

INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT NOACH

The Earth, the Flood, and the Causes

By Rabbi Yaakov Beasley

The events of our *parasha* are almost universally known. Disappointed with the prevalent, overwhelming sinful behavior of the earth's inhabitants, Hashem decides to send a flood to wipe them out. However, He wishes to leave one survivor, one family worthy of becoming the building blocks of a new and better future. Unlike previous generations, which did not communicate with Hashem until after they sinned, Hashem pre-emptively attempts to involve Noach in the planning for the flood and the aftermath. Here is the moment where Hashem describes to Noach for the first time what He intends to do:

And God said to Noach, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth has become full of robbery [*chamas*] because of them, and behold I am destroying them from the earth [*et ha-aretz*]. Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood ... (6:13)

Two difficulties arise from this verse, one grammatical and one thematic. The grammatical difficulty comes from the last four words, "*Ve-hineni mashchitam et ha-aretz*," literally, "and behold I will destroy them the land."

Several explanations have been offered for this peculiar construction. Rashi offers the following two:

Et ha-aretz: [This] is similar to *min ha-aretz*, "from the earth." Similar to this is, "When I go the city" (*Shemot* 9:26), [meaning] "from the city;" "He was stricken his feet" (*Melakhim* 15:23), [meaning] "from his feet" [he suffered from a foot ailment]. [See also *Bereishit* 44:4; *Devarim* 14:22.]

Another explanation: "*Et ha-aretz*" means "together with the earth," for even the three handbreadths of the depth of the plowshare were blotted out and obliterated.

Although Rashi attempts to solve the problem by referring to other texts, we see that the comparisons are tenuous at best. If "*et ha-aretz*" means "from the earth," like "*ke-tzeti et ha-ir*" (*Shemot* 9:29), "from the city," the meaning would be, "I am destroying them off the face of the earth." But the example of "*ke-tzeti et*" does not apply, because the preposition "*et*" in *Shemot* refers to the verb, not the object, as in our case. Additionally, we do not find that the *Tanakh* uses a combination of the words "*le-hashkhit min ha-aretz*" ("to wipe out from the earth"). The second explanation for "*et ha-aretz*," that the land was wiped out and destroyed together with its inhabitants, does not fit the context of the events.

A third approach that others suggest is what the medieval Hebrew grammarians refer to as "drags himself and another with him." This rule means that we must read the verse as if the word *mashchitam* were doubled: "I am about to destroy them **and to destroy** the land. (The

words that are understood to be doubled are bolded). Even though this circumvents the grammatical issue, there is still a difficulty comparing "to destroy the earth" with "to destroy them." Who does "them" refer to?

One modern approach suggests that by drawing upon rules of grammar from ancient Hebrew's cousin language, Ugaritic, we can come to a clear interpretation.[1] In Ugaritic, the ending letter "*mem*" is a suffix that is occasionally added for reinforcement. If we consider the final *mem* of *mashchitam* as an enclitic *mem* (added for emphasis) rather than as an accusative suffix (i.e., "destroy them"), our verse becomes:

*Ketz kol basar ba lefanai, ki mal'a ha-aretz chamas mipnehem, ve-hineni mashhit [am] et ha-aretz ...*God said to Noach, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about **to destroy** the earth."

The meaning of *et ha-aretz* is not "the earth" but rather "mankind," exactly as in the first section of the verse: *ki mal'a ha-aretz hamas* and as in verses 11-12: "*Va-tishachet ha-aretz lifnei ha-Elokim...va-yar Elokim et ha-aretz ve-hinei nishchata.*" *Ha-aretz* is a metonym for *kol basar*, "all flesh." Now our verse becomes much clearer. Hashem's behavior is perfectly "*midda ke-neged midda*," "measure for measure." Since the land was destroyed, *nishchata* in the ethical sense, by its inhabitants ("all flesh"), the Lord will therefore destroy, *yashchit* in the physical sense, the land, i.e. its inhabitants ("the end of all flesh"). According to R. Shimson Rafael Hirsch, Hashem's decision only formalized a process that began with the corrupt behavior of the people. Their immoral behavior was destroying the earth anyway. Hashem simply provided its formal end:

