



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Noach

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November 5, 2016

Noach

The Origins of Race



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

A Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, a Muslim mufti, a Methodist minister, a Buddhist monk, a Hindu guru, a white supremacist, a Black Panther, a Pink Panther, a red Democrat, a blue Republican, and a green Martian walk into a bar.

The bartender takes one look and says: “Is this a joke?” He naturally assumes that all these diverse people could not be together unless it was a joke.

With all the progress civilization has made, there still remain major racial, political, ethnic, and national rifts in this world. Look at the Muslim world. Look at the political animosity in the United States, showcased in this week’s nasty presidential elections. Look at the upheavals in Europe. Look at the divides between Jews in Israel.

How are ever to achieve true global *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of Many, One”?

The secret to finding the “one” within the “many” may be found in a beautiful teaching in this week’s Torah reading – *Parshat Noach*, as illuminated by a fascinating exchange between the then New York Mayor Dinkins and the Lubavitcher Rebbe about the racial tensions in Crown Heights.

Noah is the progenitor of every human being alive today. Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, with three very different personalities and character traits, as indicated to by their names – name warmth and beauty – which serve as archetypes for finding harmony on our lives today.

These three also gave rise to very different ethnicities, races, cultures and religions. But together, the sons of Noah, teach us what it is to be *tamim*, complete, whole, one.

THE ORIGINS OF RACE

1. Diversity (Joke)

A Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, a Muslim mufti, a Methodist minister, a Buddhist monk, a Hindu guru, a white supremacist, a Black Panther, a Pink Panther, a red Democrat, a blue Republican, and a green Martian walk into a bar.

The bartender takes one look and says: "Is this a joke?"

2. Racial Tensions (Current Events)

The often sad reality in today's world is that when different types of people walk into the same room, it is always perceived as the beginning of a joke, because all these diverse people could not ever be in the same room together.

Differences have divided us since the beginning of time. Racial differences, ethnic differences, familial, tribal, national, religious, gender, and anything else you can think of.

One of the mottos of the United States of America is the Latin saying, *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of Many, One." This maxim is printed on the back of every American dollar bill, and on all its coins.

The argument could be made that perhaps more than any other country in the history of civilization, the United States has gotten closer to achieving this lofty ideal of making out of many, one - out of many different peoples, one unified nation. Pretty much everyone in the United States is of a different ethnic background, and people more or less get along.

Getting closer to achieving this ideal does not mean that America has actually achieved this ideal. As we see with various racial tensions, political fault lines, and other dividing elements, we have not yet reached

perfection. Often it feels that we are far from it. Just witness the animosity leading up to this week's nasty presidential elections.

But at least unity – *E Pluribus Unum* – is a fundamental ideal driving this country.

The question is: How can we get there? What can we – as individuals and as a nation – do in order to bridge the divides that separate human beings in an unhealthy way? Separation is healthy when it leads to individuality – you have your house, I have mine; you have your spouse and children, I have mine – but separation that leads to divisiveness and hate, to distrust and discord, is never healthy.

3. Historical Background

You only have to look to Nazi Germany for the most extreme example of perceived racial differences causing hell on earth. The Germans portrayed themselves as Aryans, a superior race, and all others as inferior and undesirable. Thus it became the moral obligation of every member of the superior race to purge the nation of anything that supposedly blemished their national identity.

Today, with ISIS and others, the players are different but the principles and philosophies are very similar: one party or another says that we are better, we have monopoly on the truth, and everyone else has to either accede or be erased from the equation.

These are admittedly extreme examples, but true nonetheless. And we do find kernels of a somewhat similar nature – racial and ethnic and political divides – even within such a wondrous country as the United States itself. What causes someone to hate someone else simply because of the color of their skin, or their religion, or their political views? Where does this come from and how can we remove it finally and eternally, in order to achieve a domestic and global version of “out of many, one”? True world peace and harmony.

We would be remiss if we neglected to mention Israel and the Jewish people. How is possible for two Jews to dislike one another? How is it possible to have a divide between “religious” Jews and “secular” Jews, between right wing and left wing Jews? And, more broadly of course, between Jews and Arabs? Why is difference the norm, not the exception? Why is unity not the norm?

Why, in the 21st century, in a seemingly progressive time, men and women are still killed because of race, because of religion, because of tribal loyalties, because of ethnicity?¹

What can we do about it all?

We shall look to this week’s Torah reading – *Parshat Noah* – for guidance.

