

We Are What We Plant: Noach and the Perpetuation of Mankind

As Noach emerges from the Ark, he makes a series of unexpected and ultimately self-defeating choices.

ספר בראשית פרק ט פסוק כ

וַיְחַל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטֵּעַ כֶּרֶם:

Noach became a man of the earth (a farmer), and he planted a vineyard.

Picking up on the apparent etymological connection between וַיְחַל (he began) and חול (profane), Rashi makes the following observation:

פירוש רש"י לספר בראשית פרק ט פסוק כ

ויחל. עשה עצמו חלין, ששהיה לו לעסוק בתחלה בנטיעה אחרת (ב"ר):

Be began. He profaned himself, because he should have involved himself first in a different kind of planting.

This is a cryptic statement by Rashi. Does Rashi have something in mind as to what alternative planting Noach should have done? What is on Rashi's mind?

The Midrash which Rashi is quoting (Bereishit Rabbah 36:3) is more specific.

מדרש בראשית רבה פרשה לו:ג

וַיְחַל נֹחַ אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה (בראשית ט, כ), נִתְחַלֵּל וְנַעֲשֶׂה חֲלִין, לָמָּה, וַיִּטֵּעַ כֶּרֶם, לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לִטֵּעַ דָּבָר אֲחֵר שֶׁל תִּקְוָה, לֹא יַחֲוֹר אֶחָד וְלֹא גְרוּפִית אֶחָת, אֲלֵא וַיִּטֵּעַ כֶּרֶם,

Noach became a man of the earth (a farmer) – He profaned, and he became profane. Why? Because he planted a vineyard. He couldn't plant something else which would have brought about improvement in the world?! Not a fig tree or an olive tree? Rather, he planted a vineyard!

There is an important difference between Rashi and the Midrash. To Rashi, the problem is not the vineyard per se, but that he planted it **first** – notice the word תחלה, *first*, in Rashi, which the Midrash never says. The Midrash, on the other hand, is bothered by the very existence of the vineyard, labeling it as something disadvantageous to the entire operation of the world – it was not an object of תקנה, *improvement*, which Rashi never says. The emphasis in the Midrash is the innate inappropriateness of a vineyard. That is likewise why the Midrash adds that Noach not only was profaned (נעשה חלין) but *profaned others* (נִתְחַלֵּל), a point which Rashi ignores because he does not believe that the problem of the vineyard lay in the intoxicating qualities which it brought to the earth. The emphasis in Rashi is rather the misprioritization by Noach; eventually a vineyard would be fine, but not yet. If so, what should he have planted first?

To understand why Rashi thinks Noach planted the vineyard too soon, we need to look ahead to how Rashi understands Noach's curse of Canaan due to Cham's sin:

פירוש רש"י לספר בראשית פרק ט פסוק כה

אָרור כְּנַעַן. אֶתְּהָ גֵרְמַתְּ לִי שְׂלָא אֹלִיד בֶּן רְבִיעִי אַחֵר לְשִׁמְשִׁנִּי, אָרור בֶּנְךָ רְבִיעִי לִהְיוֹת מְשַׁמֵּשׁ אֶת זֶרְעִם שֶׁל אֱלֹהֵי הַגְּדֹלִים.

Cursed is Canaan. "(By castrating me,) you caused me not to be able to have a fourth son to serve me; cursed is your fourth son to serve the children of these older ones."

We can now understand the nature of the planting which Rashi felt Noach should have engaged in earlier; he should have tried to have another child to do his part to help repopulate the earth. Conception is a form of fertilization, and one which Noach should have prioritized but which he bypassed in order to engage in the hedonistic pleasure of drunkenness once he had discovered its power as a newly minted **אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה**, an expert botanist. By delaying this important task, Noach ensured that it would never happen because he was castrated in the interim. On a deeper level, it is instructive to note that Noach curses Cham for stopping Noach from having another child **לְשִׁמְשִׁנִּי**, *to serve me*. Even to the extent that Noach wanted to have another child eventually, it wasn't to repopulate the earth but to serve himself. This was another manifestation of the selfishness that led to his delaying having a child altogether in favor of drinking to excess. Since having a child, to Noach's mind, would have been purely utilitarian anyway, the timeline was determined by personal choice and there was no harm in delaying it in order to engage in another personal pleasure, drinking.

Noach's behavior can be contrasted with Avraham's, as it always seems to be, and rarely in Noach's favor. When Avram and Sarai leave Charan, we find that they stop for some time in Shechem before leaving to travel further south:

ספר בראשית פרק יב פסוק ח

וַיֵּצֵאֵם מֶשֶׁם הַקְּהֵל מִקֶּדֶם לְבֵית־אֵל וַיֵּט אֶהְלָה ...

He left there (Shechem) and went to the mountain, east of Beit El, and **planted** (pitched) his tent ...

Here we see the reemergence of the planting motif which we saw earlier: To Noach's **וַיֵּט**, *he planted a vineyard*, we have Avraham's **וַיֵּט אֶהְלָה**, *he planted his tent*. But there is more here, as Rashi comments on the unusual spelling of "his tent," **אֶהְלָה**:

פירוש רש"י לספר בראשית פרק יב פסוק ח

אֶהְלֹו. אֶהְלָה כְּתִיב, בְּתַחֲלָה נָטָה אֶת אֶהְלָאִתּוֹ וְאַחֵר כָּךְ אֶת שְׁלֹו (בראשית רבה):

His tent – But it is written as "her tent" (with a ה at the end). First he **planted** (pitched) the tent of his wife, and only after that did he pitch his own tent.

Here we return to the subject of planting, **נָטָה**, at which Noach failed. But unlike Noach, Avraham shows the proper prioritization, putting his wife's needs before his own. Noach

seemed to dismiss his anonymous wife from the scene immediately after the flood, and instead engaged in a form of planting purely advantageous to himself. Avraham puts his wife squarely at the forefront of his decision-making, planting his wife's tent before his own. Thus, while Noach is largely unsuccessful in keeping his family together after the flood, Avraham and Sarah have the privilege of being considered the "first family" of the Jewish people.

From Noach and Avraham we see a contrast in prioritization of self and other. Noach had to be forced to spend 120 years caring about the lives of those around him (see Rashi to 6:14), while to Avraham this inclination seemed to come more naturally (see Rashi to 12:5). Noach planted a vineyard so that he could drink to excess and enjoy life, while Avraham planted his wife's tent before his own to show her care and attention. As we proceed through life, whether consciously or not, we plant seeds of various types – we leave impressions of positivity and warmth in our wake, and also occasionally seeds of discomfort in those with whom we interact. It is useful to think about what we plant, and for whom, as these are the saplings which remain and grow after we leave this world. May we have the privilege to leave behind many seeds of goodness and blessing in the world.