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1. Although in the generations that went before No'ach there were, very exceptionally, a few individuals who were somewhat better than the rest of mankind, the general trend was downward. Mankind, dragging with it everything that shared its environment, had become corrupt and evil. Instead of aspiring to things spiritual and good as HaShem had intended, all human activity was centred only on seeking physical pleasures, even of the most immoral kind. But this state of affairs was made intolerably worse by a new development that saddened HaShem, Who in His goodness desires peace and harmony amongst His human creatures almost more than anything else. That new development was the cruel violence and robbery that had now become the main pursuit of a deranged mankind. HaShem saw that there was no hope that the world would be able, of itself, to return to the peaceful and harmonious existence that He intends for His creatures, and especially for man.

2. Even No'ach, the most righteous person in that generation, was righteous only when compared to the people of his time. Had he lived in the time of Avrohom he would have been considered a nonentity, no more than an ordinary person in the street. The fact that the Torah nevertheless calls him a righteous person gives us some indication of how terribly corrupt the world had become and why HaShem had to bring this all to an end. Yet at the same time, No'ach can indeed be seen to have been a truly good man in his own right, for to remain steadfast and righteous in his time was without a doubt a greatness: imagine what No'ach would have been like had he not had to contend with the wicked people of his time who tried their utmost to corrupt him, too.

3. HaShem told No'ach that because of their wickedness, He was going to destroy all the humans from off the face of the earth. Indeed, all the living creatures that shared the human environment had also become corrupt and HaShem was going to destroy them all. But to give them a further opportunity of repentance, HaShem commanded No'ach to build a large ark: the construction of this huge ark over many years and the reason for it might shock the people to better their ways. If the people will not repent, said HaShem, He will bring upon them all a Great Flood, much greater than anything experienced before. Only those in the ark shall be saved, to start the world again when the previous wicked and corrupt world will have been eradicated almost without trace. No'ach is commanded by HaShem to admit to the ark a male and a female of each species of animal, bird and insect and to bring into the ark also specimens of those more delicate plants that otherwise will be lost to the world for ever during the Great Flood. Of the kosher, that is, the more gentle, creatures, No'ach was told to take seven, for after the Great Flood many of these defenceless creatures would fall prey to the other animals and beasts: by saving more of them, HaShem ensured that they would be well-established in the world.

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Indeed, the merit of some of their number being brought as Korbonos would also help to ensure the continued wholesome existence of the world, too. Food and provisions, too, are to be brought into the ark, enough for No'ach and his three sons, Shem, Chom and Yefess, and for No'ach's wife and his sons' wives, and for those animals that will need them. (Most of the animals and birds and insects went into a state of hibernation when they were in the ark.)

4. At the command of HaShem, No'ach came into the ark. All those creatures that were to be saved came, too, and settled straightaway into the compartments that No'ach had constructed. Those that were not admitted into the ark miraculously formed a ring of defence around the ark, for the people had defiantly declared that if a Great Flood would come they would not allow the occupants of the ark to be saved, either. Indeed, when the rains came, they did remain unrepentant in their wickedness.
5. For forty days and forty nights the rains fell: the very windows of heaven poured forth their waters and all the waters of the greatest depths were thrown up, too. Poisonous gases brought to a speedy end all forms of life, and corrosive elements reduced to nothing the remains of the wicked culture that had existed. (Very few traces of the world that existed before the Great Flood are found today, for HaShem does not want wickedness to endure, nor even the ruins of wickedness. The same applies to the overturning of Sodom and Amarah, the only other instance of a culture and civilization which was based on wickedness and cruelty, and which HaShem destroyed.)
6. *Through a corrupt mankind the world itself had become corrupt till at last HaShem destroyed it all because of its terrible defilement. The incredible volume of water of the Great Flood that HaShem brought upon this planet after its physical destruction was the means by which He made the world spiritually clean and pure again: it was as if HaShem had taken the world and steeped it in a Mikveh.*
7. It was a very different world that No'ach saw when he emerged from the ark one year later when HaShem commanded him to come out. Unbelievable upheavals had occurred. Continents had shifted. New mountain ranges had been thrown up and others had sunk. New land-masses had risen up from the oceans and others had disappeared. Seas and lakes had formed where none had existed before, and other seas had vanished. The very atmosphere was changed. The world was now tilting on its axis, giving rise to different seasons and various climates. Furthermore, the world was now somewhat diminished: HaShem took away the superlative potential of the physical world so that it should not be abused as before.
8. And HaShem found pleasing the Korbon that No'ach brought, and He decided that He would not allow mankind to cause such ruin again: if there should again develop such an evil society, HaShem will punish those responsible and remove them before their influence can spread and bring misfortune upon the whole world. As a reminder of this closer contact between HaShem and His world, HaShem pointed out to No'ach the sign that he had already prepared — the rainbow — and

