

R' Moshe Binyamin z"l (Baghdad; early 1700s) applies the verse (*Mishlei* 11:30), "The fruit of a righteous person is a tree of life, and a wise man acquires souls," to the righteous in general, and to Noach in particular. He writes:

We read (*Iyov* 24:18), "He glides swiftly on the water's surface; their portion in the land is cursed; he does not turn to the way of the vineyards." *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* comments: "He glides swiftly on the water's surface"--It was decreed that [the generation of the Flood] should be destroyed by water. "Their portion in the land is cursed"--He who exacted a price from the generation of the Flood [also will exact a price from other sinners]. "He does not turn to the way of the vineyards"--because they did not intend to plant vineyards. In contrast, Noach wished to be fruitful and multiply and to establish children in the world. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Moshe Binyamin explains: The *Mitzvah* of being fruitful includes raising one's children to study Torah and perform *Mitzvot*, for that is the purpose for which the world was created. This is called "planting vineyards." If the purpose of having children were only to ensure the continuity of the species, why did G-d "bother" to create people at all? Rather, just as having children serves a physical purpose, so it should serve a spiritual purpose. Thus we read (6:9), "These are the offspring of Noach--Noach was a righteous man." Says *Midrash Rabbah*: The primary offspring of a righteous person are his good deeds--referring, writes R' Moshe Binyamin, to the good deeds that he teaches his children and students to perform. This is what the cited verse from *Mishlei* means as well--"The fruit of a righteous person is a tree of life," referring to the Torah he teaches to others, who are thereby called his "children," just as Aharon's children are called Moshe's offspring (see *Rashi* to *Bemidbar* 3:1). (*Ho'il Moshe*)

Shabbat

Why did earlier generations establish a custom to sing *Zemirot* specifically during the *Shabbat* meals? R' Menachem Mendel Pomerantz *shlita* (editor-in-chief of the *Mesivta Shas* and *Machon Oz Ve'hadar*, and a prolific author of original Torah works) explains:

Midrash Shir Ha'shirim Rabbah relates a parable: A king made a feast and invited guests. Some of the guest ate and drank and blessed the king. Others ate and drank and cursed the king. Hearing the latter, the king decided to destroy his banquet hall with his guests inside. However, the queen said to him, "Why focus on those who eat and drink and curse you? Why not focus on those who eat and drink and bless you?"

Similarly, continues the *Midrash*, when the Jewish People eat and drink and praise *Hashem*, He hears their voices and is appeased. But, when others eat and drink, curse *Hashem* and behave immorally, *Hashem* thinks about destroying the world. At such times, the Torah comes before *Hashem* and says, "Master of the world! Why focus on those who eat and drink and curse You? Why not focus on those who eat and drink and bless Your great Name through Torah study and *Zemirot*?" [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Pomerantz elaborates: It is natural that when one eats and drinks, he becomes immersed in the material world, and his holiness diminishes. Even so, the *Midrash* is noting, the Jewish People are different--in the midst of enjoying their *Shabbat* delicacies, they sing praises to *Hashem*.

R' Pomerantz adds: Good food and drink can broaden a person's horizons, allowing him to perceive and understand things that he could not grasp before. Some people use that new-found potential to discover or create new types of debauchery. The Jewish People, however, show their elevated status by elevating that potential and using it for spiritual purposes, including singing praises to *Hashem* at the *Shabbat* table.

(*Mesivta Zemirot Shabbat*, Introduction)

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

Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi z”l (Spain; 1320-1376) writes: The entire affair of the *Dor Ha’palagah* / Generation of the Dispersion (*i.e.*, the generation that built the Tower of Babel) and its punishment is murky, to the point that we are like blind men groping in the dark when we try to understand it. If they wanted to be united as one man, should they not have been rewarded--not punished--for this?! Indeed, our Sages say (in *Midrash Sifrei*): “Even if everyone in the world would be an idolator, so long as there is peace between them, the Attribute of Justice will not be harsh with them.”

