

One cannot cease to be amazed by the lifespans of people in Parshas Bereshis. Most of the featured personalities lived over 900 years, and - although it is a subject of dispute in the commentaries - one gets the sense that such longevity was the norm for all of humanity at the time. Why and how did things change?

The Ramban is of the opinion that the earth's environment was altered after the Mabul (Flood), while others advance alternative explanations for the shortening of the human lifespan. I would like to address the underlying pattern and system for this and other changes of nature in antiquity.

It is well-known that Man originally existed on a highly elevated plane. Not only was he to be sustained by Hashem without much human effort and could he procreate instantly (v. Rashi from Medrash on Bereshis 4:1), indicative of a superhuman existence, but the truth is that Man was of a different caliber altogether, such that he conversed with Hashem as did Moshe (as evidenced in the sin incidents of Adam and Kayin) and was more of an angelic being. Targum Yonasan ben Uziel on Bereshis 6:3 explains that Hashem instilled His "Ruach Kodesh" (Holy Spirit) in Man in order for Man to do good. This Ruach Kodesh refers to the Neshama - the holy, divine spark component of the soul - and not to the Nefesh, which is the mere force of life. Thus, Man operated with a highly elevated spirit within him, although it appears that this spirit was not renewed in all people after the Mabul.

Targum Yonasan ben Uziel on Bereshis 6:4 concurs with interpretations that the "Nephilim" cited in that verse were angels who were expelled from Shamayim (Heaven) to the Earth, and they seemed to have functioned within society for some time, as the Targum implies in its continuation of the narrative. Again, we derive that the contrast between Man and celestial beings was not so pronounced.

Parshas Noach changes everything. Man was now permitted to eat meat, he would live for much shorter periods, and the seasons of nature were at last fixed and predictable. This metamorphosis reflects a secularization and downward spiritual thrust in the position of Man and his surroundings. Whereas Man's quite prolonged lifespan had been more similar to an eternal, celestial one, his new and shortened existence reflected his temporality. So too regarding the natural seasons, which inhibit Man and regulate his day-to-day life, placing him more in the role of object rather than subject.

After the Dor Haflagah (Generation of the Dispersion), which built Migdal Bavel (the Tower of Babel), life became even shorter. Average longevity decreased from 500 or so years to less than half that. (See chapter 11 of Bereshis.) So too, the Holy Tongue was no longer standard, and secular languages were spoken in the majority. This indicates a further lowering and secularization of Man's state.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Bereshis 11:1 quotes Chazal's explanations that the Dor Haflagah objected to Hashem's exclusive and total mastery over the Heavenly beings. This may be interpreted as emphasizing that the true aim of the people was to rebel in the pursuit of restoring Man's former lofty spiritual status.

The Hebrew root-phrase "*chal*" or "*chol*" (*ches-lamed*) is astonishingly utilized about a dozen times in Parshas Noach, with different meanings and contexts. The term means "secular" or "unholy", and its coded use underlies the transformations of Man and nature which form the theme of Parshas Noach.

Nonetheless, there is still hope for Man to attain his former, elevated state. The piyyut "Amitz Koach" recited on Yom Kippur compares B'nei Yisroel's existence to that of Original Man. (See Ramchal in Derech Hashem for a full treatment of this comparison.) Hashem wished for Man to be able to successfully accomplish his holy mission in this world, and He renewed this ability with the birth of Am Yisroel, the Jewish People. In fact, one may compare our Golus (Exile) to the expulsion of Man from Gan Eden, such that communion with Hashem and open miracles are precluded from our state of life at present, and toil, suffering and Hester Panim (Hashem's Hiding of His Presence) are the norm, somewhat similar to the existence of Man after his initial punishment. However, we are told by the Torah that this state of affairs is temporary.

May we merit to be restored to our initial, pristine relationship with Hashem, and draw ever closer to Him.

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This notion may be supported further by the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel (ibid.), who expounds that the masses spoke "the Holy Tongue, with which the world was created..." This accentuates the desire of Man to prevent complete disconnection from his old stature and to remain a quasi-Heavenly force on his own, as it were. Obviously, Man's intentions ran counter to the Divine plan and his actions were offensive and belligerent, rather than supplicative and appeasing.