

NOACH (GENESIS 6:9-11:32)

A Tale of Two Cities

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

A few weeks ago, on Yom Kippur, we read of the near-destruction of the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The city was filled with wicked people. As this week's Torah Portion about Noah demonstrates, G-d has limited patience with wicked people. Nineveh was slated for destruction. The prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh to warn them of their imminent doom. They got the message. They repented their evil ways and were spared.

As a result of their actions, the (belatedly) righteous citizens of Nineveh serve as an annual Yom Kippur role model to teach us what we can accomplish by returning to G-d.

Now let us look at another Biblical city. We will read in a few weeks about Eliezer's journey to the city of Nachor to find a bride for his master's son Isaac. In Nachor he finds murderous, wicked people. Bethuel, son of Abraham's brother Nachor (who, presumably, was the founder of the city by the same name) tried to poison Eliezer's food.

Bethuel's son Laban was no better. A generation later, his sister's son Jacob came to visit. Over the next twenty years, Laban persevered in cheating his nephew multiple times, and ultimately tried to kill him. (See "Watch Out for *WHAT* Car?")

Bethuel's son Laban, who is also referred to as "*Laban, son of NACHOR*", (Genesis, 29:5) is one of the symbols of the enemies of Israel. He is also identified with Balaam, who did everything in his power to curse and destroy Israel.

There you have it. Two cities. Nineveh, which teaches us how to return to G-d and become better people, and Nachor, a city that teaches treachery and unrepentant evil.

We, can, perhaps, see the roots of these cities' differences in this week's Torah Portion.

G-d had waited ten generations for mankind to get its act together. It didn't, so He destroyed the world. Noah, the new father of humanity, was the new hope of the world. His descendants, as well, left much to be desired. A mere 340 years after the Flood, they built the Tower of Babel with the intention of ascending to Heaven to wage war against G-d.

This was not a unanimous effort. Noah, who was still alive, opposed the plan. Abraham, still known as Abram, who was 48 years old at the time, opposed it as well. The majority of the human race ignored these “fundamentalist religious fanatics” and rebelled against G-d. As a result, G-d confounded their languages so they couldn’t understand each other, causing the whole project to fall apart. (This is the reason that we don’t all speak Hebrew today.)

More about Abraham. The Torah tells us that he was one of three sons of Terach the idol-maker. Terach built a career upon the multiple religions of the dominant culture. If you want to bow down to it, Terach will make it for you.

Terach had three sons: Abram, Nachor, and Haran. The Torah tells us that Haran died, while Abram and Nachor took wives. The Talmud fills in some of the rest of the story.

Terach, a true believer in idol worship, was so into his beliefs that he tried to have his son killed. Abram, an adherent to the “old fashioned” concept of believing in the One G-d Who created everything, had destroyed some of his father’s idols.

This was an act of blasphemy!! How could Abram destroy those “holy” idols?! Terach turned his sacrilegious son over to the authorities.

Nimrod, the king, was incensed. He gave Abram an ultimatum: bow down to idols, or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Abram was prepared to give up his life for his beliefs. Next, Nimrod’s inquisition turned to Abram’s brother Haran: “Are you with your brother, or are you with us?”

Haran, a very pragmatic fellow, delayed answering the question. He wanted to see what would happen. If a miracle happened, and Abram was saved, Haran would cast his lot with Abram and his G-d. If, however, nature took its course, and Abram died, Haran would side with Nimrod and his beliefs.

Abram was thrown into the furnace and was saved by angels. Haran, ever the pragmatist, now willingly sided with Abram, and was promptly burnt to a crisp. So much for pragmatism.

Where was the third brother, Nachor, in all this? We find no mention of where he stood on the G-d vs. idols issue. What happened to him?

It appears to me that Nachor was probably given the same ultimatum. Is he with his brother Abram and his “heretical” beliefs in one G-d, or is he with his father Terach and the dominant culture?

Nachor was on Terach’s side. Society believed in idols; who was he to disagree? If society opposed G-d, Nachor was with society.

(It is interesting to note that Terach's father, who, presumably, was an idol worshipper as well, was also named Nachor. Terach had given his second son a wicked role model, and Nachor the Second rose, or more accurately, sunk, to the occasion. Beware the role models you give to your children!)

And so, Terach and his son Nachor set the stage for their future generations. Nachor's son Bethuel was a murderer. Nachor's grandson Laban was a thief, an idol worshipper, and a murderer. Who was Laban's role model? I believe we can see the answer to that question when he made a treaty with Jacob:

"May the G-d of Abraham and the god of NACHOR judge between us..." (Ibid, 32:53)

You take your grandfather's G-d; I'll take my grandfather's god.

Terach was willing to have his son killed for the sake of his idols. Nachor was willing to endorse the idol worship that Abram rejected. Generations later, the inhabitants of the city of Nachor had nothing but enmity for the G-d of Abraham and His People.

So much for the city of Nachor. Now, what was so different about Nineveh? Let us look at the origins of that community:

...Nimrod ... was the first to be a mighty man on earth [Rashi's commentary: he led the world in rebelling against G-d by building the Tower]... *The beginning of his kingdom was Babel... From that land Ashur went and built Nineveh...* (Ibid, 10:8, 10-11)

"From that land Ashur went forth..." Where was Ashur going? Apparently, Noah and Abram weren't the only dissenters against the Tower of Babel. Rashi explains that Ashur was distressed over the turn of events. He saw that his children were following Nimrod's plan to rebel against G-d. He couldn't tolerate it so he went away. He left Babel and built Nineveh.

Nineveh was founded by a man who was offended by rebellion against G-d. He couldn't tolerate such evil so he left town. He would have no part of it. His actions trickled down to his descendants. To be sure, they were obviously not the most righteous people on the block; after all, G-d threatened to destroy them. But when push came to shove, when G-d sent Jonah to call upon them to repent, they did so immediately.

Nachor was founded by a man who willingly rejected G-d and His commandments. His descendants, when called upon by G-d to change their ways (see Laban in Genesis, 31:24 and Balaam in Numbers, Chapters 22-24) chose to ignore the call.

We plant the seeds of the future in our actions of the present. We are who and what we are by virtue of the actions of those who came before us. Terach followed his father's ways and passed them on to his son Nachor. Nachor took the ball and ran with it. The results were Bethuel, Laban, and Balaam.

Abram took a different route. Abram decided to reach back a little further in his roots. He ignored his father's negative teachings, preferring the Torah he learned from his great-great-great-great-grandfather Eber and HIS great-grandfather Shem, son of Noah. The results were Isaac and Jacob.

Jewish ancestry is a mixed bag. You and I descend from Shem, Eber, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We also descend from Terach (through Abraham), Haran (through Sarah), and Laban (through Rachel and Leah). We can choose the path we want. Let us decide carefully. The trail we blaze for ourselves is likely to become the road we pave for our children and grandchildren.

Have a great Shabbos.

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