R’ Nissim continues: Many of the well-known explanations are hard to accept. For example, there is an opinion that they built a tower to climb up to the sky [and make war with G-d]. Could all of mankind really have been such fools? Moreover, if that is what they really thought, they should be pitied for their foolishness, not punished! R’ Nissim writes. Obviously, G-d was not threatened by them; rather, as we read (*Tehilim* 2:4), “The One who sits in the Heaven will laugh at them.” On the other hand, if they were highly intelligent but simply denied G-d, why did they escape so easily--*i.e.*, why were they merely dispersed to other lands?

Rather, R’ Nissim writes, the proper understanding of this episode is as follows: The Torah is not describing any particular sin that the Generation of the Dispersion committed; for example, they were not actively scheming against G-d. But, it is true that, with few exceptions (*e.g.*, Noach, Shem, Avraham), the people of that time were steeped in idolatry and heretical philosophies. And, given that “The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose,” there was no possibility that a lone individual like Avraham could speak out and make even a dent in the prevailing way of thinking. Therefore, in order to increase the odds of Avraham’s success, *Hashem* dispersed the people and broke them into smaller nations and language groups. (Derashot Ha’Ran #1)

Another thought about the verse quoted on the front page:

“The fruit of a righteous person is a tree of life, and a wise man acquires Nefashot / souls.” (Mishlei 11:30)

Rabbeinu Sheshet ben Yitzchak Gerondi z”l (12th-13th century; Spain) writes: This verse speaks the praises of a giving person--he is like a fruit tree that gives life to others. “A wise man acquires *Nefashot*” teaches that giving can be done with things other than money. One should share whatever another person needs or desires, including one’s wisdom. The word “*Nefashot*” / “souls” here means “will” or “desire,” as in (*Bereishit* 23:8), “If it is truly your *Nefesh* / will.” (Be’ur Al Mishlei)

“Elokim saw the earth and behold it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.” (6:12)

Midrash Rabbah relates that even the animals had become immoral and mated with other species. This requires explanation, writes R’ Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik z”l (1820-1892; rabbi of Brisk, Belarus; progenitor of the Soloveitchik rabbinical family). Man has free will and can choose to commit immoral acts, but animals have no free will and no *Yetzer Ha’ra*! How did the animals become corrupt and immoral?

R’ Soloveitchik answers: It is well known that a person can become so accustomed to doing something bad that it becomes second nature to him, even though he knows intellectually that he should not do that thing. The *Midrash* is teaching that a person’s actions affect not only himself; they also affect the world around him also. It goes without saying that when a person commits a sin publicly, he influences those who witness it. But, even an act done in private leaves an imprint on the world. Specifically, when a person pursues a given illicit *Ta’avah* / desire, he strengthens the power of that *Ta’avah* in the world until it become “second nature” to nature itself.

R’ Soloveitchik continues: Our Sages say that, on the Day of Judgment, the bricks and beams of a person’s house will testify against him. This follows from what was said above. Though we cannot perceive it, our deeds leave an imprint on the inanimate building materials that make up our homes. In the future, the Heavenly Court will look at those building materials and see evidence of our deeds. (Bet Halevi)

R’ Avraham Mordechai Alter *shlita* (Yerushalayim) explains further: Underlying the world of physical objects and phenomena there is a “world of concepts.” For example, we are all familiar with tables; we eat on them, work on them, etc. However, someone had to invent the concept of a table. Before that, there was no possibility of having a “table.”

Now that the concept of “table” exists, R’ Alter continues, we would still know what a table is even if all of the physical tables in the world were destroyed. But, if someone could erase the “concept” of table from our awareness--R’ Alter analogizes this to erasing a crucial line of code from a computer program--we could look all day at a horizontal board supported by four legs and never know that it was a “table.”

As this shows, man has the ability to alter the “world of concepts.” Before Kayin killed Hevel, the concept of murder did not exist. But, once he did invent that concept, it became part of reality, to the point that Kayin’s descendant and namesake, Tuval Kayin, devoted himself to perfecting weapons of murder and destruction (see *Bereishit* 4:22 and *Rashi* there). Similarly, R’ Alter writes, the Generation of the Flood introduced new concepts of immorality to the world--concepts that did not exist before but which became part of reality, thus impacting even the animals. (Emet Va’da’at p.45)