

*The Beginning
of Desire*

Reflections on Genesis

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IMAGE BOOKS
DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

Significantly, Rashi opens his great commentary on the Torah with a response to the mystery of the words. He does offer a *peshat* reading—a straightforward contextual reading⁹¹—but only in second place. He draws his primary energy from the enigmatic midrashic decoding of the mystery. *Beresbit*, “In the beginning,” describes not the clarities of origin and cause, but the potentialities of purpose. “For the sake of the righteous” means that all is open. There is no foundation; the beginning of a pathway glimmers. (*Bishvil*—“for the sake of”—but lit., on the path towards). In the future, at some time, in some place, a human being may create the world. God now authors the work that will go in search of authors. What is given at the beginning challenges man to the self-transformations that will allow him, in spite of everything, to stand in the presence of God.

Will transformation. Oh be inspired for the flame
in which a Thing disappears and bursts into something else;
the spirit of re-creation which masters this earthly form
loves most the pivoting point where you are no longer
yourself.

...

He who pours himself out like a stream is acknowledged at
last by Knowledge;
and she leads him enchanted through the harmonious country
that finishes often with starting, and with ending begins.⁹²

NOAH

Kindness and Ecstasy

The collapse of God's project

When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them. The Lord said, “My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.”—It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown. The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.” But Noah found favor with the Lord. (6:1–8)

God’s decision to “blot out” the whole of creation follows on an account of births and deaths over ten generations, culminating in the birth and naming of Noah. The central event of each generation is the birth of the significant heir; the father’s years are numbered before and after this pivotal act of propagation. Intense expectation builds up, therefore, in this objective account of numbers and names, an expectation that becomes explicit when the reason for Noah’s name is given by Lamekh, his father: “This one will provide us relief [*y’nahamenu*] from our work and from the toil of our hands, out of the very soil which the Lord placed under a curse” (5:29). That Noah’s name is derived from the word *nehama*, “comfort,” is in itself strange: etymologically, the word *noah*, meaning “rest,” would seem more appropriate; and, in fact, Rashi insists on treating *y’nahamenu* as a pun on *yaniah mimenu*—“God will give us

relief—from the labor of our hands.” (Otherwise, as he points out, Noah should have been named *Menaḥem*!)

There begins to be woven, therefore, a tissue of verbal plays on the words *noah*, *naḥem*: the comfort Noah will bring to mankind is the relief from a relation with nature that is misarticulated and, in some real sense, perverse. (Rashi: “Noah invented the plough—before his time, people would plant wheat and the earth would produce thorns and thistles.”) Noah is therefore seen, at least by his father, as representing a readjustment of man’s relation with the world; in effect, he will neutralize the primal curse on Adam.¹ This is the human expectation; it is followed by Lamekh’s and Noah’s significant age-data, until the birth of Noah’s three sons.

Chapter 6 begins with the cryptic description of the sexual relations of the “divine beings” with the “daughters of men”—including reference to the Nephilim, giants, heroes, men of renown. Only at this point does God, it seems, reenter a drama of sexuality, procreation, and death in which human beings have been evolving their own destiny without comment from or dialogue with their creator. Even the function of creating man in His image has been taken over, apparently, by man himself: “When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. . . . When Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image.” (5: 1, 3)

Man replicates himself; in so doing, indirectly, he will replicate the divine image. That is the model suggested by Adam’s first act of procreation after the sin. But the image of man is distorted. God “sees” that evil has swollen to enormous proportions (6: 5, 12). An act of divine perception occurs: no human being is capable of such an act, it seems. Man had desired the “knowledge of good and evil”; by now, he seems unaware of the evil that, ambiguously, he has both generated and suffers. Evil overshadows his life; he no longer knows, or can discriminate between, those radical opposites that Buber describes: “the fortune and the misfortune or the order and the disorder that are experienced by a person, as well as that which he causes.”²

A kind of sensitivity is lost to man. At this point, God, with a terrible humor, quotes the word-play on Noah’s name, subtly transforming the meanings and indulging in a positive flurry of puns. The root *naḥem*, “comfort,” which held out hope of comfort or relief, now denotes “regret,” a radical revision of the entire Adam project (6:6). The curse, in

which the relation of Adam to *adama*, “ground,” had been skewed ten generations previously, was, in the human perspective, to have been lifted by Noah. When God acts on His vision of things, however, it seems that the curse is, instead, to be intensified to the point of utter destruction.

There is a clear sense that something problematic, even bizarre, is at work in the very use of language itself: the explosion of puns raises questions about limits and liberties, about structure and play. As we shall eventually see, this is a powerful issue: what does it mean to use language truly or wrongly? The shadow of catastrophe looms, even as language begins to display its resources.

The word God uses for destruction is *emḥeh*—“I will blot out” (6:7). Rashi translates to different effect: “He is dust, so I shall bring water upon him and *dissolve* him.” This is to be a watery destruction, not a dry one. The original dust-earth of man—his relation to the *adama*—is to be radically annulled by an overapplication, as it were, of water. It then transpires that man’s destruction is also to be the destruction of all life—animal, reptile, and bird—again under the rubric of *neḥama*—the cosmic “regret” of the creative God. The root words, *naḥem*, *noah*, are joined in an associative cluster with the root *maḥab*, “dissolution.”

