what should he repent? He is a saint!

No one wants to feel guilty, so we rationalize away our guilt, making excuses either to justify what we did or, at least, to ameliorate the guilt. It does not matter how one rationalizes away his sin, the bottom line is that he does not feel compelled to repent. Kayin committed the world's second sin by killing his brother, Hevel. The pasuk reads, "Kayin said to his brother Hevel. And they were in the field, and Kayin rose up against his brother Hevel and killed him" (Bereishis 4:8). There seems to be something missing from the text. First, the Torah says that Kayin spoke to Hevel. Then it relates the murder. What was their conversation about? What did Kayin say to Hevel? The Targum Yonasan cites the dialogue, but the Torah omits it. Why?

Horav Yissachar Frand, Shlita, cites Horav Yosef Harari-Rafal, Shlita, who gives a noteworthy answer to this question. The Torah omits Kayin's words because they lack relevance. Whatever Kayin spoke was only so that he could justify his act of murder. His excuse for murder was unimportant. His words comprised nothing more than a rationalization to appease his conscience. We do it all of the time. We blame the wife, the children, the boss, and life in general. These are all lame excuses for not accepting responsibility. Therefore, the Torah is in effect telling us that what he said is immaterial. It was only an excuse. If it would not have been one, it would have been another - so, why bother?

This is the atmosphere with which Noach had to contend. He dealt with a generation of sinners who validated their evil and justified their guilt. People such as these do not repent, because, in their own eyes, they have not sinned. This, in itself, is the biggest sin.

Make for yourself an Ark of gopher wood. (6:14)

One would be hard-pressed to suggest a connection between the episode of the flood and the miracle of Purim. The Midrash says otherwise. We have to investigate the reason. Chazal teach us that the beam/tree upon which the wicked Haman was hanged was taken from Noach's Teivah, Ark. Exactly how this transpired is not the issue. What remains to be identified is the area of commonality between these two incidents.

The Jews of Shushan merited the miracle of Purim for a number of reasons. The primary stimulus for this neis, miracle, was Mordechai HaTzaddik. His resolution in defying Haman, in refusing to bow down to him, made the difference. Everyone ate at Achashveiros' party - Mordechai did

not. Everyone bowed down to Haman - Mordechai did not. Everyone feared Haman - Mordechai did not. His leadership catalyzed a return to commitment. His fortitude gave others the strength to believe and the courage to return.

Noach was also not afraid. The entire world had gone morally perverse. Robbing from each other had become a way of life. People were out of control. One person stood up to the world; one person had the strength of character to fight for what was true and moral. He succeeded in transplanting the survivors of the deluge, and together they rebuilt the world. Noach saved the world. Mordechai saved Klal Yisrael. It is appropriate that the man who did not care about world opinion should provide the means to assist the individual who stood up to the evil Haman. Mordechai followed in Noach's footsteps. He was not afraid of doing what was right. The power of the truth, the ability to act according to one's beliefs - regardless of what "others" will say - to ignore the overwhelming influence of a world gone mad, to place one's commitment to Hashem above anything else, that is what Mordechai and Noach had in common. Thus, a beam from Noach's Ark was appropriately suited for its rightful place in the miracle of Purim.

We might suggest another link between the two episodes. The Ark represented the zenith in chesed, performance of acts of loving-kindness. This massive ship was home to the creatures that were to survive the flood. Noach worked around the clock, feeding and providing for the needs of each and every creature. This was all carried out without hope for any form of gratitude. After all, these were animals - not human beings. This ultimate act of kindness was as G-d-like as one could be. Everything that Hashem does for the world is purely altruistic.

Haman represented the antithesis of chesed. Had Shaul HaMelech carried out the command to kill every member of Amalek, Haman would not have been born. He existed due to Shaul's misplaced compassion. How did Haman repay this act of kindness of which he was a beneficiary? He sought to destroy every living member of Shaul's nation! Haman represented the total paradox, the complete opposite extreme of chesed. He did not simply ignore the kindness; he sought to destroy the benefactor. How appropriate it was that his execution should be held on the pole that represented consummate kindness, the virtue which he sought so hard to obliterate.

Noach, the man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. (9:21,22)

However one interprets this episode in Noach's life, it neither has a complimentary connotation nor does it speak well of Noach. It leaves a dark blemish, a deep scar on a life of righteousness and nobility. Horav Shabsai Yudelevitz, zl, cites a meaningful analogy from the Chafetz Chaim, zl, which should serve as a positive source of inspiration for us all.

There was once a great rav, a Torah scholar who was righteous, as well as brilliant and erudite. He lived a simple, austere lifestyle, devoting himself to the general needs of his community and to each individual on a personal level. He was admired, revered and loved. For what more could a person ask? He decided to make a small party in his home for his closest friends. As the end of the meal, they brought out a bottle of vintage wine, the gift of one of his close friends. The rav was not a drinker, but a gift is a gift and a friend is a friend. He felt he could not refuse one drink. He took that one drink and had no idea of the effect it would have on him. This wine was incredible. So, he had one more drink. To make a long story short, the rav had many drinks and soon was totally inebriated.

The rav became very happy, so happy that he felt the urge to dance. First, he danced on the floor; then, he became happier. This increased joy inspired him to dance on the table! To everyone's shock and revulsion, their beloved rav was making a total fool of himself. The great and distinguished rav, the man who was their friend and mentor, their guide and inspiration, was "losing it" in public. He was acting like a habitual drunk.

The rav quickly tired of his dancing and succumbed to his weariness and lay down to sleep - beneath the table. A few hours passed and he woke up, after having slept off the effects of his alcohol-induced behavior. He turned to his wife and asked, "What happened?" His wife, who had stood by his side throughout the years, replied, "You made a fool of yourself. The rav of the city, imbibed too much wine and became a typical drunk. He then acted in a manner consistent with such a distinction. You cannot imagine how you acted. It is something that, regrettably, will not be quickly forgotten."

"I did this?" he asked.

"Yes, you did this," she replied.

The rav immediately fainted.

The humiliation was too much for him to bear. He refused to leave his home for a month. "I danced on the table like a total fool in the presence of the most distinguished members of this community. How can I go outside and face the world? I am mortified," he said to himself.

After a month of self-imposed seclusion, the rav decided that he had to face the music and go outside. With his head bowed down, he built up the courage to take his first steps in public. As he was walking down the street, he passed a photo shop. There in full color was a blown-up picture of him in his inebriated state dancing on the table! He became all shook up and out of control. He could not run home quickly enough. "What will I do? How can I live? How will I ever walk out on the street? Everyone in this city recognized me. I can no longer function in this town," the rav cried. That night, under the cover of darkness, the rav and his family moved out of town. His peaceful seclusion lasted for two days, until he took a walk in his new community, only to discover his picture plastered all over the front show-window of a large electronics store. He could no longer handle it. That night, the family once again packed their bags and set sail for America.

Two weeks after his arrival in the states, he visited a bookstore. One can only imagine the rav's shock, anger and anxiety when sitting prominently on top of the table of new releases, he saw a volume about the unfortunate effects of alcohol, and whose picture was on the cover of the book? Yes, it was the drunken rav in all of his stupored splendor. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. This picture was certainly worth more!

America was no longer a safe haven from his humiliation. His next step was Geneva, Switzerland, a country well-known for its neutrality and non involvement. Here he would finally find peace from the demons that were haunting him. Little did he realize that Geneva was to be the epicenter of the International Conference of the Effects of Alcoholism, and guess who was to be the poster boy for their campaign? The "drunken rabbi," as he was now called. They decided to distribute this picture worldwide, in order to emphasize the ill effects of uncontrolled drinking. Let the world community see how a distinguished cleric allowed alcohol to destroy his life.

The rav began to weep uncontrollably. What could he do? He had nowhere to hide. The entire world was aware of his folly. His family attempted to console him, but it was to no avail. He was inconsolable.

"Morai v'rabosai, my friends and colleagues," the Chafetz Chaim began, "do you realize that this story is not novel? It was written four thousand years ago in Parashas Noach. Noach, the tzaddik, the man who saved the world, the distinguished world leader, drank some wine and debased himself. The wine caused him to lose control and uncover himself in his tent. It happened once, in the privacy of his own tent, and it is spoken about in every corner of the world until this very day! The youngest child who studies Chumash is aware of Noach's degradation. All of this humiliation because of one error. "See," exhorted the Chafetz Chaim, "one mistake, one foolish act, and it is remembered forever!"

This is a powerful lesson for all of us. How often do we hear about accomplished people who have devoted their lives to the betterment of so many, who are relegated to humiliation and shame, all because of a foolish mistake, an error that was, for the most part, the result of a compulsive reaction or a spontaneous lack of control? It takes so little to destroy so much. If we would only think of the consequences before we act.

Hashem descended to look at the city and tower which the sons of man built. (11:5)

Rashi notes the Torah's emphasis on the distinct lineage of the builders of the tower. Certainly they were not sons of donkeys or camels. Apparently, it was the very fact that they were sons/descendants of Adam HaRishon that brought their miscreancy to the forefront. Adam was the one who told Hashem, "The woman whom You gave me" (Ibid 3:12), indicating kefiyas tov, a lack of gratitude, on his part. Likewise, his descendants rejected the good that Hashem had performed for them, when He revived the remnants of the flood.

Horav Aizik Ausband, Shlita, notes the powerful lesson to be derived from this thought. We have always been aware of the despicable nature of one who is a kafui tov. To be unappreciative of those who help us, to manifest a lack of gratitude to those who have made a difference in our lives - regardless of the size or value of the assistance - is abominable. Now we learn that this ignoble character deficiency has a far-reaching effect on future generations! Adam did not demonstrate proper recognition of Hashem's gift to him of a wife; his descendants did not recognize Hashem's salvation and mutinied against Him. After all, children often seek to outdo their parents!

I think, however, that there is one consolation - the flipside. One who is a makir tov, recognizes and appreciates the good that he has benefited from others, imbues this wonderful character trait into his family's DNA. His descendants will follow suit and demonstrate their appreciation to others. We pay gratitude when we appreciate something that we have received. A lack of gratitude indicates either a base character or a misperception on the part of the beneficiary. When parents appreciate something, they not only pay gratitude for receiving it, they also teach their children that this is something of value. This applies to all areas of life. We take many things for granted, thus neglecting to show our appreciation for it. Often, we feel that since we are paying for a commodity, our payment is sufficient gratitude. This is often the case in Jewish education when we fail to show simple appreciation to those who deserve it most. After all, "they work for us," or, "I am paying for it." Teaching goes beyond the act of imparting the material. It is a total absorption in one's work, so that the material becomes imbued into the students mind and character. It is the establishment of another link in the chain of Torah from Har Sinai. Money does not buy this, but appreciation does pay for it. When the parents appreciate what they receive, the child will, likewise, grow up with a healthy respect and appreciation for the material and its dissemination.

A simple, unpretentious admirer of fine art derived much pleasure from visiting the great art galleries. One day, he was admiring a priceless painting in a New York gallery, when a friend jokingly remarked, "Why do you permit yourself to become so enthused over things that you could never afford to own?" The man replied, "I would rather appreciate things that I cannot have, than have things that I cannot appreciate." Appreciation is an art that has to be learned.

Noach walked with G-d. (6:9)

Rashi contrasts the spiritual plateau of Noach with that of Avraham Avinu. Noach walked with G-d; he needed the Almighty's support as he walked. Concerning Avraham, however, it is stated (17:1), "Walk before Me and be perfect." Avraham was able to walk independently, without the added support. What is Rashi teaching us? The Piascesner Rebbe, zl, takes a novel approach towards explaining the distinction between Avraham and Noach. He feels that the difference between the two was in the areas of intellectual activity and creative endeavor under adverse circumstances. The Rebbe was an individual who might be uniquely qualified to expound on the issue, as he had been the Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto. He had written and delivered his brilliant innovative homilies in the darkness and devastation of the ghetto.

The Rebbe first cites a text in the Talmud Sanhedrin 104A which describes two Jews who had been taken captive and were now being led away as slaves. As they were walking along, they exchanged perceptive, insightful remarks. Their captor, who was listening to the conversation, expressed his amazement that the "stiff-necked" Jews were imagining themselves capable of wisdom even under the cruel circumstances of defeat and torment. The Maharsha explains that the trait of *kshei oref*, stiff-neckedness, is the only reason that the Jews are able to think rationally and creatively, despite being subjected to pain and misery.

