

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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There's a fascinating Midrash that sheds light on the *mabul*, the theme of Parshas Noach:

"A parable can be given of a king who built a palace and brought mute people to dwell in it. The mutes praised the king by hinting with their fingers. The king thought: 'If this is the case with mute people, all the more so with people who can speak!' So he replaced them with speaking people. However, instead of praising him, they said, 'The palace is ours!' 'If so,' said the king, 'let the mutes return to their place.'

"Similarly, when the world was first created, the praise of Hashem only arose from the water, as the *possuk* states, 'From the voice of a multitude of mighty water, Hashem is mighty on High.' Hashem said, 'If this is the case with water, which have no mouth and cannot speak, all the more so with people!' So he created man. When man corrupted his ways, Hashem said, 'Let the world return to its previous state,' and he brought the *mabul*."

PUNISHMENT OR PRAISE?

At first glance, the *mabul* was a method of punishment, to penalize mankind for their evil ways. This Midrash, however, views the *mabul* from a different perspective: its waters offered *praise* to Hashem.

In Torah Ohr, the Alter Rebbe explains the *mabul* in a similar way: the waters of the *mabul* purified the world; therefore it rained for forty days, corresponding to the forty *se'ah* of water found in a *mikvah*. However, the Midrash is saying something much more. Not only did the *mabul* purify the world, it entailed *praise* for Hashem!

What does this mean? And what is the comparison to mutes?

AQUATIC VS. TERRESTRIAL

There are two categories of living beings: aquatic creatures and animals that live on dry land.

Just like aquatic creatures were created from the water, land

animals were created from the earth. However, there is a major difference between them: while aquatic animals remain within the water, land animals do not live inside the ground. Instead,

they live on top of the earth, and they can even jump off the ground into the air.

In other words, aquatic creatures are *batel* to their source of life, and it is clear to all that they cannot exist without it—as soon as they leave the water, they die.

By contrast, although land animals recognize that they derive their vitality from the earth, they do not possess such a great degree of *bittul*. Moreover, since their *bittul* is poor, it is possible for them to forget entirely about their source of life.

A WATERY WORLD

We can now understand the Midrash.

When Hashem first created the world, it was dominated by the *bittul* of water. In other words, every created being felt how its entire existence was only there because Hashem is creating it each moment. At that time, the very existence of every creature exuded praise of Hashem.

The Midrash compares the water to mutes. To be mute represents one who is completely *batel*, like a person standing before a king. Such a person cannot speak; he can't even speak praises of the king! Only once he's outside of the king's presence, where he begins to feel himself as a *metzius*, can he open his mouth.

This can be compared to the *bittul* of Shemoneh Esrei. During Pesukei Dezimra and Krias Shema, we are still a separate existence and are therefore able to contemplate on Hashem's greatness and praise Him. However, when we reach Shemoneh Esrei (the level of Atzilus), we should be so *batel* to Hashem that we must preface: "*Hashem sefasai tiftach*—open my mouth, because on my own I am unable to utter anything at all!" Even praising Hashem would otherwise be impossible at that point.

This was the initial state of the world—a state where it was impossible to verbally sing praises to Hashem; instead, every



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THE MABUL'S PRAISE

Not only did the *mabul* purify the world, but it was an event that entailed praising Hashem.

creature's very existence expressed Hashem's greatness.

REPLACING THE MUTES

When Hashem saw this, He said: "If mutes praise Me so beautifully, how much more so people who can speak!"

What does this mean?

To be completely *batel* to Hashem is indeed an amazing thing. Ultimately, however, the person as a person isn't praising Hashem. Rather, Hashem's unlimited light illuminates him to the extent that he is overcome with an overwhelming *bittul* to Him.

Hashem didn't want the world to remain covered with water. Instead, he caused the waters to gather in the oceans so that dry land would appear. Similarly, the goal is that people should have the ability to think and speak, and they should use these abilities to reflect on Hashem's greatness and praise Him. To this end, Hashem settled the world with people who can speak—namely, people who feel that they exist, so that created beings such as these would praise Him too.

But what ended up happening? Instead of extolling the king, the speaking people said, "The palace is ours." Instead of using their intellect and speech to praise Hashem, mankind—who are endowed with free choice—utilized their capabilities to rebel against Him, and they corrupted their ways. Therefore, Hashem said, "Let the world return to its previous state"—a state where everything is covered with water, where the world is pervaded with an absolute *bittul* to Him.

THE MABUL AS A MIKVAH

After the *mabul*, Hashem swore that He would never destroy the world again. If the *mabul* was so great, why did Hashem make this promise?

The goal is not that we should remain in a state of total *bitul* to Hashem, but rather that we should exist and use our intellect

and speech to praise Hashem. By bringing the *mabul*, Hashem ensured that man won't use his intellect to rebel against his Creator, *ch"v*.

The *mabul*, like a *mikvah*, purified the world of its corruption and removed this rebellious element from man. (This is the deeper meaning of the *possuk*, "*leshaches es ha'aretz*": the *mabul* destroyed the *artziyus*, the lowly crassness of the world.) As a result, we can be an existence that can think and speak, while channeling these abilities toward singing Hashem's praises.

DOUBLE ADVANTAGE

What's more, the *mabul* empowers us to praise Hashem beyond the limited capacities of our finite existence.

The advantage of "dry land" over "water" is that we are a *metzius*, and yet we use our faculties to praise Hashem. But water, too,

has an advantage: the person's *bitul* is deeper and greater than the limited praises that a finite being can offer.

The *mabul* empowers us to combine both advantages. On the one hand, we live on dry land; we are created beings who feel our existence, and we are able to talk. However, we are now post-*mabul* people. The *mabul's*

waters instill their advantage within us, so that our existence as we sense it stands in a state of complete *bitul* to Hashem.

This fusion will be achieved in the days of Moshiach, about which the *possuk* states, "The earth will be filled with knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the ocean." The world will not revert to water; it will remain "earth," dry land. Therefore, it will be filled with "knowledge of Hashem"; we will have the ability to think and contemplate. At the same time, however, the world will enveloped in the *bitul* of water—"as the waters cover the ocean."

For further study, see the *maamar Bereishis Bara 5727* (*Toras Menachem* vol. 48, pp. 160-162)

When we reach Shemoneh Esrei, we are so *batel* to Hashem that we are unable to utter anything at all, even to praise Him.

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