

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

While the narrative of Noah is most famous for the account of the Flood and the resulting destruction of life on Earth, it also tells the story of the world's repopulation afterwards. With only four men left in the universe to contribute to that critical mission, why doesn't Noah himself participate?

It is tempting, instinctively, to try to dismiss this question out of hand, by pointing to Noah's extremely advanced age at the time as reported in the Biblical narrative. Who can imagine a 601 year-old fathering a child? This is not just unthinkable today, when the average lifespan is under 100; the Bible records no such precedents prior to the Flood, when people were living many times as long, and it explicitly cites just one person during that period as having children at anywhere near that age.¹

On the other hand, that person was Noah himself, who first became a parent at 500 (Gen. 5:32). Perhaps Noah, who had already exhibited fertility at a very old age, was a unique exception. Moreover, it is possible that others in the pre-diluvian era also had offspring that late. In particular, with respect to Noah's direct ancestors back to Adam, all of whom (except Hanokh) lived well beyond age 600, the Torah states (Gen. 5:1-31) that they each had additional children after their first – leaving open the possibility, at least, that some became fathers again around or after that age.

Still, even if at first glance it seems more reasonable to say that Noah was "just too old" to have children at that time, this position becomes hard to defend when considering the point in the broader context of the narrative. As the text makes clear, God expects Noah to procreate again.

NOAH AND *PRU URVU*

In Genesis 6:10 we are told (again; see 5:32) that Noah has three sons. He is then commanded to build the Ark and to enter that Ark with his family and

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the animals. The purpose for which they were to be saved arguably should have been self-evident to Noah from the outset,² but God spells it for him out explicitly: He is providing a haven for all on board in order *to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth* (Gen. 7:3). This objective is also plainly reflected in the command to take along a male and female of every species, and is equally applicable to animals and humans – including, on the face of it, Noah.³

On the other hand, this important goal could be accomplished – as it was with most of the fauna – by a single pair of parents. With his sons present,⁴ Noah may reasonably have believed, in part given his age, that he personally was being saved for another reason.⁵ For example, as the most righteous person of his generation, he could serve as a role model for the renewal of humanity.⁶

As such, Noah conceivably might be excused for assuming that *to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth* did not apply to him. But God does not leave it at that. When He instructs Noah to enter the Ark, He uses the following language: '*But I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee*' (Gen. 6:18). Note the separation of genders: Noah is to go in together with his sons; his wife, together with her daughters-in-law. And, this is indeed what they do: *And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood* (Gen. 7:7).⁷ This, in apparent suspension (at least temporarily) of the original procreation command given to Adam (Gen. 1:28).

Indeed, the Rabbis inferred from here that marital relations were prohibited on the Ark, as we see from Rashi to Genesis 6:18 (per *Bereishit Rabbah* 31:12) – "...*thou, and thy sons, and thy wife*" – The men and women separate, from which it is apparent that conjugal relations were prohibited."

By contrast, after the Flood, Noah and his family are instructed to exit the Ark as couples: '*Go forth from the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee*' (Gen. 8:16). The implication is that marital relations were to be resumed upon disembarking. Surprisingly, however, when they leave the Ark two verses later, the genders remain separate: *And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him* (Gen. 8:18). Why doesn't Noah comply?

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN AFTER THE FLOOD?

Perhaps Noah was influenced by what occurred in the intervening verse, in which God gave a blessing (command?) for procreation – but only to the birds and animals, not the people: '*Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee of all flesh, both fowl, and cattle, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may swarm in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth*' (Gen. 8:17). Noah may have thought, by implication, that this requirement did not (yet) apply to humans.

All doubt should have been removed, however, when, two verses later God gave the instruction to procreate (*Pru Urvu*) to people as well: *And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth'* (Gen. 9:1). It is important to note here that, in this verse, Noah personally is explicitly singled out by name – making this a direct command to him as well.