The Rebbe explains that every negative character trait has a positive aspect to it. Thus, the constructive side to the quality of stiff-neckedness is the ability to remain steadfast and resolute, to maintain one's fortitude -- even at a time of crushing difficulty. The Rebbe adds that while remaining steadfast and committed during a period of anguish is in itself by no means a simple matter, the real challenge is to be able to engage in Torah study, specifically intellectual and conceptual analysis during these times. That is a greater achievement. Indeed, stories have been recounted of people putting on Tefillin and performing other mitzvos in times of trouble, but to study Torah, especially if one is involved in penetrating analysis, is particularly difficult.

This is the meaning of the dialogue that the captor overheard between his two Jewish slaves. The captor had heard of Klal Yisrael's character trait of *kshei oref*, stiffneckedness. Thus, he could understand their ability to maintain their conviction and carry out their commitment despite the pain and despair. What impressed him so was their ability to establish an intellectual dialogue, to think cognitively and express their uncanny wisdom at such a difficult moment.

Noach did not have an easy life. Rashi says that members of his generation declared that if they were to see him enter the Ark, they would demolish it and kill him. He certainly had his detractors and, obviously, he was not universally popular. Yet, he persevered - with Hashem's Divine Assistance. Every time he was about to fall, Hashem caught him and held him up. He did not have the degree of *kshei oref* that was intrinsic to Avraham's character. Avraham also had his enemies. After all, he was *b'eiver echad*, on one side, of the philosophic conviction, while the rest of the world was on the other side. He

was alone in a pagan world, labeled public enemy number one. He, however, remained committed, as he reached out to others and encouraged them to accept monotheism. He was the first *kshei oref*, a man who was steadfast, resolute, committed with fortitude to his belief in Hashem. He never waned; he never fell. He did it alone.

My rebbe, the Veitzener Rav, Horav Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, zl, was like that. In the years 1943 and 1944, while he was still in Veitzen, Hungary, he heard about the exterminations carried out by the Nazis, killing towering rabbis, tzaddikim, scholarly Roshei Yeshivah, together with their students and families. Since the disaster arrived without warning, many of these individuals did not have the opportunity to publish their writings.

Rav Meisels had a large number of responsa from these rabbis in his possession. He considered it his duty to publish their treatises as an everlasting memory to these Torah giants. He published these works, along with short glosses which he added. Even when Hungary was overrun by the Nazi beasts, and Jews were confined to the ghettos, he continued ceaselessly to write, publish and disseminate their Torah thoughts. As he was about to complete his first volume, his entire family was taken to Auschwitz where his wife and seven of his children were put to death. As he stood before the furnace and was himself almost burned, he pledged that if he survived this terror, he would do his utmost to publish these Torah insights. He did. He survived, and he published the *divrei Torah*. He exemplified *kshei oref*.

Upon entering Auschwitz, all of the Jews' possessions, including Tallis and Tefillin, were confiscated. Yet, someone was somehow able to procure a few small volumes of Tehillim with the commentary Tefillah LeMoshe from the Uhelel Rav, Horav Moshe Teitelbaum, zl. The Veitzener used this sefer as a text, delivering lectures and commentary to the broken inhabitants of Auschwitz. I know, because my father, zl, was one of the people who benefited from these drashas. These lectures gave the inmates strength and hope with which to cope with the horrors they faced each day. These Jews developed the true essence of *am kshei oref*.

And the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth became filled with violence. (6:11)

Was it only corrupt in Hashem's eyes, but not in the eyes of anyone else? This is what the pasuk implies: Hashem saw their corruption. They saw nothing wrong with their own actions. Were they that blind or that permissive? Horav David Feinstein, Shlita, explains that from their perspective, they saw nothing "corrupt" or "evil" about their nefarious activities. Chazal teach us that the word *shacheis*, corrupt, is almost always a reference to immorality and idolatry. Who is really hurt when someone decides to bow down to a stone? In reality, it is conceivable that society might view the actions of two consenting adults as a part of their private lives and, consequently nobody else's business. Who is actually hurt by the immorality of idolatry? Surely, the sinners of that generation viewed their actions as acts of personal discretion that had no effect on the community and would certainly not lead to any crime.

This is where they were wrong. This is why the pasuk continues, "And the earth became filled with violence." It suddenly became clear that these seemingly "harmless" acts of infidelity, immorality and godlessness were the precursors of a society that was out of control. An evil emerged that enveloped the entire generation. Where did it come from? Hashem knew all of the time what was

happening. The signs were present all along. Unfortunately, people were not looking.

Sins between man and G-d do not remain that way. Otherwise, the world would have remained a viable place to live. In His supreme wisdom, Hashem knows that such transgressions of His law produce the bitter fruits of injustice and violence. Rav David supports his thesis with an intriguing incident from the Talmud Nedarim 91A. Chazal relate a story about a man who spent the afternoon in the company of a married woman. When the woman's husband suddenly came home, the unauthorized guest felt it prudent to hide himself, rather than attempt to explain his presence. While he was concealed, he noticed the husband raise a glass to drink from it. "Stop!" he cried out "I saw a poisonous snake drink from that glass."

Chazal deduce from this act of mercy that the visitor could not have committed a sinful act with the woman. They understood that the sin itself would have dulled his human compassion, so that he would have been able to watch the husband drink from the poisoned glass.

Hence, we see that sins which seem to appear as "private" acts do not remain that way forever. Slowly, the attitude they create creeps out into the open. This leads to a climate of anarchy and terror.

There is another aspect to immorality that we would be remiss to ignore: It is inevitably passed on to the next generation. Horav Mordechai Ilan, zl, distinguishes between the sin of the generation of the Flood, that brought about their deaths, and the sins of the generation of the Tower of Bavel, which resulted in their dispersal. The dor ha'mabul, generation of the Flood, lived like animals - immoral, depraved and debased lives. This lifestyle of corruption was likely to be transmitted to their children, who would eventually grow up to outdo their parents. In support of this idea, we have only to look around at contemporary society. In contrast, the generation of the dispersal was corrupt only philosophically. Their ideology was perverted - not their morals. While the parents erred in their beliefs, denying the existence of Hashem, it did not necessarily preclude their children from growing up with high moral standards and values. Indeed, they might eventually even disprove their parents and embrace a life of conviction and belief in Hashem. Once again, we have only to look around at the multitudes who are returning to a life of Torah and mitzvos. They have recognized the error of the ideology with which they were raised and have decided to do something about it.

Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood. (6:14)

Rashi teaches us that Hashem chose an ark which involved elaborate construction, because the prolonged process tangibly conveyed a message to civilization: repent while you still can. Noach labored and tried to inspire for one hundred and twenty years - to no avail. He did not succeed in reaching the people. One would think that this righteous, wholesome man would deserve the greatest plaudits. Yet, Chazal criticize him for not entreating Hashem on behalf of mankind. The waters of the Flood are referred to as "mei Noach," "waters of Noach," attributed to him, because of his failure to pray for the people. This concept begs elucidation. Are we to disregard his one hundred and twenty years of physical labor? Are we to ignore the abuse that he sustained during this period? Furthermore, why did he fail to pray for the people? After all, he was doing everything else. Why did he not go all the way?

Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, explains that Noach is described as an ish tzadik, righteous man,

for a reason. He had a sterling character; he was upright and righteous, but, as a tzadik, he acted strictly in accordance with the letter of the law. A person of this caliber will not necessarily feel a sense of compassion for someone who does not legitimately deserve it. It is for this reason that Noach could not bring himself to pray wholeheartedly for a civilization that was undeserving. He tried to convince them to repent, so that he might find them somewhat deserving of his prayers on their behalf. Prayer is described as *avodah she'b'lev*, service of the heart. Hence, one must feel in his heart the emotion to pray - if it is to be a wholesome outpouring of love. Noach needed to develop a compassion that would facilitate a heartfelt prayer for the corrupt, perverted society in which he lived.

Avraham Avinu is lauded by Chazal for his ability to reach out to the people of his generation. How was he different from Noach? Avraham was known as the *ish ha'chesed*, man of kindness. This term implies that he went beyond the strict dictates of the law. He searched and delved deeply into the recesses of the hearts of the people of Sodom in order to find a mitigating factor, so that he could pray for them. He probed and he sought. He pleaded for mercy. He employed a technique that Hashem uses for us.

In the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy through which Hashem conducts Himself towards the Jewish Nation, there is one attribute - the last one - which Hashem uses when all else fails. This is the attribute of *Mimei Kedem*. Hashem recalls the "days of old," and the love He once had for us. This arouses His Divine compassion and, once again, we are spared. Every person should remember the "beginnings," the "days of old" of those around him. There was a time when the individual was worthy of compassion. That is "*Mimei Kedem*." To paraphrase the *Tomar Devorah*, "This way he will not find a single person unworthy of kindness, prayer or compassion."

Avraham Avinu was able to beseech Hashem to have mercy even on the evil Sodomites. He was able to recall the times when they possessed *G-dliness* and, through this recollection, he was able to have compassion and pray for them. During Noach's yearlong journey in the Ark, much was demanded of him, especially in the area of kindness. His attribute of *chesed* honed and developed. During this year of constant giving, he also became an *ish ha'chesed*. Regrettably, it was too late for the civilization of the *mabul*, but the new world could be rebuilt on *chesed*, kindness.

Make the Ark with compartments. (6:14)

While *kinim* is translated here as compartments, the root word "*ken*," is a nest in Hebrew. This brings the Midrash to comment, "Just like a *ken*, nest of birds, serves as the vehicle for purifying a *metzora*, spiritual leper, so, too, shall the *Teivah*, Ark, purify you." *Horav Moshe Shternbuch*, *Shlita*, explains the connection between a *metzora* and the Ark in the following manner. The punishment of *tzaraas*, spiritual leprosy, is visited upon a person for his propensity to speak disparagingly of people. Such a person must be secluded from society. He is, therefore, punished with a disease that drives him out of the community. This will motivate him to repent and correct his ways. Likewise, Hashem was intimating to Noach that when the spiritual climate "out there" is challenging, when he is surrounded by people that are evil and who seek to bring him down, he should either leave or seclude himself, so that he would not be vulnerable to popular opinion.

Rav Shternbuch goes on to use this idea to explain why *Shevet Levi*, prior to their induction, were completely shaved, similar to a *metzora*. Why? What relationship do they have to the *metzora*? He explains that the *Levi* possessed neither land nor sanctuary. His garments were compliments of the

wool he received from the Reishis ha'gez, first-wool shearings; his meat came as a gift from the various parts of the korbanos that the Jews offered. In other words, he lived off the people. While we know that this is neither right, nor appropriate, people are human. Certainly, some of them could perceive the Levi to be a shnorrer, beggar, who lived off the dole. The Levi must be prepared for this negative reaction. The human ego is a fascinating aspect of our personality. For some, it gives them the ability to rise above adversity, to cope with challenge, to maintain self-confidence in circumstances that can otherwise be crippling. For others, regrettably, their ego can play havoc with others, putting people down in the pursuit of elevating themselves. Let's face it: There are some people that are very insecure and, unless they look down on those who do not have what they possess, they cannot function.

Shevet Levi is the name given to the tribe that served in the Bais HaMikdash. At the end of his treatise of Hilchos Shemittah v'Yovel, the Rambam writes that the term Shevet Levi is applicable to anyone who decides to dedicate his life to Torah study and dissemination. This person is not concerned with the material aspect of life. He is devoted to enhancing his spiritual dimension and seeing to it that others are also availed this opportunity.

Just as Hashem was conveying His message to Shevet Levi, preparing them for the attitude of some of their brethren, so, too, should the contemporary members of the legion of Shevet Levi -- those who are willing to forego financial bounty, to devote their lives to Torah -- be duly prepared. It is not going to be easy- neither from a financial perspective nor from the perspective of peer acceptance.

