

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



NO'ACH

Is DNA Destiny?

This week we read the further failures of mankind. After ten generations of human existence, God declares: I have decided to put an end to every creature, for the earth is filled with wickedness because of them; therefore I am going to destroy them along with the earth (B'reishit 6:13). And so it was. God, sort of, flushed away the degenerate society, and arranged a reboot using the genes of Mr and Mrs. No'ach.

Almost immediately (on a historical scale) there were issues. No'ach gets drunk, and the three brothers react differently. Cham behaved disgracefully towards his inebriated and naked father. The other brothers, Shem and Yafet, on the other hand, responded respectfully to the emergency. They, with all due respect, cover their father's shameful state. The sons' behavior gets reflected in their father's blessings or charge to them:

Cursed is Canaan! He shall be a slave's slave to his brothers! ... Blessed be God! The Lord of Sheim. Let Canaan be their slave! May God expand (perhaps 'enlarge', either in

numbers, land or influence) Yefet, let him dwell in the tents of Sheim. Let Canaan be their slave! (9:26 & 27)

That's a lot of cursing for the offspring of Cham! But before we try to understand the extent of the triple curse, there's a more urgent difficulty: Why does the curse go to Canaan, and not to Cham, himself? Canaan is most probably Cham's fourth son based on the detailed genealogy (10:6).

It is possible that the sin against No'ach took place many years after they emerged from the Ark, and Canaan participated in the sin. In this scenario, only the Canaan blood line receives the curse, not the other sons of Cham. However, Rashi famously quotes the Midrash that Cham actually castrated No'ach, the verbiage in the verse (9:22) employs euphemism. Canaan gets the curse as the fourth son, because now No'ach will never have a fourth son.

Prof. Robert Alter suggests that exclusively referencing the curse to Canaan was for the sake of Jewish audiences who benefitted from his curse by displacing him from the Land of Canaan, Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch uses the pronouncement of No'ach to describe the basic character traits of humanity:

They represent the three essential

character traits of both individuals and nations. Sheim exhibits intelligence (SEICHEL). He establishes the names for all things. It is within his talent to fashion categories of items. In contrast is Cham. He epitomizes the height of burning desires. The essence of Sheim is intelligence. He investigates everything with objectivity, which requires a calm and peaceful demeanor, without agitation (HIMUM) and even more so without 'heat' (CHIMUM). Yefet stands in the middle. He embodies the meeting point between the two points. Intelligence (SEICHAL) on the one side and passion (CHUSHIM) on the other. This is called REGESH, which is a psychological status somewhere between inner feelings and outer observations (often conflicted) ... These three character traits rule the inner life of humanity, and also represent the aspects of nations.

Cool! We actually think of nations as having certain shared character traits. Rav Hirsch is explaining that these customs or personality features come through DNA or heredity rather than the climate of natural resources of the home country. No'ach's dicta survived through the ages.

We Jews often attribute personality qualities to our brethren who inhabited certain countries. We usually think of Lithuanian Jews (Litvaks) as 'cold' or impersonal (not

me, of course, even though I trace my roots to Kovno) or German Jews (Yekkes) as punctual and officious. However, if that were true, we would be assuming that we got those traits from proximity and environment, not genes. God forbid, any of our sainted ancestors had DNA from the locals. I'm just assuming.

However, back to my main point. Is it true that DNA is destiny? Are our genes truly absolute dictators of our fate? Sometimes we'd like to think so, because we are the heirs to some wonderful blessings. Especially all those wonderful boons and benedictions from Ya'akov Avinu (B'reishit 49) and Moshe Rabbeinu (D'varim 33)!

But the Cham/Canaan curses are terrible. Must we take it for granted that all their progeny are slaves to the descendants of Sheim (us) and Yefet (western society)? The triple nature of the curse seems to imply it is both powerful and long lasting. As we learn from Shlomo HaMelech - 'triple strands can't be severed easily' (Kohelet 4:12).

Well, I'm going to suggest that these declarations from great and authoritative sources are, indeed, powerful, but not necessarily unbreakable. This past Shavuot, I was privileged to hear a wonderful shiur from my next door neighbor, the Nobel Laureate Prof. Yisrael Auman (95 years young and

going strong). He strongly explained that the Midrash on Sefer Rut (Rut Rabba 3:13) tells us that even pronouncements made from Heaven can be abrogated, under the right circumstances.

This beautiful Midrash discusses the prohibition of the Moabites from entering the Jewish community (D'varim 23:3). According to the Talmud (Ketubot 7a), Boaz, together with the Bet Din of Beit Lechem got the rabbis to understand the prohibition was only meant for males. So, Boaz could marry Rut. The Midrash sees the issue differently.

The Midrash compares the prohibition of Moabites (both men and women) from marrying into Judaism to the inability of ACHER (Rav Alisha ben Abuya, 'who was aware of My might, but still rebelled') to perform T'SHUVA from his terrible sins and be accepted back by God. In the Midrash, ACHER's student Rebbe Meir comes to visit ACHER on his death bed. Rebbe Meir says, 'Repent!' ACHER cries, then dies. Rebbe Meir was joyful! God accepted ACHER's T'SHUVA. Similarly, God accepted Boaz's promise that Rut would be redeemed, because 'The Lord is good to all!' (T'hilim 145:9)

Yes, DNA is powerful! Torah blessings and curses are formidable! But the power of God's goodness and love is infinite! We can't ignore or make light

of Torah declarations, but God's compassion for those who seek it sincerely can't be denied. There is hope for Cham and Canaan and every human being. 