Moreover, God reiterates this message a few verses later, in concluding the same Divine statement began at 9:1: '*And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; swarm in the earth, and multiply therein*' (Gen. 9:7). Rashi to Gen. 9:7 comments that by this repetition, *Pru Urvu* reflects both a blessing and a command. "'*And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply*' – according to the plain meaning, the first verse [1:28] is for a blessing and here [9:1,7] it is a command."⁸

An obvious question must be addressed at this point: since this blessing/command was already given to Adam and Eve on behalf of the entire human race, it was already applicable to Noah and his family. Why does *Pru Urvu* need to be restated here at all?

The Sages and the classic commentators provide various possible answers. To cite just two of these: According to Radak to Genesis 9:1, part of the significance of the entire planet being submerged in water by the Flood⁹ was that the Earth was thus returned to its unformed and void (*tohu u'vohu*)¹⁰ pre-Creation – and thus pre-human – state. After such a global "re-boot", a new blessing and command was required. R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsh to Gen. 9:1 suggests that it was important to stress that *Pru Urvu* still applied then, after the "so-called fall of Man." Alternatively, based on our analysis above, one might propose that God felt compelled to restate the general command here, in order to make it clear to Noah that it still applied to him personally as well.

Whatever the reason that this commandment must be reiterated here with Noah, of particular interest for our purposes is his reaction to it – or rather, the lack thereof. In contrast to God's previous instructions to him – to build the Ark and to bring the animals into it – immediately after which the Torah states that Noah did just as he was told (Gen. 6:22; 7:5), such a verse is curiously missing here. What was holding Noah back now?

Rashi to Genesis 9:9 proposes that Noah was hesitant to have more children until God guaranteed He would not destroy the Earth again. In the words of *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:6, Noah was confounded by the implied requirement: "He asked himself, 'Should I go and have children, just so that they too can be subject to a curse and the fate of certain destruction?'"

God immediately addresses this concern and promises Noah – as symbolized by the rainbow – that He will never cause another Flood to destroy the Earth (Gen. 9:8-17). And although the Torah already indicated earlier that after Noah brought sacrifices, God had "made up His mind" not to destroy humanity again,¹¹ as *Siftei Chachamim* to Genesis 9:9 points out, Noah may have been unaware of this decision, since God was "speaking to Himself," as it were, when He made it.

If so, however, we are surprised by what happens next, and by what doesn't. God's no-Flood commitment is apparently enough for Noah's children to begin procreating, as we see in the following verse (Gen. 9:18), which references Ham's son Canaan;¹² but the same cannot be said for Noah himself, who dies in Genesis 9:29 never having had another child. The Torah even seems to stress this failure, in stating that the repopulation of the world stemmed from Shem, Ham and Yefet: *These three were the sons of Noah, and of these was the whole earth overspread* (Gen. 9:18-19) – i.e., and not from Noah himself.

Based on the verses cited above, Noah's behavior is perplexing. There are no less than five separate Divine directives for him to have more children after the Flood: (1) the original commandment/blessing of *Pru Urvu* from Creation, given to Adam and Eve as representatives of humankind generally (1:28); (2) God's explanation for why He is saving Noah, his family, and the animals from the Flood: in order to repopulate the world (7:3); (3) the instruction to leave the Ark as couples, ending the separation of genders which applied inside (8:16); and most importantly, (4) the follow-up *Pru Urvu*

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN AFTER THE FLOOD?

commandment/blessing – which is specifically addressed to Noah personally, together with his sons (9:1), which (5) is repeated a second time a few verses later (9:7). These final two sources, which unambiguously apply to Noah, shed light on the first three verses as well, and should eliminate any uncertainty about their applicability to him. Noah should understand at this point that he is expected to father more children after the Flood.

Moreover, given that the Omnipotent God, for Whom Noah's advanced age is not an obstacle to his fertility, was the One making this demand of him, the objection that Noah was simply too old falls away as well, and our original query may be reinstated. So why didn't Noah have more children after the Flood?