While I certainly agree with Rav Shternbuch's thesis, I must add that people can be "taught" respect. If the ben Torah demands respect, he will receive it. There is no reason for anyone to feel inferior simply because he does not have a large portfolio of stocks and bonds. His function in life, his dedication to Torah, his commitment to elevating the spiritual persona of the community in which he lives, should be sufficient reason for him to have at least equal status with anyone else. If he does not manifest this aura of majesty and dignity, then he has no one to blame but himself.

And he departed with them from Uhr Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan. (11:31)

Rashi earlier (11:28) relates that Avraham Avinu left Uhr Kasdim when he was miraculously spared from death after being thrown into a fiery caldron by King Nimrod. Terach, Avraham's father, complained to the evil king that his son had smashed all of the idols in his store. In Pirkei Avos 5:3, this miracle is considered one of the Asarah Nisyonos, Ten Trials, over which Avraham Avinu triumphed. Rashi cites Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, who concurs. It is, therefore, surprising that when the Rambam enumerates the Ten Trials, he does not include Avraham's preparedness to die for his beliefs. Does this act of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, not warrant recognition?

Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, derives from here that for Avraham the challenge to deny Hashem's existence was not a test. It is understood that this was an ideal for which he would gladly suffer and even die. It is related about Horav Shimshon, zl, m'Ostropolia, who died at the hands of gentiles in a most cruel and heinous manner: When he was asked during his final ordeal how he felt, he responded, "I feel nothing." Similarly, Rabbi Akiva went to his painful death at the hands of the Romans with total joy.

A nisayon is a challenge which is enigmatic, yet a person overcomes the challenge with equanimity, because of his deep abiding faith in the Almighty. To agree to worship a graven image,

however, was so beyond Avraham Avinu's mindset, that it was not a nisayon for him. His conviction was unequivocal, and his faith unshakable. Indeed, the great tzaddikim, righteous Jews of every generation, followed in the footsteps of their ancestor to the point that dying Al Kiddush Hashem, by sanctifying Hashem's Name, was not considered to be a trial for them. In fact, these individuals viewed Kiddush Hashem as a z'chus, privilege.

The Ostrovitzer Rebbe, zl, garbed in his kittel and tallis, confronted the Nazis in Zusmir in the winter of 1943, prior to being shot, exclaiming, "For some time now, I have anticipated this z'chus of Kiddush Hashem. I am prepared!" The Shedlowitzer Rebbe, zl, comforted those packed into the cattle cars without food and water on a four day trip to the death camp, saying, "Fellow Jews, do not fear death. To die Al Kiddush Hashem is a great privilege."

Horav Mendele Alter, zl, the brother of the Gerrer Rebbe, was among a group of Jews in Treblinka during the summer of 1942 who were ordered to undress. Realizing these were his last few moments on earth, the Rebbe pleaded desperately for a glass of water. A Jewish guard, who was regrettably infamous for his cruelty to his fellow Jews, was moved by the plea. He provided the water, thinking that the Rebbe wanted to quench his thirst before he was killed. Instead, the Rebbe washed his hands, as an act of purification prior to Kiddush Hashem. He then urged his followers, "Fellow Jews, let us say Viddui, confessional, before we die."

The Piaznesner Rebbe, zl, observes that he who is murdered Al Kiddush Hashem does not suffer at all. He explains that a person, in anticipation of this unique opportunity, is stimulated to such a degree of ecstasy that he numbs his senses from experiencing any pain. May Hashem bless us to be able to sanctify His Name in our daily lives, so that His honor and glory will be manifest in the way we live.

And as for you, take yourself of every food that is eaten and gather it in to yourself, that it shall be as food for you and for them. (6:21)

A number of ambiguities are manifest in this pasuk. First, why does it say, "Take for yourself"? Why does it not simply say, "Take food." Second, at the end of the pasuk, it states, "It shall be as food for you and for them," Is that not obvious? Why else would he be gathering food? Third, the pasuk begins with instructions for Noach to gather food for himself and ends, "It shall be as food for you and for them." Last, the Torah concludes by saying that Noach followed Hashem's instructions, presumably by bringing all of the necessary food into the Ark. What is so praiseworthy about this? Clearly, he had to bring in the food or they would all have starved to death.

The Shach and the Tiferes Yehonasan both explain that had Hashem demanded Noach to supply food for all the "passengers" of the Ark for an entire year, it would have been impossible to fulfill His command. In fact, one hundred arks would have been insufficient to provide the necessary space to warehouse such a great amount. Apparently, Hashem provided Noach with a great miracle. He first commanded him to gather enough food only for himself. He blessed that food, so that there was a never-ending supply of rations left over for all the animals, beasts and fowl aboard the Ark. Since a Heavenly blessing must have something tangible to rest on, Noach had originally to provide food for himself. The rest would appear miraculously. We now understand the sequence of the pasuk. Noach was first to gather food for himself, which Hashem would ultimately bless to provide sustenance for himself and for them. Hashem praised Noach for his trust and faith in Him, relying on the minimal

amount of food to be the medium upon which Hashem's blessing would engender food for all the Ark's passengers for an entire year.

One who believes in Hashem does not require great material abundance. Whatever he has serves as the source and springboard for blessing. The Brisker Rav, zl, once related the following story about a young girl who was a chozeres b'teshuvah, had recently become observant. Her parents were vehemently against her decision. Thus, everything that she did had to be performed in the utmost secrecy. The young girl was subject to constant derision, as her parents did everything in their power to undermine her beliefs and to impede her spiritual development. They had a hardware store which was open seven days each week. One weekend, the parents told their daughter that they were taking a vacation and that she would be in charge of the store for Shabbos.

Erev Shabbos, she went to the store and did everything possible to enable her to remain open on Shabbos without having to desecrate its sanctity. She unlocked the door and left the lights on. When she arrived at the store on Shabbos morning, she began to recite Tehillim, with the hope that no customers would appear. All day, no one showed up to purchase anything. She began to get nervous. Her parents would certainly not believe her assertion that there had been no customers. They would probably claim that she had never opened the store.

Shortly before sundown, a man came to the store searching for a specific gadget. It was a simple dollar item that he had not been able to find anywhere else. When he came to the girl and inquired about the price, she became disconcerted. What could she do? She could not allow him to purchase the gadget. She told him the gadget cost five hundred dollars, truly an outrageous amount of money for such a simple device. The man was in great need of the device, so he began to haggle over the price. He left and returned a number of times, until he finally agreed to pay the asking price. What could she do now?

She told the customer that she could not sell him the gadget for another half-hour, after which Shabbos would be over. When Shabbos ended, she was filled with excitement that she had not been mechalel Shabbos, had not desecrated the Shabbos. She told the customer why she had raised the price, asserting that she would now sell it to him for the regular price of one dollar. The man, a paragon of integrity, countered that once he had reconciled himself to spend the higher sum, he would not go back on his word. The girl had kept Shabbos and, in the end, had even made a healthy profit.

When her parents returned, she related to them the entire episode that had occurred. "You probably would never have made so much money had you been open on Shabbos. I was able to keep Shabbos and still earn a huge profit," she told her parents. The parents were moved by her piercing words and eventually became baalei teshuvah themselves. When one believes in Hashem, he eventually sees his hopes realized.

Noach did according to everything G-d commanded him. (6:22)

What was Noach's reward for his role in saving the world? For one hundred and twenty years, he attempted to inspire his generation to repentance, to no avail. For one year, he slaved on the Ark in a manner that is simply indescribable. His middah of chesed, character trait of loving-kindness, was unprecedented and unrivaled to this very day. So, what was his reward? Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein,

Shlita, suggests that his remuneration was to become a gabbai, caretaker, and - to some extent - a proprietor of the world. He bases this premise on a statement made by the Maharam Shick, that when one "saves" a mitzvah from extinction by standing up to revive it, it becomes his acquisition, his property, so to speak. This occurred during Noah's generation, when robbery and injustice were a way of life. The mitzvah of chesed, caring for another human being was about to become extinct. Nobody cared; nobody empathized. Noah arrived on the scene to rescue this mitzvah from obsolescence. It became his mitzvah. Because he survived the Flood, it became his world.

Chesed has been the hallmark of the Jewish People. Jews, regardless of their level of observance, have always maintained a close adherence to the mitzvah of chesed. It is part of the Jewish psyche, an inheritance from our Patriarch, Avraham Avinu. Yet, even among a nation of loving and caring people, there are always individuals who are superstars, who exemplify the middah of chesed to its zenith. There are always individuals who are there to visit the sick, assist the infirm, raise money for the needy, support the widow and orphan both morally and financially. What about those types of chesed, however, from which people naturally shy away? In certain instances we are called upon to help in situations that are not popular, that are physically and emotionally demanding, as well as aesthetically repulsive. This is where we need a baal chesed who is unusual, who is truly a tzaddik, righteous person.

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonenfeld, zl, was such a unique individual. His love and caring for others were legend. He sought out those areas requiring kindness that were ignored by the populace at large. Hidden away in one of Yerushalayim's side streets was a miserable hovel that housed the community's most unfortunate citizens. The Hospital for Degenerative Diseases was one place where even the most kindhearted person hesitated to visit. Here, beneath disheveled blankets, lay people appearing more dead than alive. These were people who once were strong and healthy, but now - due to the cruel diseases from which they suffered - their bodies had been transformed into wretched shadows of their former selves. They lay in agony, knowing that their days were numbered, anticipating death's welcome release from misery. Even their closest relatives shied away from visiting them, not out of a lack of concern, but rather, because they became severely depressed seeing their relatives in such miserable predicaments.

It was in this forsaken place that Rav Yosef Chaim's chesed shone forth. He was a frequent visitor, who made it his business to come by and offer words of solace. He would stand by the bedside of these living dead and imitate Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who, the Talmud in Kesubos 77b relates, would visit those afflicted with contagious diseases and study Torah with them. Rav Yosef Chaim spoke to them as a father speaks to his child, offering hope and inspiration. Their faces would light up when he entered the hospital and, for a short time, they were transported from their misery and affliction. "Rav Yosef Chaim is here," they thought, "and if this great saintly person finds time to visit us, then our lives cannot be altogether hopeless." Indeed, the chief nurse at the hospital recalled that Rav Yosef Chaim's coming was the one thing to which these patients looked forward. "When is Rav Yosef Chaim coming?" they would always ask. "When is the tzaddik coming to visit us again?" His visits were neither perfunctory nor routine. He took personal interest in every patient's life. Their suffering was his suffering. Their concerns were his concerns. It was not below his dignity to serve as their personal secretary, as he would read their letters and even compose a reply together with them, which he, of course, would jot down for them. A smile of satisfaction would spread over the patient's face as Rav Yosef Chaim would read "his" reply to the letter he had received.

Those patients who were childless had a deeper concern: Who would recite Kaddish for them after they passed from this world? Rav Yosef Chaim assured them that he personally would see to it

that Kaddish be recited for them after their death. He would then pay a young talmid chacham, Torah scholar, from the charity funds at his disposal to say Kaddish and study Mishnayos for these unfortunate souls. Rav Yosef Chaim taught us that greatness in Torah goes hand in hand with greatness in chesed.

Every moving thing that lives shall be yours for food. (9:3)

Adam HaRishon, the first man, was not permitted to eat meat, only vegetation. After the Deluge, the prohibition was lifted and man now entered a state in which eating meat was permissible. Horav Simcha Wasserman, zl, observed that this change suggests a profound failing concerning the members of that generation. To sustain one's life at the expense of another life is not the ideal situation. Veritably, this was all a result of their original iniquity.

A major sin of the generation of the Flood was theft. The ensuing corruption of that generation led to its demise. Prior to the contamination of the human dimension with theft, only vegetarian food was permitted. When mankind chose to prey on others via thievery, meat became an intrinsic part of man's diet. There is a very distinct relationship between theft and a meat diet: in both cases, one is sustained by depriving another of what is rightfully his. When a person's possessions are forcibly taken from him, the result is that man falls into a situation in which he is sustained by taking the life of another creature.

We are punished middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. The consequences of one's actions are manifest in parallel. The annihilation which the Flood catalyzed was not total - mankind was saved. He could not, however, live as he had before. Mankind's remnant was permitted to repopulate the world in such a manner in which he is always living at the expense of other creatures. This serves as a constant reminder of the difference in plateau between what life was like prior to the Flood and what it is in the aftermath. We must always remember that our present sustenance depends upon the flesh and blood of another earthly living creature. Thus, when we sit down to eat a meal, a sandwich of meat or any other derivative of what once had been a living creature, we should stop to think what this sandwich symbolizes and what human shortcoming it represents.

