



GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Before The Avot: First Founders of Judaism

Parashat Bereishit recounts the three seminal failures that shaped the early history of humankind. The first failure unfolds in Gan Eden, when Adam defies Hashem's direct command, surrendering to desire rather than submitting to divine authority. The second follows soon after, when Kayin commits the first murder, disregarding the voice of moral conscience. Even without an explicit command prohibiting bloodshed, such an act should have been obviously immoral. The third tragedy appears toward the end of the parashah: powerful men seize women and claim them as they please, desecrating the sanctity of marriage. Power, once unrestrained, corrodes both judgment and spirit.

These three personal collapses—theological, moral, and social—compel Hashem to reconsider His original vision for humanity, curbing the human lifespan to one hundred and twenty years.

By contrast, Parashat Noach chronicles not personal breakdowns but collective collapse. An entire generation decays morally, compelling a divine reset of creation itself. The saga continues with the Tower of Babel, where humanity unites with remarkable coordination and purpose, only to channel its ambition toward rebellion—imagining

that it could scale the heavens and replace Hashem. In response, Hashem disperses them into seventy nations scattered across the earth.

At this point, after the failures of Bereishit and Noach, it becomes clear that a new plan for humanity is required. Rather than expecting all of humankind to live by divine ideals, Hashem selects one man to discover Him and to inspire a moral and monotheistic revolution. That man, Avraham, would establish a family, a clan, and ultimately a nation. Avraham emerges from the moral wreckage of Bereishit and Noach—the world having been rebooted and its peoples redistributed. Amid the ruins of these ethical and spiritual collapses, Avraham is summoned to journey to the Land of Hashem and to inaugurate Jewish history.

Bereishit and Noach are stories of failure, while Lech Lecha launches the response—the unveiling of “Plan B” through the selection of Avraham. Humanity collapses, but from its ruins rises a single man who restores faith, rebuilds morality, and begins the long journey of redemption.

Yet within Parashat Noach, two figures seem to belong to the emerging world of Avraham. Their stories suggest that Lech

Lecha does not erase the past or begin upon a blank slate. Rather, two personalities from Noah play a crucial role in shaping the Jewish future and legacy. They do not encounter Hashem as Avraham does, nor do they attain his sweeping moral grandeur, yet they plant the qualities essential for the nation that Avraham will soon build.

THE PATH OF SHEM

Shem appears in Parshat Noach and then largely disappears from the rest of Sefer Bereishit. According to Chazal, he was a deeply righteous figure and a spiritual leader in the postdiluvian world. He is often identified with Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, who blesses Avraham after the war of the four kings, serving both as a “priest to G-d” and as a moral-spiritual guide to the emerging generations.

Chazal also teach that Shem, together with his great-grandson Ever, established a yeshiva—known as the Beit Midrash of Shem v’Ever—where, according to our Masorah, both Avraham and Yaakov studied Torah. Yet the Torah itself records only Shem’s behavior in the immediate aftermath of the Flood, leaving the rest of his story to Torah sheb’al peh. What we do witness is Noah planting a vineyard, an image reminiscent of the dawn of creation, when Hashem had planted trees in the newly formed world of Gan Eden. This Gan Eden-like moment holds the promise of a new beginning—a second chance for humanity to repair the failures of the first.

Tragically, the renewal falters. Instead of focusing on rebuilding civilization, Noah sinks into drunkenness, lying uncovered and humiliated in his tent. His son Cham witnesses the shame and rushes to tell his brothers instead of acting swiftly to protect

his father’s dignity. Shem and Yefet enter the tent walking backward, unwilling to gaze upon their father’s nakedness, and quickly cover him to end the disgrace.

For his failure to respond appropriately, Cham is cursed and condemned to servitude, while Shem and Yefet are blessed. Although the Torah describes their actions together, Chazal discern a difference: Shem was the principal actor, while Yefet followed his lead. It is this instinct for reverence and restraint that marks Shem as the ancestor of Avraham—the man who would restore holiness to human history. In this moment, Shem became our founding ancestor—not one of the Avot, but the progenitor of the values that would shape the Jewish people.

In Parashat Ha’azinu, the Torah describes the scattering of the generation of the Tower of Bavel:

בְּהִנָּחֵל הָעַלְיוֹן גּוֹיִם, בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם, יִצַּב גְּבוּלֹת עַמִּים לְמִסְפָּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Devarim 32:8)

“When the Most High apportioned the nations, when He separated the children of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel.”

Rashi observes that this verse raises an implicit question: if humanity had fallen so deeply, why didn’t Hashem destroy the generation of Migdal Bavel as He had the generation of Noah? Rashi explains that Hashem chose to preserve humanity because the Jewish nation was destined to descend from Shem. It was Shem’s moral sensitivity and respect toward his father that laid the foundation for the future character and identity of the Jewish people.

RESTORING HUMANITY’S IMAGE

Shem’s behavior illustrates two

fundamental traits of Jewish identity. His modesty and careful covering of his father reflected an awareness of the sanctity of human beings—the *tzelem Elokim*. In the aftermath of the Flood, when most of humanity had perished and the survivors endured the cramped, suffocating confines of the Ark, it was far from obvious that human beings were meant to be treated with inherent dignity. Shem's actions preserved this vision and provided a model for the moral and ethical legacy that would define his descendants.