THE HAM INCIDENT

Some commentators look for an answer in the final incident of Noah's life – a most humiliating end for the first person the Torah refers to as a righteous man. At the end of Chapter 9 (vv. 20-27), Ham finds his father lying in his tent in a drunken and naked state, and Noah, in his last recorded act, curses Ham's son Canaan (Noah's own grandson!), after discovering *what his youngest son had done unto him* (Gen. 9:24). Regardless of whether the perpetrator was Canaan or Ham (which is the subject of a debate in Rabbinic literature), the Torah's account leaves it unclear as to what exactly happened to Noah here. While this is also the subject of a Talmudic dispute,¹³ both opinions agree that Noah was castrated as a result.¹⁴

Following that view, *Bereishit Rabbah* 36:7 actually explains Noah's severe reaction to the incident by painting him in a positive light in relation to our question: Noah yearned to have another child, but this act rendered him unable to do so; thus his harsh response.

Even if one adopts this Rabbinic interpretation (which is not apparent in the plain sense of the verse), one difficulty with it in this context is that the Ham episode occurred a number of years (at least) after the Flood – since Canaan, Ham's fourth son, was already alive at the time (and possibly an actor in this incident). How would this theory account for Noah's failure to have children during the interim period?

Interestingly, *Bereishit Rabbah* 35:9, discussing the same story, describes Noah, once again in relation to our question, in exactly the opposite way: "Rabbi Yehudah says: 'Noah suffered the embarrassment [of the Ham incident] precisely because he failed to fulfill the Divine directive [to procreate].'"

Which brings us back to square one: why in this case did Noah not do what God told him to do?

HUMANITY AND EVIL

To find a possible answer, let's look again at the issue of Noah's age, but this time from a different perspective. Noah first had children at age 500. Why did he wait so long, especially when considering that his nine direct ancestors had their first children on average around age 120, and at latest at age 187?¹⁵

Radak to Genesis 5:32 addresses this point as follows: "*And Noah was five hundred years old.* . . Noah, having witnessed the evil of his generation, did not want to get married, fearing he might have children who were wicked like the others of his evil generation."

According to Radak, Noah, in whom humanity – suffering greatly from the cursed earth resulting from Adam's initial sin (Gen. 3:17-19) – had placed so much hope (Gen. 5:29), had lost his own hope for that humanity. Living within a society filled with wicked people, he couldn't bring himself to introduce more evil into the world, by producing offspring who would eventually just sin anyway. Noah's original aversion to procreating may even be viewed, from this perspective, in a positive light, as perhaps seeking to avoid the desecration of God's Name.

This approach explains Noah's early failure to have children so well, however, that it triggers a question from the opposite direction: If this was Noah's rationale, what suddenly changed his thinking at age 500? Radak senses this issue and posits that Noah may have "had a prophecy about it" – but he does not provide further details. Where might this Divine inspiration have come from?

Returning to the opening passage of the Noah narrative, we are told: *And the Lord said: 'My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for that he also is flesh; therefore shall his days be a hundred and twenty years'* (Gen. 6:3).

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN AFTER THE FLOOD?

Many¹⁶ see this verse as a 120-year advance warning about the coming destruction of civilization.¹⁷ As Sforno (based on TB *Sanhedrin* 108a) puts it: "...therefore shall his days be – humanity would have time to repent: 120 years...during which Noah would make the Ark and also rebuke and warn the people."

Noah's job was to admonish the other members of his race, and hopefully to bring about mass repentance so that they could avoid the fate of the Flood, which was otherwise awaiting them 120 years down the line. How old was Noah at the time of this warning? Since Noah was 600 years old at the time of the Flood (Gen. 7:6), he was 480 at the time of the warning.

As Abravanel to Genesis 6:14 (relying on *Bereishit Rabbah* 30:7) points out, this information may affect our entire reading of God's initial instructions to Noah, in 6:13-22: "This whole passage was told to Noah when he was 480 years old, at the time of the decree of, *his days be a hundred and twenty years*." According to this view, the Divine command to build the Ark was given simultaneously with the warning – when Noah was 480.¹⁸ The instruction narrative is written as follows:

13 And God said unto Noah: 'The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. 14 Make thee an ark of gopher wood; with rooms shalt thou make the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. 15 And this is how thou shalt make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits. 16 A light shalt thou make to the ark, and to a cubit shalt thou finish it upward; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it. 17 And I, behold, I do bring the flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is in the earth shall perish. 18 But I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. 19 And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. 20 Of the fowl after their kind, and of the cattle after

their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. 21 And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them.' 22 Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.