We can go a bit further. There are a number of commentators who view our sustaining ourselves by ingesting other forms of life as, in fact, a form of tikkun, spiritual rectification. When one creature eats another, the first becomes part of the body and life force of the second. That which is eaten becomes assimilated and absorbed into - and therefore, a part of - the latter. Hence, when plants incorporate inorganic matter into their substance, the inorganic substances become part of the plant world. They are now given a life form. Animals which eat these plants, in turn, elevate the plants to the level of the animal world. When these animals are eaten by humans, the entire chain becomes elevated to the level of humans.

There is, however, a catch to this process. The adjustment made by the human is commensurate with the spiritual level achieved by the human. When a righteous person is nourished by food derived from the animal world, that food is elevated immeasurably. The righteous person will use his strength to perform mitzvos and acts of loving kindness. Therefore, the food is transmuted into spirituality. What loftier destiny can there be for an inanimate creation or an animal, than to become part of the life force of a spiritually enhanced human? Regrettably, the converse is true when the food is ingested by one who is spiritually deficient. Thus, we see that the effect of eating meat is not insignificant.

The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery through them; and behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth. (6:13)

Rashi notes that whenever you find promiscuity, catastrophe comes to the world. As a result, both good and evil people perish. Yet, the ultimate judgement of destruction was sealed as a result of robbery. The Gur Aryeh reconciles this apparent contradiction with the idea that although robbery catalyzed the destruction, once it occurred the good and the evil both died because promiscuity was also involved. We wonder why robbery has an effect only on the evil, while the consequence of promiscuity radiates to the good people as well.

Horav Shmuel Walkin, zl, explains that like a physical disease, in which certain illnesses are highly contagious while others affect only the immediate victim, spiritual disease has similar characteristics. One of those sins that is contagious and spreads quickly throughout a group is promiscuity. The far-reaching effect of this sin is obvious throughout history. Contemporary society is plagued by this spiritual disease to the point that its greatest and most illustrious leaders have fallen prey to it. The slightest vestige of promiscuity arouses the yetzer hora, evil-inclination, granting it the power to bring us down spiritually.

Yes, robbery sealed the sentence of destruction. Yet this sentence would have been executed only against the actual perpetrator. Once promiscuity entered the picture, both the sin and its consequence became more widespread.

Rashi's statement that the "good" are also affected means that the good are no longer good. In other words, the yetzer hora of z'nus, promiscuity, is difficult to overcome. It has an effect on everyone, unless a person is stoic and maintains a strong footing against the blandishments of the yetzer hora. This is the reason that tznius, modesty/moral chastity, plays such an integral role in the weltenshauung of the Jewish People.

Interestingly, as noted by Horav Eliyahu Munk, zl, the first time that the Torah refers to the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov by the name, Yisrael, is in regard to morality. When Shechem violated Dinah, daughter of Yaakov Avinu, her brothers exclaimed their outrage with the words, Ki nevalah asah b'Yisrael, "He had committed a disgraceful act against Yisrael" (Bereishis 34:7). This occurred even before the name Yisrael had officially been proclaimed as exemplifying our strength and ability to overcome challenge. This name denotes the priestly people, who will "fight for G-d." To paraphrase Rav Munk, "What a lofty conception of duty, virtue, and moral nobility is already connected with this august name!" It is particularly significant that the first "struggle for G-d" with which the name, "Yisrael," is connected is in defense of the sacred ideal of moral purity. The primary mission of those who are Bnei Yisrael is to safeguard this ideal.

For it is you that I have seen to be righteous before Me in this generation. (7:1)

What did Noach do during the year that he and his family spent on the Teivah, Ark? Chazal teach us that Noach immersed himself in chesed, as he saw to the needs of the thousands of creatures that were in his care. The Midrash Tanchuma tells us that the Torah refers to Noach as a tzaddik due to

his extraordinary care of the animals. Indeed, Noah was unable to sleep because the schedules for feeding the various animals did not coincide. Noah's devotion to performing chesed was a kaparah, atonement, for the selfishness and depravity of the members of his generation. They lived for themselves. Noah lived for others. They preached cruelty, injustice and apathy. Noah exemplified love, sensitivity and hope.

Feeding the hungry is a form of chesed that many of us ignore, because we do not know what it means to be hungry. Sensitivity towards others can often be expressed once the beneficiary has himself experienced the "other side of the coin," once he has been sick or hungry or poor and in need. We live in a country where people do not usually experience the hunger that is commonplace in Third World countries. Yet, there are people among us who, although they do not starve, do not have the money to put meat and chicken on the table - even on Shabbos! There are people who do not have enough to eat. They might not go to bed hungry, but how do we measure hunger? Noah taught us the significance of caring for the simple material needs of all creatures. Surely what he did is a lesson for us all in our concern for our fellow man.

I would like to share with the reader an analogy, a story that pertains to this subject: A man had two distinctly different dreams. In the first dream, he saw hundreds of sad, expressionless people, sitting at a large banquet table that was filled with large platters of the most delectable foods. Regrettably, not a morsel of food had been touched. The people simply stared at the tables.

He wondered, "Why are these people not eating? They appear to be hungry. The food is there for the taking. What is preventing them from availing themselves of this feast?"

His guide told him, "They cannot feed themselves. If you will look, you will notice that the people have no joints in their arms. They can hold their arms straight out, but they cannot bend them. No matter how hard they try, they cannot bend their arms to bring the food to their mouths."

In his second dream, the man saw a similar vision: same room, same table, same people with no joints in their arms.

Everything was the same, except in this vision the people all appeared to be well-fed and happy. "How could this be?" he wondered. "How could these people appear to be well fed if they could not feed themselves?"

The guide gave a quick response, "Look again, carefully, and tell me what you see."

He looked again and saw an astonishing sight. While each person could not feed himself, he could grasp the food in his outstretched hand and place it in to his neighbor's mouth. They could not feed themselves, but they could feed one another! What a powerful analogy! To the extent that we do for others, we do for ourselves. When we feed only ourselves, we all starve. When we think of others, we are all satiated. A wise man once said, "This world is comprised of two kinds of people: the givers and the takers. The takers eat well, but the givers sleep well.

The following story occurred with Fiorella LaGuardia in 1933: The future legendary mayor of New York was then a presiding judge in police court. A trembling old man was brought before him. The charge: stealing a loaf of bread. The man broke down and conceded his guilt, adding, "What can I do? My family is starving."

LaGuardia turned to the man and said, "I have no recourse but to fine you ten dollars for your crime." He then reached into his pocket and said, "Well, here is the ten dollars to pay for your fine." He proceeded to place the ten-dollar bill on the table. "Furthermore," he declared, "I am going to fine

everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat. Will the bailiff please collect the fines and give them to the defendant!"

The bailiff went around the room collecting the fines and gave the defendant the money. The shocked old man, who was originally brought to the judge for stealing a loaf of bread, left with tears in his eyes and forty-seven dollars and fifty cents to help feed his starving family.

This story teaches us the value of human compassion; the importance of caring about others; and the extent of our responsibility towards our fellow man.

*And Cham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and related it to his brothers outside.
(9:22)*

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, observes that Cham should have remained respectfully outside, as his brothers did. Entering the tent with the intent to look already identified him as the degenerate that he was. Cham should have known better. After all, he was also a father. No - not Cham. He went in and saw what he wanted to see. When he came out to his brothers he did not simply tell them, he related in detail what he had seen. Vayaged, he painted the story in words to get the most out of it. He gloated on the shocking effect of his words.

Cham fathered Canaan and Mitzrayim, two nations that descended to the nadir of depravity. The social degeneration that characterized Egypt and the moral decadence that personified Canaan had their source in Cham's behavior towards his father. The whole world of humanity is built on the relationship of children to their parents.

Veritably, parents are there for their children: the mother, as the condition for their existence; the father as the one whose life should be given up for the well-being of his children. Children must see in their parents the repository of Hashem's mission in this world. If respect for a parent is absent, then the stem that connects the sapling to the tree is severed. The younger generation then considers itself only a yoreish, inheritor, of the previous generation. The more vital supplants the older, weaker generation and steps into its place. We are taught differently. The Jew's relationship to the previous generation is one of nachalah, a form of inheritance, a word derived from nachal, stream, a flow. Thus, the older generation hands over its strength and powers, material and spiritual treasures, to the younger generation. While others seek to divorce themselves from the past, we see our parents as a source of strength, power and experience. As a stream flows from above, the spiritual mission of the Jew is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Cham denigrated the pivotal mitzvah of Kibbud Av, honor for a parent. The degeneration that followed was the consequence of his iniquity. The ensuing moral disintegration of his descendants was a direct outgrowth of that first act of disrespect towards a father. Cham set the standard of behavior for his children throughout the following generations.

Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language. (11:7)

Rashi tells us how their failure to communicate in a common language resulted in confusion and

discord. One person would ask for a brick. The other one, as a result of a lack of comprehension, returned with plaster. The first one would rise up and kill the other person for not bringing him the brick. We wonder why Rashi has to go so far as to say that the lack of communication resulted in murder? The original purpose of confusing the language was to undermine their building project. If they could not communicate, they would not be able to build. Why did they resort to murder?

The Brisker Rav, zl, explains that unity can have a negative as well as a positive effect. Furthermore, when the wicked unite with a common objective, they find an avenue to succeed. The drawback of the d'or haflagah, generation of the dispersal, was the harmony that existed between them. If their goal was to build a tower, they would find a way to see their goal reach fruition. Nothing would stand in the way of their collective efforts. This is why it was essential that the confusion brought about by the language problem had to be so great that it resulted in a complete breakdown of society, even murder. The greatest proof is the fact that even after they killed one of their own, they continued building the tower. It was only when they were dispersed that the Torah writes that work on the tower came to a halt.

Terach took his son Avram... And they departed with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan; they arrived at Charan and they settled there. (11:31)

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, notes that the Torah reveals to us that Terach originally had set a destination to reach Canaan. In the end, he did not reach his goal; he settled midway in Charan. He cites the Arugas Habosem that explains this occurrence in the following manner. Terach set a goal to reach Canaan. Like so many other weak people, Terach did not achieve his goal. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, challenges us midway, seeking a way of preventing us from bringing our goal to fruition. This is what happens to the wicked: they undertake glorious endeavors; they make grandiose plans, all with good intentions. Yet, along the way, they fall prey to their yetzer hora which misleads them. Tzaddikim, the righteous, are not like that. They set sail on a mission, and nothing obstructs their way. They triumph over the challenges and obstacles that lie in their path, because they are focused on their objective. Regardless of the difficulties, once they have accepted a task upon themselves, they complete it.

The Chassidic Seforim distinguish between angels and man in that angels manifest the virtue that they cannot deteriorate. Their concomitant flaw is that they cannot improve. They cannot go forward and grow. Man, regrettably, can deteriorate, but he also demonstrates the virtue that he can improve. Man can set goals for himself which he can drive himself to achieve. A wise man once said, "Humanity cannot be measured by what it is; only by what it is trying to become." When people set a goal before themselves, and they adhere to the path towards achieving that goal, their success is determined by their achievement. They can only achieve their goal, however, if they feel a sense of mission.

One of our most common human failings is a lack of persistence. We set before ourselves lofty goals, which we initially attack with great enthusiasm, but we do not persevere. When we lose the will to go forward, we have lost the most significant line of defense against failure - persistence. And a lack of persistence is the natural consequence of losing our sense of mission.

How often do we throw up our hands in defeat at a time when - with just a bit more effort, a bit more patience - we would have succeeded? With a little more perseverance and a little more effort,

what previously might have seemed hopeless, may yet turn into a glorious success. The greatest failure is in no longer trying. Defeat except that from within. There is no barrier more insurmountable than our own lack of purpose, our own lack of mission.

Hasmadah, diligence, in Torah study produces Torah leaders. One does not have to be a genius to achieve this status. Indeed, many talented geniuses have not achieved this zenith in Torah. It is those who plug away every day, all the time, who are undiscouraged and indefatigable, who achieve the mark of success.