4. Noah & Sons

Following the creation of the universe, the Torah picks up the narrative ten generations (or some 1,000 years) later, with Noah and the famous Flood. It begins:

These are the chronicles of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, complete (*tamim*) in his generation. Noah walked with God, and Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.²

Originally, all of humanity descended from Adam and Eve. After the Flood, in which the only remaining survivors were Noah and his family, humanity began anew, and all of us living in the world today are descendants of Noah and his wife Naama and their three sons. As the Midrash states: “From these three the world was built.”³

This implies that every single one of us comes from the same grandfather, but also that we each have our own unique personalities and characteristics, as evident from the fact that Noah had three sons – three different sons.

¹ This link is an excellent resource to address the general topic of race.

² Genesis 6:9-10.

³ Midrash Hagadol, Noah

The first verse of our portion states that Noah was complete (*tamim*) in his generation. In what way was Noah *tamim*, whole and complete? And how can this help us, Noah's grandchildren, to be *tamim*, whole as well?

5. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

The second verse of our portion states that Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth? What do these three brothers teach us about wholeness, especially as it relates to race and other differences?

The answer comes from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a Torah giant who lived in the early part of the 19th century rabbi in Germany. His famous commentary articulates the Torah in a contemporary way. This is one of the reasons that Rabbi Hirsch is perceived to be one of the founding fathers of today's Modern Orthodox community or what is known as *Torah im Derech Eretz*.

Rabbi Hirsch explains the concept of *tamim* by analyzing the names of Noah's three sons.

- o Shem means "name." As the Torah states: And the Lord God formed from the earth every beast of the field and every fowl of the heavens, and He brought to man to see what he would call it, and whatever the man called each living thing, that was its name (*shem*).⁴

- o Ham means "heat/warmth." As the Torah states: Now the Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot (*k'cham*).⁵

- o Japheth (or *Yafet* in Hebrew) means "beauty." As the Torah states: Rachel had beautiful (*yefat*) features and was of beautiful (*yefat*) appearance.⁶

Rabbi Hirsch explains that these three general descriptors embody all

⁴ Genesis 2:19.

⁵ Genesis 18:1.

⁶ Genesis 29:17; cf. Deuteronomy 21:11, and Ohr HaChaim ad loc.

of humanity's varying characteristics. Every race, every people, every ethnicity, brings its unique gifts to the table, which can be divided into these three general categories. There are those who name things – the namers; there are those who bring warmth to things – the heaters; and there are those who reveal beauty in things – the beautifiers.

6. The Namers

To name something is to capture its essence.

Indeed, *shem* is related to the word *neshama*, meaning “soul.” Adam's great gift was the ability to capture the essential element of a subject or object and articulate that essence in a relatable way, in effect freeing each creation's soul to be experienced by other people, who could now relate to it.

Naming something is a tremendous gift. It could be used for positive, giving light and inspiring names; however, as with all gifts, it could also be distorted by applying dark and debilitating branding to people, objects, or creations.

Shem represents the ability to define things, communicate them, and express them.

7. The Heaters

When something has no energy, no passion, no life, it is cold. That's why an unsolved mystery is called a “cold case,” or why an emotionless expression is characterized as an “icy stare.”

Ham's unique gift is to lend warmth and heat, sensuality and passion to life's endeavors. As with all energy, the great challenge is focusing that energy into what is positive and holy, channeling the heat and warmth of life to selfless and heavenly endeavors and not selfish and abusive ones.⁷

⁷ Ham obviously abused his power and ended up sinning and disgracing his father. Here we are focusing on what Ham was capable of being; on the positive archetype of Ham, as a son of Noah who was preserved with Noah and his family.

8. The Beautifiers

Beauty is not merely a physical thing. To prove this point, a beautiful body without a soul may maintain its outer beauty, but not be beautiful; it is a corpse (sorry for using a morbid example). It is the opposite of beautiful. Beauty is harmony and symmetry. Beauty is when one's physical characteristics reveal a deeper elegance.

Beauty, too, can be a magnificent tool, or an ugly one. True healthy beauty is one that adorns the world, one that permeates inside and out, one that recognizes where beauty itself comes from and the responsibility that comes along with it. But if people perceive beauty as something to be controlled and enslaved, to be taken advantage of, if they worship beauty (as an end in) itself and not the deeper reality it bedecks, then beauty can be distorted and lead to wrong things.

9. The Rebbe on Race (Optional)

In 1986, the Lubavicher Rebbe began distributing dollars for charity to people from all walks of life. Men, women, children, Jews, non-Jews, people from all over the world would line up on Sundays to receive a dollar and a blessing.

