

The Foundation of Humanity: Adam to Noah

This is the account of the descendants of Adam ... (Genesis 5:1)

The first three mishnayot (plural of mishnah) of the fifth chapter of Pirkei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers) chronologically mirror the Torah's narrative which details the creation and development of mankind from Adam through to the birth of Issac (Pirkei Avot 5:1-3). We will explore the significance of these opening four sections of the Torah and how they describe the foundations of humanity and God's mission for mankind.

After the first Mishnah describes the process of God's creation through speech, the second Mishnah then turns to the genealogy of man and states that there are ten generations from Adam to Noah, representing one unit in our lineage.

The Gemara explains that immediately after creation, the connection between heaven and earth was far stronger than it is today. Consequently, the earth was physically richer and more fertile. Man was physically stronger and could live for longer periods (Sanhedrin 108a).

Yet the Torah describes how prediluvian man turned away from God. The Gemara records for example, how the people mated animals of different species with each other and with humans (ibid.). Since man's spiritual connection with God was so much greater, his behaviour had a more powerful effect. Just as the ground became cursed through Adam's sin (Genesis 3:17), the sins of mankind sullied the world with lawlessness and infidelity which irreparably corrupted the natural state of creation (Genesis 5:11).

The Gemara asks how a generation who knew God and were so close to Him could stoop to such levels of depravity. Yet it was precisely because of the close connection they had with God that they became conceited and misused their abilities to satisfy their own desires (ibid.).

The Torah explains that God saw that man's inclination was 'only evil all the day' (Genesis 5:8). God resolved to take the one man who had found 'grace in the eyes of God' and rebuild the world through him. Noah and his family, together with all of the animals would begin the next stage in the story of mankind.

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