A person who is on a mission works at achieving his goal on a constant basis. He looks for every way to enhance his work and grow in his endeavor. He does not slack off and take the easy way out. Nothing stands in his way. He is on a constant mission. The story is told about a firm that sought to hire a man for a top executive position. The firm had bypassed the man next in line and chosen an outsider for the position. The individual who had seniority and had been ignored was upset, so he decided to take his case to the company's CEO. In very hurt tones he said, "But I had fifteen years of experience with this firm." The CEO replied, "That is not so. You had one year of experience fifteen times."

In every endeavor, in every field, especially in the field of Torah chinuch, education, one must be creative, innovative vitality and fresh. The success of a teacher is determined by his excitement, his viridity and his sense of mission. Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl, the legendary menahel of Mesivta Torah Vodaath and primary architect of Torah in America, instilled this sense of mission in his talmidim, students. He understood that the transformation of American Jewry was dependent on the creation of a cadre of teachers who had a passion for their work, a burning sense of mission. He imbued them with a love for each Jew, with a sensitivity to their physical and spiritual needs, by having them identify personally with each one. Rav Shraga Feivel once sent one of his close students to a distant community for the Yamim Noraim, High Holy Days. When the student returned, he asked him, "How many shomrei Shabbos did you find there?" The talmid responded, "I highly doubt if there is even one shomer Shabbos in the community." quickly asked in amazement, "Did you not cry bitterly because of this?" He felt that only those capable of weeping over the sorry spiritual state of American Jewry were capable of changing it. The situation required sensitivity, determination, diligence and a sense of mission.

Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation. (6:9)

Rashi cites a difference of opinion regarding the meaning of b'dorosav, in his generation. Some are of the opinion that Noach was a tzaddik in a generation that was evil, immoral and hedonistic. If he could ascend to spiritual leadership in such an environment, then he could certainly succeed in a generation such as Avraham's. Others contend that Noach seemed to be a tzaddik only because he was alive during a period of evil unparalleled in our history. Had he lived, however, in Avraham's generation, his righteousness would not really have appeared as great. Some interpret Noach in a positive light, while others dispute his righteousness in an absolute sense.

Nachlas Tzvi suggests an interesting twist to the meaning of b'dorosav, in regard to Noach. Chazal say in Talmud Eirubin 105a that in the circumstances in which there are no Kohanim temimim, whole and healthy without any physical blemishes or impediments, to serve in the Bais Hamikdash,

then any Kohen, regardless of his physical challenge, may represent Klal Yisrael in serving before Hashem. While the mitzvah is through temimim, it applies only if such individuals are available. If they are not to be found, then even a Kohen baal mum may serve. This is the meaning of b'dorosav. Noach was a tzaddik in the context of "his generation." Since no one else other than he was inspired to come close to Hashem, he was blessed with an extra shefah, spiritual outpouring, from Hashem. When "bnei aliyah," those who strive to succeed spiritually, are few, Hashem increases His Divine spiritual flow to the world. Hashem rewarded Noach with special favor, since he was the only one who cared.

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, once explained that those who studied Torah during the terrible years of World War II achieved incredible heights in Torah erudition, because so few studied. The dearth of students available and committed to Torah engendered a special, unprecedented Siyata Dishmaya, Divine assistance, to the point that whoever sat down to learn Torah became successful.

But the dove did not find for itself a resting place...and it returned to the Ark...so he put forth his hand, and took it and brought it to him to the Ark. (8:9,10)

Noach sent the dove out of the Ark in search of dry land to ascertain if the time had come to leave the Ark. The first time, the dove returned and Noach stretched out his hand, to take the dove back into the Ark. The Torah seems to be using this incident to tell us something. Why did the Torah find it necessary to point out that Noach stretched out his hand to bring the dove into the ark? Rabbi Yechezkel Munk Shlita, shared an insight with me which sheds light on the matter.

The generation of the Flood was guilty of various transgressions. There was a moral and spiritual breakdown of society. In the beginning of the parsha, Rashi tells us two significant points. He teaches us that the sin, which finally sealed the fate of that generation, was "chamas", theft in various forms. "Sheli, shelcha v'shelcha sheli," mine is yours, and yours is mine. They did not respect "boundaries". They took whatever they wanted without regard for the fact that it belonged to someone else.

Rashi also teaches us that the social conduct of animals is often a reflection of the way of life of human beings. Human hanhagah, activity, does not only influence humans, but also directly influences how animals live. The purpose of the Flood and all punishment is not merely to punish. Rather, it is meant to rectify the wrong and return the individual or society to the proper way of life. The year spent in the Ark was a year of education, a year of learning to live with one another under circumstances that were far from comfortable, a year of learning to respect each other's "space".

Noach sent the dove in search of dry land. When the dove returned, it would not enter the Ark on its own. The dove waited to be "invited" back in. It was necessary for Noach to stretch out his hand and take the dove back into the ark. This served as an indication to Noach that the concept of "boundaries" was again respected and that the sin of "chamas" was rectified. Soon they would be able to leave the Ark and again live on land.

Shem and Yefes took the cloak and placed it on their shoulders. (9:23)

Rashi notes that the Torah uses the word vayikach, and he took, in the singular, as opposed to

vayikchu, and they took. This teaches us that Shem actually exerted himself more than Yefes for this noble deed. Consequently, Shem's descendants were privileged to receive the mitzvah of Tzitzis, while Yefes merited to receive respectful burial for his descendants. Rashi clearly teaches us that the difference between the reward received by Shem and that received by Yefes is directly linked with their relative actions on behalf of Noach. Shem received a "covering" of Tzitzis for the manner in which he covered his father. Yefes received burial for his descendants in a manner corresponding to the way he covered Noach. **Horav Yitzchak Goldwasser, Shlita**, points out four differences between the reward received by Shem to that received by Yefes, each one a direct result of the way each son performed his act of respect for his father.

He cites **Horav Gedaliah Schorr, zl**, who distinguishes between Tzitzis, which is a covering for the living, and burial, which is a covering for the dead. Shem exerted himself when he performed the mitzvah. He put his life into it. Therefore, his reward is a covering for the living. Yefes was not proactive in his performance. He simply followed along with Shem. There was no life to his act. His reward was a covering - for the dead. His corresponds with his behavior.

Second, it did not take long for Shem's reward to take effect. The Torah was given at Har Sinai to Shem's descendants, Klal Yisrael, and the mitzvah of Tzitzis became a reality. Yefes' reward will be fulfilled in the end of the days, after the war of Gog and Magog is fought. Measure for measure, the rewards coincides with the action. Shem wasted no time in performing the mitzvah. He moved forward with alacrity and covered his father. Thus, his reward was soon forthcoming. Yefes dragged; he was slothful in performing his good deed. His reward will arrive in a manner similar to his deed - at the end of the days, when the world as we know it is about to transform forever.

A Tallis -- and every garment for that matter -- performs a vital function in covering its wearer. Hence, the Tallis, or garment, becomes part and parcel with the person. It is like a part of his extended body. Indeed, a person's image, his outward appearance, changes with the clothes he wears. The grave, on the other hand, is not a part of a person. He is placed into it. The body does not change its appearance as a result of being placed in the ground. It deteriorates, because there is no life left in it. Once again, this reverts back to the way each one performed the mitzvah. When one executes a mitzvah with hislahavus, fiery passion and excitement, he becomes one entity with the mitzvah. He is elevated and sanctified by it and becomes a new person by virtue of its holiness. Conversely, when one performs a mitzvah without feeling, without interest, without enthusiasm, he does not become affected in such a manner. One takes from a mitzvah exactly what he puts into it.

Last, Tzitzis is a mitzvah, a reward that bears fruit, that catalyzes the performance of other mitzvos. Chazal teach us in Pirkei Avos that s'char mitzvah - mitzvah; the reward for observing a mitzvah is the opportunity to carry out yet another mitzvah. As we don the Tallis everyday, we say, "Just as I cover myself with a Tallis in this world, so may I merit the chiluka d'Rabbanan, Rabbinical garb, and a beautiful cloak in the world to come, in Gan Eden." In contrast, burial is the final reward. It does not generate any other fruits. A mitzvah performed with zeal and enthusiasm engenders other mitzvos and good deeds. It is like a wellspring, a veritable fountain of ever-flowing waters. On the other hand, a mitzvah performed lackadaisically, without fervor or desire, is sterile. While one certainly will be awarded for his endeavor, the spiritual quality of the mitzvah is deficient. A strong, positive attitude produces the "next generation" of mitzvos, while a languid demeanor in mitzvah performance hardly has the strength to give this mitzvah viability.

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. (11:1)

We talk about achdus, unity, as the ideal ingredient for success among people. Yet, the Torah suggests that the sin of the people who built the tower of Bavel was precisely their unity - one language - one common purpose. Obviously, their unity was not an asset. When is harmony among people a detriment and when is it to their benefit? Moreover, In the Yerushalmi Megillah 1:9, Chazal clearly state that the people spoke seventy different languages, when in fact the Torah states that the punishment was to disperse them and divide them into different languages. Last, in giving a name to the place where the building of the tower took place, the Torah calls it Bavel, which means to disperse, because "from there Hashem scattered them over the face of the whole earth." If they spoke seventy languages prior to the dispersment, what changed after they were scattered?

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, explains that while unity is certainly a positive quality, it depends greatly on the purpose in which the unity is used. Let us first focus on the languages and the types of communication between people that existed at the time. Language is an expression of each individual nation based upon its culture, society, way of life and other various circumstances, which are endemic to that individual nation. While it is true that different languages existed before the dispersion, people were still able to understand one another, so great was the harmony among men. When people get along and there is a strong meeting of the minds, the language barrier just seems to fade away. Rav Schwab posits that even after the dispersion, when people and their lives changed to the point that they no longer understood each other, one common thread remained: music. Every country makes its own music, with its own individual sounds, notes and lyrics. Yet, one who is proficient in the area of music can read and understands anyone's music. It is a universal language. Hashem dispersed the people and mixed up their languages, but their music stayed the same.

As a result of the unique harmony among men that reigned at the time, people understood each other and became like one family. United, mankind began to think that "they" were "it." They thought that with everyone playing a supporting role to his friend and neighbor, each was actually self-sufficient. They no longer needed G-d. They could go at it on their own. Indeed, this is why the Torah does not clearly state their actual sin. It only writes that they were of one language and one common purpose. This common bond among men is what led to their infamy. Nimrod rallied the people against the Almighty. "We can do it ourselves!" he declared. "Why should we listen to Hashem?" In order to abrogate their misguided unity, it was essential that each person be acutely aware that in order to endure, he must have Siyata Dishmaya, Divine assistance. Unity does not take the place of emunah, belief in Hashem. It was necessary for Hashem to "descend," to bring Himself down, to give people a more penetrating understanding of His greatness. Hashem intervened and prevented the gap between Heaven and earth from growing. The pernicious goal of the tower's founders was halted.

Hashem confused their ability to communicate with each other. The Torah uses the word v'navlah som sfasam, "so that their language will become confused/dried up." Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, explains that the word, v'navlah, is a derivative of naval, which means to wither. The immediate result of Hashem's yeridah, descending / closing the gap, was the withering of their speech. There certainly was a confusion of their language, and consequent ability to communicate with each other, but it happened because people had a greater and more profound grasp of Hashem. The more they understood Hashem, the less they needed one another, because they now realized that they could not exist without Him. Thus, their prior ability to communicate with each other, to understand one another despite the gap created by variant languages, naturally deteriorated. Language became an insurmountable barrier, since the ability to act as one with one another decreased. This is why the place became known as Bavel, because there Hashem bolal, scattered them. Bolal also means to "mix in;" Hashem "mixed in" a

perception of Himself into their ability to communicate with each other. The result was a dispersal of nations throughout the world. Unity among people is wonderful, as long as it is meaningful and produces *achdus haBoreh*, a belief in the unity of the Creator.

