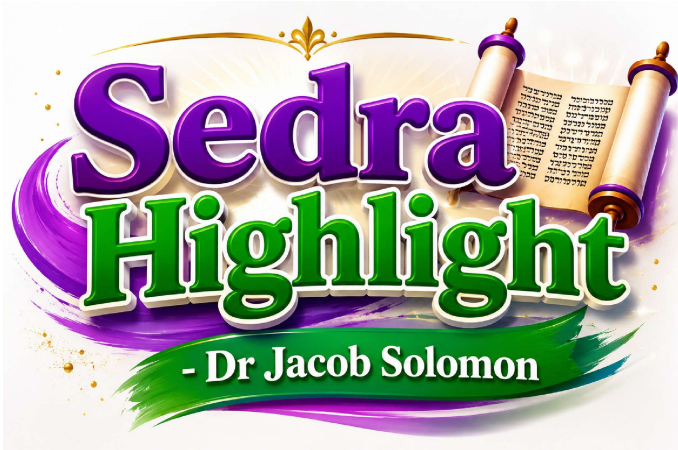




NO'ACH

When the earth dried up completely, G-d said to No'ach: "Get out of the ark..." (8:14-16)

The Midrash (Tanchuma, No'ach 13-14) tell us that when the land was ready for walking on, No'ach still remained shut in the ark. He reasoned that G-d who invited him to enter would invite him to leave. Until then, stay put. That is why G-d specifically ordered him to leave the ark. R' Yehuda bar Ilai remarked, the Midrash tells us, that had he been there he would have smashed the door down and got out at the first opportunity. With no questions.

Perhaps this gives us an insight into guilt-ridden people. In contrast to R' Yehuda bar Ilai, their disorientation clings to unpleasant yet familiar surroundings rather than step out into the daylight and into the uncertainties of the unknown. No'ach, it may be suggested, may well have felt sad and depressed at not having been able to save people from death by the waters of the

Flood. That mood may also be hinted at by what he did later. Instead of being a herder of animals like Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'akov, Moshe, and David, travelling from place to place and mixing with different people, he preferred to keep himself to himself by planting a vineyard and getting drunk (maybe to drown his sorrows) on the products. We then hear no more about him. He might have been a tzadik at the time of the Flood. But that doesn't necessarily mean that his life ended as a tzadik. The last three and a half centuries of his life vanish into oblivion. The Torah tells us nothing about them.

By contrast, the story of Migdal Bavel, the Tower of Babel later in this parasha, indicates Mankind at the very opposite, but equally undesirable, end of spectrum. Not depressed and downtrodden. But with delusions of grandeur and a sense that their combined impact elevated them to the level of the gods who could then declare their own terms with the Creator, at the Heavens. They did that by coming together in their masses to build a new world order "lest we become scattered on the face of the earth". That suggests that they wanted to be the complete masters of their own destiny. They would be entirely in charge. Their values, bad as well as good, would dictate the way things would go. In the capacity of being the mythical

gods of the ancient world. G-d responded by restoring them to their former state, an ordinary and diverse set of peoples scattered over the face of the earth.

G-d's fundamental response was to ground humanity on to the most suitable point on the spectrum; the point of discipline and rules that made possible human interactions with trust and mutual respect. This was the code of the Sheva Mitzvot B'nei No'ach that applied to everybody, not just to Am Yisrael. Based on expounding mainly this parasha, that included permitting eating meat as long as the animal is dead. This code also included establishing systems of law and justice, prohibition of murder, idolatry, blasphemy, specific sexual relations, theft, and meat taken from a living animal (Sanhedrin 56ab). It certainly did not include blaming oneself, as did No'ach, for things that could well be out of one's control. And at the other end, it forbade elevating oneself to being one of the gods, as did the community of Migdal Bavel.

Thus one may claim that the Sheva Mitzvot B'nei No'ach form the unifying structure of the Parasha. And yet, the final part of the Torah takes the first step above that code, to the yet higher, though equally balanced realms of the Torah itself: Avraham Avinu's leaving Ur Kasdim towards

Eretz Yisrael and the long path that would lead to Am Yisrael and the Mamlechet Kohanim v'Goi Kadosh, the nation that would take this to the higher levels through Kabbalat HaTorah at Mount Sinai. 