"The end" [*keitz*] means, "If I do not intervene, it will already go completely to ruin by itself; its end is already before me"... The thriving of the species is connected to the purity of the mating... Accordingly, when God said earlier, "*Va-yar Elokim et ha-aretz ve-hinei nishchata*," God saw that the land that was destroyed, corrupted, automatically from their behavior. Had God not intervened [when he did], even the spark of purity that could be saved with Noach would have been irrevocably lost.

A close reading of what Hashem told Noach, however, notes that Hashem was not entirely open regarding why the earth deserved destruction. Here is how the beginning of the *parasha* describes what Hashem saw:

Now the earth **was corrupt** before God, and the earth became full of **robbery**. (6:10)

Rashi (in verse 10) notes that Hashem noted two sins that were prevalent in the time of the flood – sexual immorality and robbery:

Was corrupt: The Hebrew "*va-tishachet*" is an expression of immorality and idolatry. [Other editions add: immorality, "for all flesh had corrupted its way," and idolatry], as in *Devarim* (4:16): "Lest you deal corruptly." [*Sanhedrin* 56b, 57a]

And the earth became full of robbery: The Hebrew *chamas* (forced) [implies] robbery. [Other editions add: as it is said (*Yona* 3: 8), “And of the dishonest gain (*ha-chamas*) which is in their hands.”)]

However, Rashi in verse 13 notes that though the sin of sexual immorality determined the type of punishment that Hashem would send upon the world, it was only the sin of *chamas* that Hashem informs Noach about because it was the sin that sealed the decree:

The end of all flesh: Wherever you find promiscuity (and idolatry), a pestilence comes upon the world and kills both good and bad alike. [From *Bereishit Rabba* 26:5]

For the earth has become full of robbery: Their verdict was sealed only because of *chamas*(robbery). [From *Sanhedrin* 108a]

This emphasis on the effects of *chamas* (robbery) in the story led to a fruitful discussion among the commentators as to why this sin was more destructive than others. The Seforno suggests that society had deteriorated to such a degree that everyone was aware that the system was unjust and corrupt, and this forced everyone to offer bribes and steal just to survive. By default, everyone become corrupt and accepting of the corruption. The Maharal, in his super-commentary on Rashi, *Gur Aryeh*, emphasized the corrosive effects of *chamas*. If people who work hard and honestly are punished and those who steal and live of the efforts of others remain above the law, then people will lose all incentive to work and productivity will grind to a halt.

We will conclude by focusing on the words of the Ramban:

Hashem only gave Noach the reason of *chamas* (robbery), and not sexual corruption, because this sin was known to all [as opposed to sexual immorality, which, although prevalent and destructive, remained behind closed doors, and Noach was ostensibly unaware of it] ...

Another reason why *chamas* (robbery) was the reason for the bringing of the Flood was that it is a “*mitzva muskelet*” – a logical commandment that needs no prophet to announce or describes its evil effects, as the results of robbery damage both Heaven and our fellow men.

The Ramban suggests that everyone agrees that robbery is inherently evil (by implication, unlike sexual immorality whose damaging effects are not necessarily apparent^[2]). The Ramban used a similar argument to indict Kayin after he murdered Hevel, even though Hashem did not proscribe murder beforehand. As such, the failure of society to put an end to the problem was enough to indict them for destruction.

[1] By Professor M. Zippor of Bar Ilan. Further examples of the uses of the enclitic *mem* are available online at <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/noah/zip.html>.

[2] For a full discussion of whether or not sexual immortality is listed among the “*chukim*”(commandments without logical reasons behind them) or “*mishpatim*” (commandments whose logical reasons are apparent to all), see E. Samet’s article at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/29aharei.htm>.