Noach walked with G-d. (6:9)

Rashi distinguishes between Avraham Avinu's spiritual plateau and that of Noach. Regarding Noach, the Torah says that "Noach walked with G-d," implying that Noach needed Hashem's support for walking with G-d. Avraham Avinu, on the other hand, walked alone before G-d, as the pasuk in Bereishis 17:2, states, "Walk before Me and be perfect." Avraham did not need that extra support to maintain his spiritual status quo. What does this mean? In a homily delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto on Parashas Noach, 1940, the Piacesner Rebbe, zl, acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining intellectual activity and creative endeavor at a time of overwhelming crisis and tragedy.

He cites a narrative in the Talmud Sanhedrin 104a that describes two Jews who had been taken captive and were being led away as slaves. As they walked along, they exchanged perceptive, insightful remarks. Overhearing the dialogue between them, their captor expressed his chagrin and incredulity at the "am k'shei oref," stiff-necked people, the Jews who imagine themselves capable of wisdom even in defeat. The Rebbe explains that every negative character trait, such as stubbornness, has a positive aspect. The desirable side to the quality of stiff-neckedness/stubbornness is the ability to remain steadfast and resolute, firm in one's faith, even at a time of great personal difficulty.

The Rebbe continues, that to be firm and resolute in matters of Divine service, during a period of crisis and affliction, is in itself no simple matter - but it can be accomplished. It is a special challenge, however, to be able to engage in Torah study, conceptual analysis and dialectic. This is a much greater achievement. Everyone knows from experience that at a time of trouble it is not difficult to put on Tefillin or to perform other mitzvos involving an action, but to study Torah, especially if one is engaged in penetrating analysis, is very difficult. Noach and Avraham both had their detractors and pursuers. The people of Noach's generation sought to kill him at every juncture. Avraham underwent a number of trials, one of which was that he was thrown into a fiery furnace. They were both great tzaddikim, virtuous and pious. The difference between them was evident during the moments of crisis. Noach could not do it alone. He was faithful, but overwhelmed. He needed Hashem's support. Avraham was resolute, reflecting the capacity to maintain his intellectual and physical level of commitment, despite the terrible challenges he was compelled to confront.

We have modern-day Avraham Avinus: people who, despite being subjected to excruciating pain and debilitating emotional torment and challenge, are able to forge on with resolution and fortitude, with pride and conviction. They do not lessen their physical activity on behalf of Torah and mitzvos. Their prayer and mitzvah-observance are exemplary, never waning for even a moment. Above all, however, they continue to excel in the intellectual arena, studying Torah, setting goals and maintaining them.

I have had the privilege recently to get to know one such family. Regrettably, I did not meet them until I traveled to Detroit, Michigan, to be *menachem aveil*, comfort them, during their period of grief over the tragic loss of their dearly beloved son, Akiva. I was so moved by Akiva's mother's relating of his months in the hospital, his devotion to Torah-study throughout his illness, especially during his last pain-filled days, that I asked her to write about "Kivi," as his father lovingly refers to

him. This is but a brief appreciation of Akiva Simcha ben Asher Zelig, ז"ל, written by his mother, Yehi Zichro baruch. May his name be a blessing. Finding a moment to pen this biography has been difficult... Truth be told, I have procrastinated. For, how is it possible to sum up Akiva's life in just a few pages. How can I put my thoughts onto paper and truly describe the impact that one nine-year old boy had on the world? How can I convey how special he was - and how lucky we were to be his parents - in the little space allotted to me?

I can only compare Akiva to a candle; his light illuminated the darkness. His entire life was a lesson in Kiddush Hashem. Physically, Akiva was small for his age. Spiritually, Akiva was a giant. His size was never a limitation. He never used it as an excuse for not doing. Akiva took his stature in stride. "People think I'm younger than I really am," he would say matter-of-factly. Though he was small, he was a leader in his class. The boys were drawn to him. He was bright and clever and had a great sense of humor. The children didn't care about his size. Intrinsicly, they knew he was someone they wanted to be around, someone that they wanted to consider their friend. After Akiva was niftar, passed away, one boy cried to his mother, "Other boys picked on me. Akiva was the only boy who was always nice to me."

Akiva had an impact on people all over the world. He touched the lives of people he never even had the opportunity to meet. Simchah truly was his middle name. It embodied his entire being and defined his essence. He always had a cheerful smile on his face, a joke to tell. He always had an angle. He sold his own personal recipe for hair tonic in Memorial Sloan Kettering. He posted signs all over the fifth floor, hanging them in strategic positions, such as right next to the elevator, so people would be sure to see them. "Hair tonic in a cancer hospital?" I asked. "It's not for me, for my hair will grow back! It's for all the bald doctors." He always managed to make the best of any situation. He never complained about his treatments. Akiva would always find a way to make his circumstances more enjoyable. He could be seen skating down the hallways of the hospital on his IV pole. He perfected his skateboarding technique by flying down the hill on the way to the playroom. "Look Mommy, no hands!" My heart would beat a little bit faster as he spun in circles, with his IV lines getting tangled on the pole. He would always come prepared to doctor appointments with a riddle with which to stump someone. One might think that a cancer clinic would be a depressing place to spend so many hours each day. Akiva never looked at it that way. He was always smiling. If he wasn't feeling well, everyone noticed. Parents would come up to me and say, "Akiva must be in a lot of pain. We noticed he's not smiling today. He's usually cheering up my child with his antics."

Akiva was very bright and inquisitive. He was an expert when it came to his medical care. He grilled every nurse and doctor: "How much experience do you have? How many times have you done this procedure?" He asked countless questions in order to know what to expect. In this way, he was able to prepare himself psychologically for the treatments. He knew all the medications he was taking, as well as their side effects. He knew his blood counts every day and whenever he needed platelets. He knew if he had forgotten to take a pill and which pills he had already taken. He never forgot to say, "Please" or "Thank you." The nurses used to say, "Akiva, there's no need to thank us when we give you a shot or finger poke." But it was ingrained and automatic. Though he was always b'simchah he took his halachos seriously. Akiva always made sure that his yarmulke was on his head before he made a brachah, blessing. Even in his sleep, he was always touching his head to check that it was still in place. When Akiva's yarmulke would get completely soaked with sweat and had to be put in the dryer, he would insist that his head be covered with a washcloth until his yarmulke was dry. He was always so careful to wash his hands after using the bathroom, so he could say Asher Yotzar. One could argue that it was second nature, done by habit.

There was that one Friday night, however, when he was suffering from tremendous bone pain, he had mouth sores from chemotherapy and a temperature of 103, and he was on a pain drip. He still managed to say Asher Yotzar. When he woke up in the morning, we questioned him about all the empty packets of fresh towelettes scattered around the pillow, ripped with precision. Akiva answered us, "I needed to wash my hands in order to say Asher Yotzar, and it's Shabbos. You know I can't rip the letters."

Such strength of character... this was not just a habit!

Akiva was diagnosed with (ALL) Leukemia on Isru Chag Sukkos, 2000. Within a month, he was in remission. Unfortunately, in February, Akiva relapsed. We needed to decide on a more drastic form of chemotherapy. Our doctors decided that Akiva's only chance for a cure was a bone marrow transplant.

After many trying days of meeting with doctors and doing research, we decided that our best hope for a cure was in Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Making this decision meant that our family would be separated for at least three months, while Akiva and I traveled to New York. My three-month-old baby would stay with my parents, and my husband would watch our other children. It is too difficult to describe our parting. However, everyone rose to the occasion beautifully. Akiva was anxious to get on with the treatment, so he could be back at home with his family. Our other children were extremely understanding, knowing that we were doing the best we could for Akiva and that we would do no less for each of them. In total, we were separated for over five very long months. One would imagine that Akiva and my other children would be walking around depressed, understandably so. This could not be further from the truth. People were amazed when they found out that we were far from home. In Detroit, people would tell me that from looking at my kids, they would never know that anything was wrong. When the girls went to camp, their bunkmates were not even aware that they had a brother in the hospital, let alone how serious the situation was. We all took our cue from Akiva. If he could walk around with a smile in the face of adversity, we could do no less.

While we were in New York, I was troubled by one thing. I had once heard a story that at the end of a person's life, when they come to the Bais Din Shel Ma'alah, Heavenly Tribunal, they will be farhered, tested, on their "blatt gemara," folio of Talmud, in which they excelled. I worried about Akiva. His class had just begun Mishnayos, and he was alone in New York without a chavrusa, study partner. Who would learn the Mishnayos with him?

My husband was in Detroit attempting to keep the family together and functioning as smoothly as possible. I didn't feel that I was the right person for the job. Not to mention the fact that I was so busy just trying to get through the day with clinic appointments, giving Neupogen shots, administering medication, blood tests, pain pills, insurance claims, keeping a smile on my face, and entertaining Akiva. Who would teach him? This was a constant source of anguish.

I was on the phone with a close friend from Detroit, and I voiced my concerns: "What will happen to Akiva when he gets to Shomayim and Hakodosh Boruch Hu wants to farher him? How will Akiva be able to answer?" My friend got very upset with me, "You can't talk that way. Im Yirtza Hashem, with the help of the Almighty, before you know it, Akiva will be back in school learning, and he will catch up in no time." My reply was, "But what if he doesn't? What if Hashem has another plan? Akiva needs to know the Mishnayos. He needs to be prepared for this most important test."

A few hours later, my friend called back. "Okay, it's arranged. My son, Aryeh Leib (a classmate of Akiva's), will learn with Akiva every night." And so they began, two eight-year-old boys on the

telephone almost every night learning Mishnayos, Mesechta Brachos. There were days when Aryeh Leib would call from Detroit, and Akiva was not up to learning or wasn't in the mood, but we encouraged him and he pulled out his Mishnayos and took the phone. There were times when he was in terrible pain and it was difficult for him to speak, but we spurred him on. We told him that all he had to do was listen, we would hold the phone up to his ear and Aryeh Leib would read the Mishnayos. The next thing we knew, Akiva would be sitting up in bed reading and translating in a strong, clear voice.

They were so close to finishing. They were on the last perek, chapter, of Meseches Brachos. For Shavuos, we were fortunate enough to come home to Detroit to spend Yom Tov together as a family. What a beautiful Yom Tov we had, singing zemiros around the table the Shabbos before Shavuos. On Shavuos night, Akiva was in severe pain, and it was difficult for him to walk. The cancer had come back, and Akiva was taking pain medication that made him drowsy. Akiva had made arrangements to learn in the Yeshivah Gedolah with his rebbe. He didn't want to take the pain medication for fear that he would fall asleep. After the meal, Akiva went with my husband and my other son to the Yeshivah to learn. I expected them back within the hour. When I awakened in the morning, I woke my husband for shul. "It's okay, I already davened. The boys wanted to stay in Yeshiva all night learning; it was so beautiful." I was overcome with emotion. I had often wondered what possible tafkid, purpose, could an eight-year-old boy have. What was he put on this earth to teach us? Now I understood. Imagine all the bachurim, yeshivah students, observing this bald little boy learning with such hasmadah, diligence, while in so much pain. How could they not learn harder and push themselves farther? If he could do it, what excuse could they possibly have not to try harder? He was here to teach all of us the importance of learning Torah.

When the end was imminent, I held Akiva in my arms. I told him not to worry, even though he had not finished the Mesechta; he would finish it in Shomayim. He would have the best teachers to answer all his questions and clarify any points. They will make a Siyum, the festive conclusion, of the Mesechta in Shomayim and the Malachim, angels, will sing Shira, a song of praise. The doctors had told me that he had a few hours to live. As soon as I finished telling him what to expect and not to be afraid, however, his neshamah, soul, was returned to Shomayim.. Akiva had just celebrated his ninth Hebrew birthday.

The day of his kevura, burial, was the eighth day after his birthday and would have been the day of his Bris. Akiva was born on a Tuesday, and he died on a Tuesday. That is a nechamah, consolation, to our family, for in Beraishis, "Ki Tov," "it was good" is written twice on Tuesday. Akiva's life was truly good.

I have taken the liberty to include "Akiva's story" in this week's Peninim with the hope that it will inspire and instill within us a sense of pride in our People. "Mi K'Amcha Yisrael?" "Who is like Your Nation, Yisrael?" To suffer with courage, to continue studying Torah with joy - despite being subject to extreme pain - takes incredible love for, and faith and trust in, Hashem. Akiva was special. May his family know no more pain, and may their lives be filled with joy and nachas.