In 1989, the mayor of New York, David Dinkins, an African-American, came to receive a dollar sometime before Rosh Hashanah. At that time, the Lubavitcher Rebbe shared a beautiful blessing. The Rebbe's words went something like this (I am paraphrasing):

May G-d Al-mighty bless everyone in this city with a happy year, so that all will go from strength to strength, in all things necessary – especially the multitudes of nationalities in New York. This city is a “melting pot” for many nations, and may all these nationalities live here in peace, and in harmony, and may all be strengthened, especially in matters of charity...

I hope that in the near future, the “melting pot” will be so active that it will not be necessary to stress every time that, “they are black,”

and “they are white,” or “they are Hispanic,” etcetera, etcetera, because they are no different. All are created by the same G-d and for the same purpose: to add good things to everything around them, beginning especially with themselves and their families...

As I said before, I am not so happy about the emphasis placed on Brooklyn being on one side, and Manhattan on another side, and other people – the Hispanics, etc – on a third side... If it is a real “melting pot,” then certainly it must be a melting pot for all good things, with no differences.

In the Jewish prayers during Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the year, we begin by underlining that G-d is a ruler of all the universe – not only of our country but of all the universe. So don’t be afraid of the task to do something good for all the universe.⁸

Two years later, in the summer of 1991, Crown Heights was roiled in violent riots attacking Jews (provoked initially by a black child being struck and killed by a vehicle driven by a Jew). A Jewish yeshiva student, Yankel Rosenbaum, was stabbed to death by a black teenager. The racial tensions and unrest between the Jewish and black communities was terrible, the divide between peoples and cultures, stark.

Following the riots, Mayor Dinkins, once again came to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He stated that he would do everything in his power to bring security and protection to the entire Brooklyn community, both sides, whether black or white, Jewish or non-Jewish. To which the Rebbe added:

And not to forget that both sides are really one side, one people, united by the management of New York City.⁹

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-etVw9PZUs>.

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdO5OtTbK_4.

10. Imagine If...

Noah is described in the Torah as tamim, whole/complete, because he embodied and fathered all facets of humanity, represented by his sons, Shem, “the Namer,” Cham, “the Heater,” and Japheth, “the Beautifier.”

We all have our unique personalities and particular allegiances. We are all individual people with unique personalities. But, at the core, we are all one people. Our oneness manifests in many colors, hues and shapes. But they all comprise one magnificent, elaborate mosaic.

All people are created equal and from the many one – *E Pluribu Unum* – these are the principles upon which this country is founded.

Imagine if every single political debate began with this preface and concluded with this statement: “We are created by the same G-d and for the same purpose: to add good things to everything around us, beginning especially with ourselves and our families.” Tell me, how then could any political debate or election ever be anything but unifying?

Imagine if every time two Jews spoke to each other – religious or secular, in Israel or in Diaspora – they began their conversation with: “We are created by the same G-d and for the same purpose: to add good things to everything around us, beginning especially with ourselves and our families.” Do you think there would an ounce of animosity between brothers?

Imagine if every time a white individual spoke with a black (or brown, or any shade between) individual, that he or she opened with: “We are created by the same G-d, and created for the same purpose: to add all good things around them, beginning especially with ourselves and their families.” Tell me, you think race would be an issue?

Imagine if we all adopted this as our motto. If we did, we would reach *E Pluribu Unum* – manifesting the one, without compromising the individuality and uniqueness of the many.

11. It Begins with Charity

Charity, at its core, is basically the realization that we are one. That we have a symbiotic reciprocal relationship with each other. Each of us shares his or her blessings with the other. Everyone has something to give, and everyone has something to receive.

When we think or believe that we are each on our own, independent from one another, disconnected or cut off from one another, not responsible for one another, then charity seems like an insane idea – why should we ever give our hard-earned money to a different and perhaps even opposing entity?

But when we realize that, “We are created by the same G-d, and all created equal, and for the same purpose: to add good things to everything around us, beginning especially with ourselves and our families,” then the question becomes: How could we ever not give to others (who are really not “others”) whatever they need?

The archetypes of Shem, Ham, and Japheth teach us how to be different but all part of one Noah, making him *tamim*, whole and complete. They impart to us the capacity to be diverse yet united. To be communicators, warmers and beautifiers – all driven toward one higher divine cause.

When we feel that way about each other how could we not nurture and care for each other?

As their descendants this is our mandate, which we all will certainly fulfill.

Remember my friends: We are all in it together. We are different and diverse, but all one beautiful family.

Shabbat Shalom!

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