

The Foundation of Humanity: Noah to Abraham

And I, behold I am setting up My covenant with you and with your seed after you. (Genesis 9:9)

The Mishnah teaches us that God held back from destroying mankind for ten generations from Adam to Noah. This demonstrates that God is slow to anger in the face of man's indiscretions (Avot 5:2). Yet ultimately God resolved that man had corrupted himself and the entire creation to such a degree that it was necessary to not only destroy mankind but to weaken the connection between heaven and earth which in turn reduced man's physical and spiritual potential. God then sought to begin a new generation through Noah.

The second part of the Mishnah (ibid.) parallels the first; just as there were ten generations from Adam to Noah there were ten generations from Noah to Abraham, once again describing a unit in our genealogy. This second stage of humanity had been humbled by living in the aftermath of the flood. In order to have a functioning relationship with God, man had to be shown his place in the cosmos; there is only room for one Creator and man's role is to be His servant.

Yet as the narrative continues, the next ten generations from Noah to Abraham become beguiled by another obstacle in God's mission to nurture and mould man into a morally sensitive being.

Humanity was united in language and purpose and could have achieved greatness. Instead, they chose to follow Nimrod. According to the Midrash, Nimrod encouraged others to worship idols (Genesis Rabbah 37:3). Yet it was his arrogance in thinking that he could wage war against God which led to the building the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4).

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama (d. 1494) explains that since the building of this tower was a result of their unity, God would punish them measure for measure by creating disunity (Akeidas Yitzchak). Man had once again corrupted the greatest gift he had, forcing God to remove it from him.

The difference this time is that this period of history ends with Avram and Sarai, the couple who will take on God's mission to bring morality to the world and elevate the whole of humanity.

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