And Shem and Yafes took a garment, laid it upon their shoulders... and covered their father's nakedness. (9:23)

When they saw their father in his disgrace, Shem and Yafes took a garment and covered him. Rashi observes that the word "vayikach," "and (he) (they) took," is written in the singular, while the

actual act of covering is written in the plural form (va'yasimu). Rashi cites Chazal who say that it was Shem who took the initiative, and afterwards Yafes joined him in this act of respect for their father. We wonder if taking the initiative should be considered as important as if he was the only one involved in the deed. Furthermore, what makes this more perplexing is the fact that Shem's descendants were rewarded with the mitzvah of Tzitzis, while Yafes' descendants were rewarded with burial in Eretz Yisrael. It would seem that there is a large discrepancy between these two rewards. There is reason to suggest that Yafes, who did not take the initiative, was the beneficiary of a greater reward than Shem.

Horav Zalmen Sorotzkin, zl, explains that they both were rewarded midah k'neged midah, measure for measure. They both covered their father; consequently, they were both rewarded with a covering for themselves. Shem was given the mitzvah of Tzitzis, which implies with it that he will have garments upon which to put on the Tzitzis. Yafes was given the assurance of burial - a covering for his mortal remains. There is a significant difference between their rewards. Shem's reward can be enjoyed during his lifetime, while Yafes' reward is only after he has passed on. Furthermore, Shem's descendants received their reward when they accepted the Torah at Har Sinai, while Yafes' reward will not be attained until the "end of the days." Apparently, the initiative taken by Shem paid off handsomely. Should such a seemingly small deed make such a great difference?

Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita, explains that it is the "little things," the extra few moments of learning, the few minutes that one arises before davening, that extra effort when doing a mitzvah, the smile when one performs an act of kindness, that make a major difference. In fact, they create the difference between ultimate success and mediocrity. As Horav Beifus point out, Koresh/Cyrus, the Persian king who helped build the second Bais Hamikdash, was a descendant of Yafes. The Shechinah did not repose there. The first Bais Hamikdash, which was built by Shlomo HaMelech, a descendant of Shem, was worthy of the Shechinah's repose. All of this is the result of Shem's extra effort. Trying harder is more than a slogan; it defines the mitzvah and its consequent success.

And the earth had become filled with robbery. (6:11)

In the Midrash, Chazal offer an intriguing interpretation for the word "chamas." Indeed, the corruption of that period was on a "fruma oifen," religious manner. They depict a case in which a person would come to the market with a basket of fruit. Immediately, everybody pounced on the basket, each removing less than a shavah perutah, value of a "penny," of fruit. A perutah is the minimum halachic parameter to constitute stealing. Bais Din cannot collect a sum less than a perutah from the thief. In other words, these evil people were concerned about how much they stole. They wanted to make sure that their "geneivah," stealing, was within the limits of the law. How are we to understand this? We are talking about a generation that had sunk to the nadir of depravity, murder and licentiousness; every immoral act was insignificant to them. Why should they suddenly concern themselves about the laws of geneivah?

Horav Sholom Shwadron, zl, derives a profound lesson in human nature. It is conceivable for one to transgress the most cardinal sins, to stoop to the lowest rung of immorality, and still be concerned with the halachic implications of his behavior. After all, if he can steal with halachic dispensation, why should he transgress a Biblical prohibition? This is the hypocrisy that prevails in the minds of some people. They want to murder and act immorally, while simultaneously lauding their meticulous mitzvah observance.

Horav Shwadron cites the following story as an analogy to understanding the psyche of these people: He was once walking on one of the side streets in Yerushalayim, when he noticed people moving away quickly from an area down the block. As he got closer, he was told that there was a terrible stench being emitting from some place down the block. His curiosity got the better of him as he came closer to the spot. He wanted to know what was so bad that everybody was literally running away. When he came to the place, he noticed that the lid of a manhole had been removed while a crew was cleaning out some sewage that had gotten stuck. The stench was overpowering. As he got closer, he looked in and saw that the Arab crew was down in the pit seemingly unaffected by the odor.

Moreover, one of the Arab workers was enjoying his lunch. He sat there eating a falafel sandwich, totally oblivious to the noxious fumes. How could he eat - even enjoy - a falafel amid the stench of the sewage all around him? The answer, realized Horav Shwadron, was that one only felt the noxious odor from afar, but in the center of the stench, surrounded on all sides with all forms of waste, he did not sense the offensive odor. Smell is relative. When one is surrounded by noxious odor, when he is in the middle of the stench, it does not smell as bad. He can have his lunch and enjoy it amid the reeking smell of sewage.

A parallel idea can be applied to the generation that was destroyed by the flood. When a person is submerged in the slime of sin, when he is engulfed by depravity, licentiousness and all forms of violence, it is no wonder that he loses all sense of objectivity. When he is in the sewer, he can enjoy his falafel. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, can even make him believe that he is a saint. After all, he would never steal the value of a perutah. What about all of those other terrible sins that he has committed? Those are nothing; they are momentary lapses in his spirituality, but not really a reflection of his real essence.

We now understand why that generation did not repent. They had so many opportunities. Hashem gave them every chance – to no avail. They felt they had nothing to repent about! They were perfect! Regrettably, this attitude did not die with them. Until this very day, we have those who see nothing wrong with a momentary lapse, a quick fling with the yetzer hora, as long as they remain committed in other areas of religious observance. These people will one day wake up and realize that it did not work then, and it will not work today.

Noach, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him, went into the Ark because of the waters of the flood. (7:7)

The pasuk implies that Noach entered the Ark at the last minute; to escape the rising waters which compelled him to seek shelter. Indeed, Chazal tell us that Noach “miketanei emunah hayah,” his faith was imperfect. He waited for the “last second” to enter the Ark. This is difficult to understand. It is one thing to say that someone is deficient in a middah, character trait, such as hatred or envy; to claim, however, that Noach was lacking in emunah is a strong statement. This is a man who spent one hundred and twenty years building an Ark. He did not just build it; he even planted the cedar trees from which he made the boards for the Ark. He went all over preaching, inspiring, hoping to bring some of the pagans back to belief in Hashem. When the moment had finally arrived, he could show the world it was true. The torrential rains had begun. He did not stand at the helm of the Ark, screaming, “I told you so.” He did not even depart until he was forced to do so. Does this sound like the same Noach who had been so meticulous in following Hashem’s imperative?

Horav Gershon Liebman, zl, derives from here that one who is “mashpia,” inspires others, risks his own exposure to those whom he is attempting to influence. Noach spent a “lifetime” influencing

others, reaching out to them, seeking every way to bring them closer to Hashem. At the same time, however, that he was trying to help others, he was endangering his own spiritual health. We see now why, on the one hand, Noach was considered a tzaddik, while on the other hand he was so affected by the people of that generation that he is called “m’ketanei emunah.” If this is true about Noach, whom the Torah calls a tzaddik, what should we say about ourselves? One can be spared the effects of this harmful influence in just one way: “zikui horabim”, by doing everything possible to bring others into the fold. Noach saved himself; he survived; his family made it – but that was all. He failed in zikui horabim. Avraham Avinu reached out to a world of pagans – successfully. Moshe Rabbeinu interceded on behalf of Klal Yisrael – successfully. They were “mezakeh the rabim.” Noach was only able to save himself. His lack of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, on behalf of others weakened his ability to protect himself from their harmful influence. Thus, he failed.

This exposition might explain why some of those mashpiim, those who have gone out to reach out to others, to inspire the unaffiliated, to bring back the alienated, have themselves become lost. The determining factor that effects success is mesiras nefesh. How far is one prepared to go to help others? Is it all superficial, the nurturing of an overactive ego - or is it for real? The product will tell us the true origin of one’s kiruv work.

Hashem said to Noach, saying... go forth from the Ark, you, and your wife and your sons. (8:15)

Chazal tell us that Noach did not want to leave the safety of the Ark. He was safe, his family was safe. Why should they not remain in the Ark? Moreover, Hashem wanted Noach to continue his family. Noach was apprehensive about this. Should he have children only to bring them into a world of destruction and evil? Noach had lost all hope for his future descendants. Hashem told him that if someone is saved it is for a reason. A whole world was destroyed. Humanity was obliterated from the face of the earth. One family existed. Was it by chance? Did every bullet have its “number”? Did every bullet reach its mark, except for Noach and his family? The lesson is clear: Since Noach was saved, it was for a purpose. He had no right to have second thoughts about his future, nor could he take his future into his own hands.

My rebbe, the Veitzener Rav, Horav Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, zl, who served as spiritual mentor to thousands in Auschwitz during the dark years of World War II, would relate this concept to the many Holocaust survivors who had lost hope. He reiterated time and again the notion that if they had been saved when so many others perished, it was surely by design. They had a Divine imperative to rebuild the Jewish world and culture that the Nazis had so cruelly destroyed. The spiritual climate that we enjoy today is a tribute to those who were able to go on, who saw the future amid the desolation, whose vision transcended the destruction, who realized that it was not by chance that they had survived.

And they said, “Come let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens (11:4).”

What happened to the Migdal Bavel? Chazal tell us that one-third of the tower was destroyed by fire, one-third sunk into the ground, and the remaining one-third still exists. The Midrash proceeds to emphasize that should one think that the remaining one-third is not impressive, it is not true. If one were to ascend the remains of the Tower of Bavel, upon looking down, the people he will see will

appear to be the size of grasshoppers. Remarkable words! How do Chazal know this? One would think that Rabbi Chiya bar Abba, the author of this statement, had personally ascended the tower and looked down from its high perch.

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, suggests that Chazal are not addressing the tower's physical structure, but rather the foundations upon which it was built, its purpose and the underlying objectives of its creators. The builders of the Tower had but one objective: to rebel against Hashem Yisborach. There were various "approaches" to this rebellion. In response to the pasuk, "The whole earth was one of language and of common purpose" (Beraishis 11:1), Chazal have given two interpretations concerning the meaning of "devarim achadim," "of common purpose." Everyone is in agreement that they all worked together as a harmonious group. They had one language and one goal, which they knew could only be realized if they all worked together, b'achdus, in unity. "Devarim achadim" are translated as "sharp words." The word "achadim" is derived from the word "chad," sharp. They disputed Hashem's authority, contending that He had no "right" to select the heavens as His home, relegating mankind to earth. They planned to build a giant tower upon which they would place an idol with a sword in its hand to make it appear as if it was battling the Almighty. The other foolish claim was that every one thousand six hundred and fifty-six years, the heavens "open up" with a tremendous downpour that deluge the earth with floods. This was, of course, a reference to the Mabul, implying that it was nothing more than a natural occurrence. They would build a tower that would "hold up" the sky from "opening up" and releasing its waters. This is the "safah achas," one shprach, one language, and the sharp words that resulted from this "unity."

If we analyze Chapel, we derive that actually there were three underlying causes for the tower. The first cause was misplaced and misguided unity. The people worked together because they were afraid of being spread out across the world. Their achdus was not positive in nature. It was purely for the purpose of self-preservation. Otherwise, they did not care about one another. Such unity is meaningless. Its origin is selfishness, not selflessness. It cannot endure. Second, they were in contention with the Almighty. They sought to battle Him. They could not accept His domination of the world. Third, they disputed the miraculous nature of the Mabul. Thus, they sought natural methods to prevent another flood.

Chazal relate to us the fate of these three reasons for building the Tower. One cause was completely destroyed, burnt, obliterated from the world. The second cause sunk into the ground. It exists but has no power, no effect on anybody. It is as if it did not exist. The third cause, regrettably, continues to thrive. The group that sought to battle Hashem is gone. The most malevolent sinner knows that Hashem exists and that it is senseless to talk of "fighting Him." No one, however inane, would ever say that he was "taking on" the Almighty. That group is gone.

Those who demonstrated a burning desire to unite the world, so that everyone would live together in brotherhood, are still around. Indeed, after every war, when hundreds of thousands of victims are killed, these peace, love and unity supporters arrive on the scene preaching, preaching and preaching. Unfortunately, they accomplish very little because a unity whose only goal is unity will not endure. People must ascribe to one ideal in order for their accord to work. Yes, the desire for achdus exists, but it has unfortunately sunk into the ground, lacking even the fundamental criteria of "safah achas," one language.

