

The first eleven chapters of our Torah take us on a whirlwind journey from the formation of the universe through the evolution of humanity and deposit us at the beginning of our unique relationship with HaShem. Strikingly similar stories that progress from creation through corruption and deluge to a new beginning can be found all over the earth. Even the Tower of Babel story has its parallels in such far-flung places as Mexico, Nepal and Botswana, with the common theme of humankind's futile attempts to transcend its natural boundaries. Mythology the world over is full of stories about humans challenging divine authority, i.e. daring to compete with the gods, in which humans usually end up being punished for their presumptuousness. And we are still challenging authority, both divine and temporal, because it's in our very nature. While the fruit of that forbidden tree gave us the knowledge of good and evil, it gave us neither the discernment nor the willpower to always do the right thing. As they say today, adulting is difficult! For that, and many other reasons, our particular story, which begins at the end of our parashah with Abram and his family migrating from Ur of the Chaldees to Charan in Canaan, is prefaced by these universal stories. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z'l explains: "The structure of the Hebrew Bible is unusual and significant. Its subject is the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Yet the Torah does not start with Abraham. It begins with the universal archetypes of humanity as a whole. We read about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, Babel and its builders. None of these is a Jew, a Hebrew, an Israelite. They are us in our universality. ..." (*Future Tense pp. 211-212*) Our unique relationship begins with Abraham and our way of life is different from that of others, but we are still part of humanity, sharing in all its potential and all its foibles. The long list of generations between Adam and Noah in last week's parashah and the list of generations between Noah and Abraham this week point out that all humankind arose from a common source. Despite our vastly differing cultures and appearances, we all share the same taxonomic hierarchy: genus Homo, species Sapiens. But we are not born with the ability to make wise, healthy choices. If we are fortunate, we learn this as children, and gradually develop the necessary tools to help us become responsible adults. But as anyone who remembers their own childhood or has ever raised a child can attest, this is definitely not a smooth path. Growing up is full of blunders and fraught with confusion. Like Adam and Eve, we have all at some time played the blame game, eschewing responsibility for reasons ranging from fear to hubris. It is not easy to admit one's mistakes and take steps to make amends, but it is a skill that can be acquired. Like Cain, we all have had to learn, sometimes painfully, to accept moral responsibility for our actions; but sadly, some of us still act with impunity. It is all too tempting to take the easy path, indulging in subterfuge to further our own interests. Like Noah, we have all been silent when we should have spoken up, and we have all misused language to the detriment of others. Unlike Abraham and Moses, Noah never said a word in defense of the people HaShem was about to destroy; HaShem does all the talking. In fact, Noah's very first words are "Cursed be Canaan; he shall be a slave among slaves to his brethren." (9:25) For centuries, these words, however they were intended, have fomented grievous injustice. And like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we have all disrespected boundaries, causing undue harm to ourselves and others. These shortcomings are simply part of the human condition. We are not perfect, but we do have the capacity to learn from our mistakes and chart new, better courses. The sages of the Talmud cite seven commandments for all humans (the Noachide Covenant) that encapsulate the basic laws of morality: Establish courts of judgment. Prohibition of blasphemy, i.e. cursing HaShem. Prohibition of idolatry. Prohibition of forbidden sexual relations, i.e. incest and adultery. Prohibition of murder, i.e. of shedding innocent blood. Prohibition of robbery. Prohibition of eating the limb of a live animal, i.e. outlawing cruelty out of respect for all life. Maimonides teaches that whoever accepts and observes these seven *mitzvot* is counted among the pious of the world's nations, and will enjoy a share in the world-to-come. In other words, we Jews believe that HaShem judges all humanity by their behavior irrespective of religious or political orientation. We have our own covenant of 613 commandments that define our unique relationship with HaShem through augmenting these seven basic laws to which all humans are subject. But we all descend from Adam's descendant Noah. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z'l vividly illustrates this in his interpretation of the *aleinu* prayer by changing the spelling of the word נְאָתָה (not, no) to נְאָתֵה (him, to him). Both are pronounced *lo*, but the new spelling changes the meaning of "has not" (made us like the others) to "has made us to him [HaShem]" (along with the others), reminding us that although our relationship with HaShem is indeed special, we are but one culture among many, sharing in all of humanity's potential for good and for evil. It is upon us – *aleinu* – to represent our own culture honorably by observing our *mitzvot*, which define us, to the best of our ability.

Shabbat shalom!