The last verse of Parshat Bereshit returns explicitly to Noah and evokes a fundamental unease about the relation of this one individual, who was to have given relief to a strained world, and the total destruction that God has just declared, in His own voice. The narrative voice takes over for a short, final half-verse: “And Noah found favor with the Lord” (6:8). *Noah matza ḥen*—the words *noah* and *ḥen* form a palindrome, suggesting a subversive relation between the man and the “favor” he finds, the grace with which God sees him. So many expectations are being undermined; there is a kind of mirror-reflection of Noah that God sees and saves from the debacle. It is as though only by an imaginative act of vision can God decide to exempt Noah from the clearly stated general fate of the whole Adam project.

The choice of Noah

There is a profound tension in this passage: in a sense, God declares an intention, based on a vision, and immediately revokes it, because of another vision of things. The tension is subtly reinforced by the fact that

detestari, sed intellegere—"not to laugh, not lament, not to curse, but to understand" (*Athens and Jerusalem*, 195).

87. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press: 1989), 96.

88. The skeptic asks: "Does God see the *nolad*—that which is born . . . ?" R. Yehoshua answers: "*Nolad*? Was there born to you a son?" His retort brings the "philosopher" down to earth, to the existential knowledge of fathers of mortal children. It is here, and not in the sublime certainties of metaphysical knowledge, that human understanding of God begins.

89. *Beresbit Rabbah* 27:4.

90. The source for the ending is *Beresbit Rabbah* 8:9.

91. *Beresbit* is the construct form of the noun. So, "In the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth. . ."

92. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, second part, 12.

NOAH

1. There is a midrash that connects Noah's birth with Adam's death, and the end of the curse ("Cursed be the ground because of you . . . until you return to the ground" [3:17, 19]). (*P'sikta d'Rabbi Eliezer*, in *Torah Shelemah* 5:81).

2. Martin Buber, "The Tree of Knowledge," in *On the Bible* (Schocken: 1982), 17.

3. Joseph is also described as "righteous," in Amos 2:6, and he, too, is described as feeding and sustaining his world.

4. See Ramban on 6:9.

5. See 6:5, 12–13, 17; 7:4.

6. *Beresbit Rabbah* 29:4

7. Compare *Torah Shelemah* 6:37 on the wordplay of *gopher* (the wood of the ark) and *gophrit* (sulfurous fire).

8. *Tanbuma*, Re'eh, 3.

9. See Rashi on Genesis 6:4: one third of the world was flooded in the time of Enosh.

10. See Rashi on 6:13.

11. See Ramban on 7:18: "The waters swelled. . ."

12. Rashi's main source is *Beresbit Rabbah* 26:5.

13. *Beresbit Rabbah* 32:8.

14. See, for example, *Tanbuma*, Ba-midbar, 26.

15. The reference to the Tower of Babel generation is missing from the first edition of Rashi. There are, however, midrashic sources that suggest that at least some of the builders of the Tower were also destroyed. See *Beresbit*

Rabbah 38:16. This midrash plays on the words *va-yafetz* and *va-yatzef*—"God scattered the builders" becomes "God swept them away."

16. *Tanbuma*, Tissa, 17.

17. *Tanbuma*, Va-yera, 8.

18. *Tanbuma Yashan*, Va-yera 10.

19. *Beresbit Rabbah* 52:8.

20. *Va-yikra Rabbah* 20:2.

21. *Beresbit Rabbah* 28:2.

22. *Tanbuma*, Noah, 11.

23. See, for example, *Sefat Emet* 5662, p.40.

24. *Sifrei*, Ha'azinu, 7.

25. Leviticus 20:17: "If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace (*hesed hu*)." Rashi notes that in Aramaic *hisuda* is the term for "disgrace"—which leaves us with the paradox of *hesed* as root for two contrary ideas, "grace" and "disgrace." Ramban clearly finds this distasteful and asserts (claiming the support of the Sages) that *hesed* posits the right, generous mode of relationship that the sinner is transgressing: instead of disinterested concern to marry off his sister, he demonstrates selfish lust. However, the radical possibilities in a paradoxical conception of *hesed* remain intriguing.

26. *Beresbit Rabbah* 26:5.

27. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Penguin: 1966), 145, on the dangers inherent in margins.

28. See Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 224: "How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life."

29. *Beresbit Rabbah* 38:6.

30. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 177–78.

31. *Ibid.*, 165.

32. *Ibid.*, 163.

33. *Ibid.*, 158.

34. *Ibid.*, 160.

35. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 222.

36. See Rashi, 6:11. Targum Onkelos translates *hamas* (which Rashi, in the wake of the midrash, translates as *gezel*, "robbery") with the word *hatufin*, "snatching," "rapaciousness."

37. See *Beresbit Rabbah* 27:3 for an analogy between the uses of the word *rabbah* in both narratives and the fates of both worlds.