The third cause, the primary motive for building the Tower, the denial of Hashem's Providence, His constant control and direction of the world, regrettably continues to exist. For one hundred and twenty years, Noach labored and toiled, building the Ark that would transport him and his family to a

safe haven. An entire world ignored his pleas for repentance. On the designated day it began to rain and rain. Soon the world was deluged. Hashem had punished the wicked who chose to continue their degenerate lifestyle. Exactly what Noach had said would occur came true. Noach and his family lived, while the rest of that generation perished. Do we need a greater, more definitive demonstration of Hashgacha, Divine Providence? Yet, the generation that built the tower seemed to “forget.” The third motivating factor of the tower has continued to plague generation after generation with its evil intentions. We must ask ourselves: What is it going to take to finally rid ourselves of the Tower of Bavel? Then we must do something about it!

Noach was a righteous man...Noach walked with Hashem. (6:9)

Noach walked with Hashem. This seems to be a positive comment about Noach's virtue, until we note that the Torah writes about Avraham Avinu, "Hashem before whom I walked," (Bereishis 24:40). Rashi notes that Avraham walked in front, without assistance. Noach walked with Hashem; he needed the support of the Almighty to maintain his spiritual strength. Without prompting from Above, Noach would have faltered. Avraham, on the other hand, had the spiritual fortitude to single-handedly override the challenges that confronted him. Chazal use the term, "hisorrerus d'l'eila," inspired from Above, in reference to Noach's spiritual commitment. In contrast, Avraham Avinu was "misorrer," inspired himself, to serve Hashem.

Horav Zaidel Epstein, Shlita, observes that the spiritual difference between Avraham and Noach resulted in the latter's inability to transmit his beliefs to the next generations. A ben Noach is still a ben Noach with only seven mitzvos to fulfill. He is spiritually impaired, always in need of outside support to maintain his spiritual plateau. Avraham's descendants, however, undertake the spiritual challenge on their own. They look for ways to grow in Torah, accepting responsibility to reach out to the unaffiliated, to better themselves, to move closer to Hashem.

The litmus test for a ben Torah is his ability to ascend on his own in his spiritual dimension. His spiritual drive must be apparent in his every endeavor. Complacency is anathema to the ben Torah. Children growing up in a home where there is no motivation, no vigor, no enthusiasm for Torah will have no guidelines in their personal quest. We harvest what we sow, cultivate and nurture. That which we ignore will produce nothing. Such a lifestyle has little chance of producing a generation that will be spiritually productive.

Hashem said to Noach, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery through them." (6:13)

The people had become overtly corrupt. At first they committed immorality and idolatry. Then their sinning "progressed" to blatant robbery. Their covert sins led to overt corruption, for which Hashem would not forgive them. Rashi cites Chazal, who say that, indeed, Hashem did not seal their verdict until they began stealing from one another. This is enigmatic. Is stealing more sinful than immorality, idolatry and murder?

Horav Dov Eliezrov, zl, explains that while stealing is certainly not as evil as the three cardinal sins of immorality, murder and idolatry, it is, however, the bitter root of evil. It indicates the true evil

within a person. A person who steals demonstrates his lack of belief that Hashem determines the amount of material possessions he will hold during the year. He shows that he does not trust Hashem to provide for him. One who steals displays a total moral breakdown. He is prepared to do anything to fulfill his needs. He will even take someone's life if he is challenged. In other words, stealing indicates that the other sins are not just the result of a temporary lust or error in religious perspective. Rather, they are the consequence of man's rebellion against the Almighty.

Furthermore, one who steals may be prepared to take someone's wife, if he so desires. He does not understand that Hashem has given certain possessions to certain people - and, in this instance, destined to be the owner. What belongs to my neighbor is his by right; it is his because Hashem has "given" it to him. One who challenges this idea, challenges Hashem. When the people of that generation broke down the boundaries indicating human possession, they showed their lack of conviction in Hashem. This was the true source of their iniquities. They no longer deserved to be forgiven, for they had progressed beyond the point of possible return.

Cham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. (9:22)

Noach's other two sons, Shem and Yafes, remained outside the tent out of respect for their father. They had no desire to take part in their father's degradation. Not so Cham, who boldly entered the tent and emerged later to relate the scene that he had witnessed. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer comments on the depravity of Cham. He himself was a father who should have set an example for his own children. He should have felt different about debasing his father, knowing fully well the impression this would leave on his own children. No, he took pleasure in observing and relating his father's abuse. This was Cham, a man who neither cared for his father nor was concerned about the impact his abuse would have upon his own children.

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, remarks that by emphasizing the words, "avi Canaan," "the father of Canaan," the Torah focuses on the degenerate population of Canaan and the reason for their perversion. The source of their corruption was their ancestor, Cham. Klal Yisrael was involved with two nations, both descendants of Cham: Egypt and Canaan. In Egypt, Klal Yisrael were exposed to social decadence. Canaan was a nation replete with moral decay. Klal Yisrael witnessed the downfall of both these nations. The Torah alludes to the genesis of their depravity - the relationship between Cham and his father. The breakdown of the ancestral home, reflected in the lack of respect of a son for his father, was manifest in the total social and moral decay of all descendants.

Our world is built upon the relationship between child and parent. When children find something of value to respect in their parents, such as their moral rectitude, their spiritual being, their kindness and goodwill, they develop in a healthy manner. When all they can venerate is the physical aspect of their parents, when they no longer feel a sense of decency in respecting their parents, then the relationship has been terminated. They receive no legacy from the past to pass on to the future. They have nothing to transmit but stories of moral decay. This is what Klal Yisrael saw when they came to Canaan. They were told, "Do you know why this nation fell to such a nadir of depravity?" It all began with their grandfather, Cham, who committed the first act of disrespect. It fermented into a way of life. These are the consequences of a single immoral act.

They said, "Come, let us build a city for ourselves and a tower whose top will be in the heavens, and

we will make a name for ourselves. (11:4)

"We will make a name for ourselves" is the attitude one would expect from an individual with an insecure ego. Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, remarks that becoming aware of one's ego can lead to two possible attitudes: humility or arrogance. An obsession with one's insignificance can either stimulate one to do something for the common good, to serve humanity, or it can drive him to defy what he believes is an inexorable destiny, to break the shackles of human limitations by revolting against Hashem. The people of that generation chose arrogance. They could not accept the fact that one's worth, his personal success, is measured by his contribution to society. Their tower was a useless facade, the concretization of an obsessive ego bent on rebellion against the Almighty. The tower was a grotesque monument to their presumptuous pride, to a society who thought they could eradicate the eternal periphery that exists between man and G-d. They dreamed of greatness. They had delusions of grandeur.

Hashem scattered them across the earth, creating seventy distinct nations. He separated them with geographic barriers and impeded their communication with the obstacles of different languages and cultures. They could no longer unite to form a coalition for the purpose of rebelling against Hashem. They now realized the futility of their dreams, the folly of their actions. Weakened, and obliged to depend upon their own resources, deprived of their unions and coalitions, they would each be compelled to utilize his individual strengths for the good of humanity.

Their collective mistake was in each seeking to establish a name for himself. That is not the Torah way. A Jew's purpose in life is to "likra b'Shem Hashem," glorify Hashem's Name. He is to follow in the footsteps of our forefather, Avraham Avinu. Although Avraham Avinu was born in a pagan country to pagan parents, he reached out to a world, not to "make a name for himself," but rather to call out in the name of G-d. He endeavored to instill His Name in others, inspiring them with His laws. He sought to teach them the meaning of love and kindness, to serve as the symbol of peace between G-d and man. We are acutely aware of our infinitesimal paltriness compared to the Almighty. Yet, we realize the opportunity to achieve greatness by concentrating our efforts to glorify His Name.

Now these are the chronicles of Terach, Terach begot Avram, Nachor and Haran...Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father. (11:27,28)

The Torah traces the genealogy of Avraham Avinu. It records the names of his two brothers, Nachor and Haran, and adds that Haran died during his father Terach's lifetime. Rashi cites the Midrash that claims that Haran actually died because of his father. Terach was an idol merchant who complained to the wicked Nimrod that his son, Avraham, had smashed his wares. Nimrod could not tolerate that someone "defaced" his idols, so he threw Avraham into a fiery furnace. Haran was challenged to decide between his brother and his king. Should he follow Avraham, whose belief in monotheism made sense? Or should he follow what was in vogue at the time and side with Nimrod? Vacillating back and forth, he decided to side with Avraham - if he emerged unscathed.

When Avraham was miraculously saved from death, Haran decided that he would now join forces with Avraham and dispute the pagan Nimrod. Haran was immediately thrown into the fiery furnace. His willingness to defy Nimrod only because he expected to be saved resulted in his death. He was not worthy of being saved, as Avraham was, because of his insincere belief. On the other hand, he

did die Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name through his death. As the progenitor of Rachel and Leah, he had unique characteristics that were praise-worthy. His role as a vehicle for Kiddush Hashem also leads us to believe that he possessed spiritual nobility of a sort. Who really was Haran, and how was his character manifest?

The Shem Mishmuel cites the Arizal who provides us with an ambiguous note about Haran. He says that Haran possessed the same neshamah, soul, as Aharon Hakohen. We now must endeavor to comprehend the nature of Aharon Hakohen in order to understand why his neshamah was a reincarnation of Haran. The Maharal presents us with a fascinating insight into Aharon's personality. He notes that the name Aharon in Hebrew consists of four letters: Aleph, hay, reish and nun. The "reish" has a numerical value of two hundred and is the middle letter of the hundreds. (Tav, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet is four hundred.) The "nun" has a numerical equivalent of fifty and is the middle letter of the tens. The "hay" has a numerical value of five and is the middle letter of the units. Aharon's name expressed his true nature. He was a man who remained focused on the "middle" aspects of life - on the internal, spiritual essence of existence, rather than the external, more obvious concepts.

While the Maharal does not give a reason for the "aleph" which prefaces these three letters of Aharon's name, the Shem Mishmuel suggests a profound explanation. The aleph is the first letter of the aleph-bais and has a numerical value of one. It is the first, literally the chief of all letters. Indeed, the word aleph means chief. It is an allusion to the aleph, "chief" of the world - Hashem. The aleph at the beginning of Aharon's name tells us that the spiritual focus implied by the rest of his name, the internal/spiritual perspective, was to draw himself closer to Hashem.

Keeping this in mind, we may note that actually the names of Aharon and Haran are alike, except for the aleph which is missing from Haran (Aharon - Aleph, hay, reish, nun. Haran - Hay, reish, nun). This implies, says the Shem Mishmuel, that while Haran demonstrated the right idea by concentrating on the internal/spiritual aspects of life, as suggested by his name, he lacked the aleph. He did not manifest the crucial factor, the necessary focus of his devout concentration: directing his aims toward avodas Hashem, serving the Almighty.

As we mentioned, Haran did have some good qualities, as evidenced by the descendants he merited. In order to be mesaken, rectify, his soul and atone for the sins of his generation, it was necessary that Haran serve as a medium for Kiddush Hashem. His inability to focus his attributes towards serving Hashem would now be amended. The generation during which Avraham and Haran lived was one that reeked of idol-worship. The people's defiance of the Almighty was manifest when they attempted to build the Tower of Bavel. Rejection of Hashem as Ruler of the world was the prevalent atmosphere at the time. It would require an incredible display of Kiddush Hashem to challenge and overwhelm this attitude.

In his Magid Meisharim, Horav Yosef Karo, zl, explains that the supreme merit one can achieve in this world is to die Al Kiddush Hashem, particularly if one is burned to death. One who dies in this manner becomes like a Korban Olah, an elevated offering, which is totally consumed and goes up to Heaven. Likewise, the reward for such a person is immeasurable. Haran was mekadash Shem Shomayim in this manner. His death confirmed the miraculous nature of Avraham's situation. Even those who thought that Haran had saved Avraham through magical powers, now realized the folly of their beliefs.

Through his death, Haran achieved the ultimate deveikus b'Hashem, connection with the Almighty, as he cleansed his soul of defect. His neshamah could now be reincarnated in the body of Aharon Hakohen, whose life was lived in total devotion to Hashem.

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