Noach did little to restore this vision. Instead of employing his G-d-given traits—vision, hard work, creativity, and hope—he planted grapes and indulged his sorrow in alcohol. His unclothed state and drunkenness represented a nadir in human dignity and the awareness of *tzelem Elokim*. Shem's immediate and respectful response, entering the tent without gazing at his father's disgrace, became a moment of restoration of human dignity.

This ethic became central to Shem's descendants: the belief that Hashem endows humans with distinctive traits, granting both dignity and moral responsibility. Unlike animals, who act on instinct, humans are expected to exercise free will and moral conscience in the pursuit of something higher and eternal.

Over the past two years, we have defended the value of *tzelem Elokim*, confronting forces that demean human life, glorify death over life, and fail to honor the sacred creation of Hashem. Shem's example remains a touchstone for restoring and upholding human dignity.

FAMILY AND FAITH

The second trait that Shem establishes at the core of human identity—and ultimately

at the core of Jewish identity—is respect for his father. Up to this point, the Torah presents few examples of meaningful father-child relationships. We wonder about Adam's role in the tragedy of Kayin and Hevel: where was he during this moral collapse? Would he have intervened? Did Kayin ever return to seek his father's forgiveness? We witness Lemech navigating complex relationships with his wives while his children master crafts and music. These stories unfold in parallel, yet without any meaningful parent-child interactions to provide moral guidance or nurture character. Cham fails to uphold the simplest duty: protecting his father's dignity. He hesitates, gawking at Noach instead of acting. By contrast, Shem responds with immediate reverence, honoring both human dignity and *kibbud av va'em*, the sacred respect due to a parent. Without this foundation, family building cannot commence. Up to this point in Bereishit, no fully healthy family structure exists. By honoring his father, Shem establishes the foundation for functioning families—the primary vehicle through which moral and spiritual values are transmitted. Bereishit is less a book of abstract theology than a book of family. It chronicles the struggles of our Avot to navigate human complexity: tension between children, multiple wives, succession crises, and the challenges of building households. Families serve as a microcosm for the covenantal relationship with Hashem, nurturing loyalty, selflessness, and devotion. Without Shem's moral example, these traits cannot take root.

For these reasons, Shem may be called the “proto-founder” of the Jewish people—a term meaning that while he did not formally discover Hashem or establish the covenant, he

laid the essential moral and spiritual groundwork. His recognition of the *tzelem Elokim* and his reverent care for his father created the conditions in which Avraham could later fulfill his historic role. Shem planted the seeds from which the Jewish nation would ultimately grow, making him an indispensable forerunner of the covenantal project.

ANCIENT ECHO

We all know who Terach was. The Midrash tells the famous story that he was a priest who craved idols and encouraged pagan rites. He even denounced his own son, Avram, for believing in one G-d, condemning him to certain death—a fate averted only by a miraculous divine intervention. As we recite during the Pesach seder:

מִתְחִילָה אֶעֱבֹדָה זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, תֵּרַח אֲבִי
אֲבִרָהָם

“At first, our ancestors served other—Terach, the father of Abraham.”

Yet the Torah omits this sordid history, as well as the story of the idolatrous priesthood. Instead, we see Terach beginning the journey with his family from Aram Naharim toward the Land of Israel. He stops in Charan, and ultimately his son Avraham completes the journey. Still, Terach began the process. Though he was a pagan who had not discovered the one G-d, he felt a tug in his heart toward the Land of Hashem. He was the first to start the journey—the initial stirrings of aliyah. Evidently, Hashem creates within the Jewish heart the ability to respond to the pull of this Land, even when that heart is not yet fully attuned to ritual or belief. There is an ancient echo in the Jewish soul, a commitment to this Land that transcends formal observance.

We have witnessed this echo amplified

across history. The great heroes who led the Jewish people back to Israel and helped reset the Land were not always fully observant of Torah law or halachic practice. Yet they were devoted to the Land and to the people. In their own way, they were modern-day “Terachs”: their motivation to return was deeply rooted, visceral, and instinctual—even if not entirely religiously articulated. Their movement laid the groundwork for the covenantal journey that their descendants would continue, each step echoing the ancient stirrings of a heart drawn toward the Land of Hashem.

These are the two founding ancestors of Parshat Noach—two people who gave rise to the man who would revolutionize religion and history. Each contributed foundational features of Jewish identity. Shem exemplified *tzelem Elokim* at a moment when human dignity had been degraded. He was also the first to honor a parent, providing the essential platform for family life. Terach, though a pagan, felt the call of Israel in his heart and began the journey toward the Land of Hashem. Together, these two set the stage for Jewish history. They are the twin heroes of Parshat Noach. ■



OU Press is honored to partner with Rabbi Moshe Taragin on his new volume in Hebrew regarding the recent war ('Emunah B'toch Hahastara). This remarkable book is also available in English, “**Dark Clouds Above, Faith Below**”

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