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its significance was now explained to No'ach. When the rainbow appears, HaShem told No'ach, let it be a reminder of the Great Flood, that people shall better their ways.

9. HaShem repeated to No'ach the blessings that He had originally bestowed upon man: they shall be fruitful and shall multiply and fill the world, for HaShem desires a fully-populated world.
10. The world of the animals shall again be under the mastery of man, and they shall once again fear man their superior (unlike the situation that existed in the depraved generations leading up to the Great Flood, when man lost his Divine Image). Because the strength of the earth was now lessened, its produce does not provide all that man needs to remain in peak physical condition, and therefore HaShem told No'ach that from now on, man is permitted to slaughter animals for his food. But this must be done in a considerate way and without cruelty and only if the human was deserving of this right and lived up to his responsibilities as the servant of HaShem.
11. No'ach, the father of all mankind and the protector of all living creatures, was moved to show his gratitude to HaShem for the new world that he saw. He was extremely happy and thankful to HaShem to see that the fertility of the earth was not taken away and when he replanted the vine, he drank of its juice so as to better express his feelings of joy before HaShem, for it is the purpose of wine to enhance one's joy by relaxing man's natural sense of reserve so that his happiness can be more freely expressed, without the usual self-control and constraint that is built-in in man. But No'ach underestimated the strength of the wine, and he became drunk. When he felt the effects of the wine taking hold, he retired to his tent, to sleep off his intoxication. Chom, the son of No'ach, went in to see his father in his degraded state and then told his brothers outside. Upon hearing of his father's condition and anxious to protect his dignity, Shem, assisted by Yefess, went into their father's tent backwards, taking care that they should not see him as he was, and covered him with the garment. When No'ach awoke, he became aware of what had happened.
12. In a vision of the farthest-reaching prophecy, No'ach saw clearly through this incident the particular characteristics special to each of his three sons and how these characteristics would variously manifest themselves in the future generations of all mankind who will descend from them. All nations that will emerge from them will have within themselves a combination of his sons' traits of character. In some nations, one characteristic might be more dominant; in others, that particular characteristic might be less pronounced but another will be prominent instead, and all in different degrees and various ways. Thus would each folk and ethnic group develop its own character, and indeed each individual member of each people differ from all others. The descendants of Shem, No'ach saw, would inherit Shem's abilities of mind and noble spirit to understand the true nature of a thing as