Note that vv.13-21 are all part of a single, uninterrupted statement by God. As such, in v.18, Noah is instructed, at age 480, to go (in 120 years) into the Ark which he is now being told to build – together with children he does not yet have!¹⁹ God's promise to save Noah from the Flood is thus conditional – not only on building the Ark, but also on building a family in the interim period, to join him in it.

It is now clear why Noah, childless for 480 years, suddenly begins to have offspring within a (relatively) short period of 20 years,²⁰ at age 500: he won't survive the Flood without them. (And note, he is required by v.18 to bring multiple children on board.)

Thus compelled, Noah establishes a family and is saved. On disembarking, he discovers a world where profound changes have been made to so many things – but not to the nature of man. God Himself seems to acknowledge this, as is implied by His post-Flood description of man's inherent flaws, *And The Lord smelled the sweet savor; and The Lord said in His heart: 'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done* (Gen. 8:21), which is highly reminiscent of His warning-time version thereof: *And The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (Gen. 6:5).

Nevertheless, while God seems to view this unaltered truth about the human condition from a new perspective, now pointing (in Gen. 8:21) to man's inborn failings as a reason to have *pity* on him, rather than as grounds to destroy him (Gen. 6:5) – Noah is unable to make this switch. Possibly, witnessing both the utter wickedness exhibited by the people of his own generation and their consequent destruction left Noah permanently scarred. The experience caused Noah to be further committed to his original, spread-no-evil outlook against having more children.²¹

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN AFTER THE FLOOD?

Anticipating this attitude, God made clear to Noah, in advance of the Flood, that the *raison d'être* for surviving it was to repopulate the world. When that, together with the message effectively implied by the command to disembark as couples, did not move Noah, God added two explicit and personal *Pru Urvu* instructions to impress upon him that – from the Divine perspective – the human enterprise, flaws and all, was worth taking forward, and that he too, must contribute to that endeavor.

Yet, this was all to no avail: Noah had lost his faith in humanity, and – perhaps even with good intentions, to prevent the desecration of God's Name – failed to fulfill the Divine commandment.

POST-SCRIPT

Noah's approach here calls to mind two passages from the Talmud – the first, a famous rabbinic debate, between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, about whether it would have been better had the world, and humankind, never been created.²² The dispute raged for several years, with one group arguing that being given the opportunity to do God's will outweighed the risk of sinning, and the other group taking the exact opposite view. Ultimately, the matter was put to a vote, and the majority decided the question in the negative. Noah seems to have come to the same conclusion. What's missing from Noah's analysis, however, is the Rabbis' takeaway here: while it may have been better if people were never created, now that they have been, each person is responsible to investigate his or her actions – to repent sins committed in the past, and to regulate future behavior to match God's will. In Noah's case, adopting that viewpoint may well have led him to fulfill the Divine command to have more children after the Flood.

In the second passage, the Talmud imagines the content of the conversation between the Prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah, when the former went to visit the deathly-ill king (II Kings 20:1). When Isaiah explains to the king, then a bachelor, that he is being punished for not seeking a wife, Hezekiah defends his actions by saying that he had deliberately not married in order to avoid having children. This was because he had seen with Divine inspiration that his son would be wicked. The Talmud gives the prophet's response as: "Why

do you concern yourself with these hidden things of the Merciful One?" (TB *Berakhot* 10a).

Essentially, Isaiah was arguing that even if the unborn prince's wicked behavior was indeed preordained, this should not affect Hezekiah's actions. God has his reasons for creating a world that contains evil, and instilling within each person the potential to activate that evil. Yet humanity must march on. In the rabbinic account, this argument persuaded Hezekiah, who proceeded to marry Isaiah's own daughter – hoping that the union of a righteous king and the child of God's prophet could help prevent the terrible omen's fulfillment. (The effort failed, as Menashe turned out to be one of Judah's most sinful kings.)²³

While it may have been Noah's zealousness to protect God's honor that led him to question the wisdom of a human enterprise utterly steeped in wickedness, God made clear to him that ultimately it is He Who decides about these matters, not man. God chose to create the universe with a world to be populated by people as its centerpiece. As Isaiah puts it (in a different context): *For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else* (Isa. 45:18).