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summed up in its name ('Shem') and thus will recognize its potential goal ('Shom') that it should be utilized properly in the service of HaShem. From Shem, therefore, there will emerge the moral teachers and religious leaders of mankind. The descendants of Yefess ('easily impressed' by things of 'beauty') No'ach saw, will bring culture and an aesthetic sense to things human. But grace and beauty in themselves can never be the ultimate goal of mankind, and man is always a seeker and cannot rest contented until he finds true fulfilment and spiritual happiness in closeness to HaShem. Mere beauty and art will never in themselves give man the spiritual fulfilment that he seeks. Chom (meaning 'heat') who embodied the hot impetuosity and the excited action of the senses, would pass on to his descendants this uncontrolled sensuality: Chom's descendants, inheriting as they do his unrestrained and coarse nature, bereft of any reserve, lacking in themselves any respect for things spiritually high or noble, must place themselves under the descendants of Shem and Yefess if they are to ennoble themselves and raise themselves to a truly spiritual height. They will never achieve this in freedom, by themselves. Never will the people of Chom be acknowledged as noble rulers of mankind, for they are not worthy to rule others who are not in control of themselves. Only when Chom places himself at the feet of Shem and Yefess does he (and his descendants) learn how to be sensitive to things beautiful and become refined and dignified and spiritually elevated. If not, then Chom indeed remains low and inferior to his brothers. In the same way, only if the peoples of Yefess are guided by the moral and religious teachings of Shem can the aesthetic sense and culture of Yefess add up to anything more than a veneer of civilization, or have any true spiritual content and genuine G-dliness. Only if the peoples of Chom and Yefess willingly place themselves at the feet of Shem can they become truly ennobled and moral and spiritual beings. No'ach, the oldest ancestor of the new human race, saw the strengths and weaknesses of his three sons and he prayed that together they should unite into a humanity that is full of vitality and warmth (Chom) and cultured and sensitive to beauty (Yefess) but all guided by the moral and religious teachings of Shem.

13. The Sidra continues with the lists of the groups of peoples that descended from the three sons of No'ach, and from whom there eventually emerged the seventy principal nations of the ancient world and from whom all humankind is descended.
14. As the years and centuries passed, the Great Flood became only a memory. As time passed, the people chose to interpret the Great Flood not as the work of HaShem but as a natural catastrophe, something which 'just happened' and which very likely will recur. Thus it came about that under the tyrant Nimrod, mankind was brought together to build a great tower with a vast metropolis at its base. A great tower, they reasoned, would afford them a refuge when "the heavens' supports again collapse."
15. This colossal undertaking was possible only because of the great degree of unity and harmony that prevailed, and, although this project represented an open rebellion against HaShem, He did not punish the people, for they were at peace with each

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other and HaShem is willing to forgive anything if He sees that there is harmony and peace among people. But since it was this very harmony — they all spoke the one language — that made this rebellion possible, HaShem confused their language so that they could not understand one another. Thus did HaShem halt the project, for organized rebellion against HaShem eventually leads to terrible conflict amongst His creatures.

16. And so the people abandoned the tower and spread over the face of the earth, and this was when different languages started to develop. Slowly but surely, men will have to learn again how to communicate with each other so that they will all once again be at peace, but that they shall utilize their harmony for good.
17. When No'ach and his family again settled the earth, he divided up the territories between his sons. To Yefess and his descendants he gave the northern lands. To Shem and his descendants he gave the lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, with the lands to the east. And to Chom and his descendants he gave the hot countries of the continent of Africa, for Chom was now suited to these tropical countries more than his brothers were. The rest of the world, said No'ach, would be settled by future generations as their needs grew. (Later, Chom's descendants spread northwards and unlawfully appropriated the lands belonging to the descendants of Shem. When HaShem helped the Children of Israel, who are descended from Shem, to drive out these 'squatters,' the land returned to its rightful owners, as HaShem promised to Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov.)
18. The Sidra continues with the list of the succeeding generations of Shem, leading up to the family from which Avrom came. Because of Nimrod, Terrach, the father of Avrom, had to move away. Taking his family and a considerable number of followers, he made his way towards the Holy Land. But when they arrived at Chorrion they stayed there, and later Terrach died in Chorrion.

And with the coming of Avrom, the world was to find relief in a new age.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra ַן please go to HAFTORAHS.

THE PRISONER

Adapted from
 “The Prisoner and other Tales of Faith” by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern and published by Feldheim.

Terrach lived seventy years and he begot Avrom, Nachor and Horron. These, then, are the generations of Terrach: Terrach begot Avrom, Nachor and Horron, and Horron begot Lot. Horron died in the lifetime of his father Terrach, in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldees. Avrom and Nachor married wives: the name of the wife of Avrom was Sorai and the name of Nachor’s wife was Milkoh, a daughter of Horron the father of Milkoh and Yiskoh. But Sorai was barren — she had no children. Then Terrach took his son Avrom and Lot (the son of Horron his son) and Sorai his daughter-in-law (the wife of Avrom his son) and he went with them all from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Kenaan but when they came as far as Chorrone they settled there. And the years of the life of Terrach were two hundred and five years, and Terrach died in Chorrone.