NOTES

1. In fact, no one else in the entire Bible is explicitly recorded as having children later than Noah.
2. In the context of *'The end of all flesh is come before Me'* (Gen. 6:13), what other purpose could there be for saving any such living things from the Flood?
3. And, indeed, Noah is commanded to bring his wife with him (Gen. 6:18).
4. Why three sons, rather than just one, were needed for this purpose, is a question worth pondering (regardless of this analysis), but Noah's thought process as to himself is not dependent on the answer.
5. Noah seems to have employed similar reasoning in concluding that "extra" pairs of clean animals and birds were saved in order to be offered as sacrifices after the Flood (Gen. 8:20).
6. But if so, why is Noah's wife being saved? Here too, one could reasonably argue that God wanted an experienced mother figure to be present after the Flood, among other things, in order to give guidance to her daughters-in-law and sons, about childbirth and childrearing, as they begin raising their own families in a world without other people.
7. The same gender split appears in the parallel verse, Gen. 7:13, as well.
8. Alternatively, he may mean that 9:1 is for a blessing, and 9:7 is a command.
9. Genesis 7:19-20.
10. Genesis 1:2.

WHY DOESN'T NOAH HAVE MORE CHILDREN AFTER THE FLOOD?

11. ...and the Lord said in His heart: 'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake...' (Gen. 8:21).

12. Actually, Ham clearly began procreating even earlier, given that Canaan is his fourth son (Gen. 10:6). Earlier still may have been Shem, who begins having children right after leaving the Ark, as is evident from the Torah's dating of the birth of his third son, Arpachshad (Gen. 10:22), at just two years after the Flood (Gen. 11:10).

13. TB *Sanhedrin* 70a.

14. One opinion holds that he was also sodomized in the incident.

15. Perhaps one could assert that Noah, as the most righteous person in an extremely evil generation, felt that his other responsibilities in serving as a role model for people were too substantial and too critical for society to allow him to devote time to raising a family. In this sense, a certain similarity of attitude might be drawn between Noah and the sage Ben Azzai, who, because he loved the Torah so much, didn't want to get married. When asked how he could abstain from fulfilling the commandment to procreate, Ben Azzai argued that "the world [humanity] can be sustained through others", TB *Yevamot* 63b. On the other hand, it would be difficult for Noah to rely on this reasoning following the Flood, once his wicked generation had been wiped out.

16. See also, for example, *Seder Olam* 28 (quoted by Rashi to Gen. 6:3), and Onkelos and Ibn Ezra (referenced in the next note) on this verse.

17. To be sure, others suggest an alternate interpretation, that 120 years is a reference to a forthcoming shortening of the maximum human lifespan. See, for example, *Hizkuni* to Gen. 6:3. This opinion is also cited (and rejected by) Ibn Ezra to the verse.

18. And this would be another example of the Torah not always being written in chronological order (*ein mukdam u'meukhar baTorah*).

19. Interestingly, *Hizkuni* to Genesis 6:3 notes that the Torah may have deliberately obscured this fact – by arranging the verses to give the impression that Noah's sons were born before the decree – to prevent readers from criticizing Noah for having his children after God is described as regretting creating man (Gen. 6:6).

20. Still, while 20 years is a comparatively short period in the span of Noah's lifetime to that point, objectively two full decades may be considered a long time. What took Noah so long to act? Though it is not clear from the text, perhaps the interval could be explained in part by Noah's first having to seek a wife (as implied by Radak to Genesis 5:32, quoted above).

21. Interestingly, Noah's children, who were also eyewitnesses to this evil, managed to look past it to have their own children. Perhaps having been born as a result of a special commandment, and into a situation of assured survival of the Flood, gave them a different perspective from their father.

22. TB *Eruvin* 13b.

23. See II Kings 21:2-3. Ironically, Menashe's evil actions are likened in this passage to those nations who were kicked out of the Land in favor of the Israelites, the descendants of the very same Canaan who was cursed by Noah.