[Beraishis, 11 : 26 — 32]

The throne room was full of courtiers and local dignitaries. King Nimrod-Amra-Phul, master of all the settled lands, was paying his yearly visit to his southern capital of Ur and to the temple of Nannar the moon god, whose High Priestess was the king’s own daughter.

The room was splendidly decorated. The pillars were sheathed with gold and inlaid with rare stones. The walls were covered with paintings: paintings of the king at the head of his fighting-men, of the king sitting in judgement, of the king receiving tribute from his vassals and, over and over again, paintings of the king hunting various kinds of wild animals, for Nimrod prided himself on being the mighty hunter. Indeed, life had become much easier for the farmers during his reign because he had killed the wild beasts that used to invade the settled lands. In some districts lions had become quite scarce.

Trumpets blared and the mighty gong was sounded three times. A hush fell upon the room. The Royal Herald, flanked by two guards in resplendent garb, stood at the far end and announced in a stentorian voice: “Give honour to the most illustrious sovereign and protector! Hunter, warrior and builder extraordinary! Ruler of all men and governor of the gods! Great High Priest of the mighty god of fire Osram-Mazda! King of kings, His Royal Majesty King Nimrod-Amra-Phul!” The trumpets sounded the royal fanfare and then, preceded by standard-bearers, surrounded by guards and followed by the High Priestess, soothsayers, advisers, and many priests of various gods, the king made his entrance. Everyone bowed low.

When the local governor and various delegations had paid him their homage and spoken formal greetings, the herald proclaimed: “Who seeks justice? Who is oppressed? Let him step forward and appeal to the most just and illustrious king!”

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After a moment's silence, a temple dignitary stepped forward. "May it please Your Majesty," he began. "We have a case of blasphemy and sacrilege. The case is of the greatest importance for it involves all the gods and we beseech Your Majesty to hear it." The king nodded his assent and a group of people were led in by temple guards.

"Who is the accuser?" demanded the king. An elderly man stepped forward, and bowed. "I, Your Majesty, Terrach son of Nachor, a sculptor and the appointed maker of statues of the high gods."

"And who is the accused?"

Two guards led forward a boy of fourteen. His wrists were bound and he wore prisoner's garb. But from his large dark eyes flashed such earnestness and purpose, so fearlessly did he carry his head and such calm and resolution were expressed in the handsome young face framed in black locks that exclamations of admiration escaped some of the onlookers as they caught sight of him.

"Your Majesty," said the prisoner, "my name is Avrom, son of Terrach."

The king looked at the father. "You are accusing your own son of a capital crime? And one so young? What kind of joke is this? Can you not keep your child in order yourself?"

"Your Majesty," replied the maker of idols, "how happy would I be if I did not have to bring him to judgement, for I love my son. But he did indeed commit serious crimes, not once but many times, and the punishments I gave him had no effect. He does not fear beatings or being locked up. The only thing that has any effect on him is speaking to him of his duty, but on this matter he gives such answers that I myself become confused about what is right. That is why I pray Your Majesty for justice, not punishment. If he is found innocent, I should be most happy."

The king studied the boy's face for a while, then spoke to the father: "Proceed with your charges!"

"Your Majesty," said Terrach, "on many occasions this boy has spoken disrespectfully of the great gods, doubting their power and their very existence. On some occasions he has spoken to worshippers in my private chapel, and even in the temple, declaring that the sacrifices that they brought were wasted, that — may I be forgiven for repeating it — that the great gods had no power to help or to harm. Each time I asked the hearers not to take him seriously and gave him his punishment myself. He is young in years but is like an old man in his ability to talk and persuade others to his thinking. Even his brother, my son Horrion, a married man with a child of his own, has begun to express doubts about the gods because of this boy and his outrageous ideas."

"Where is this son Horrion of whom you speak?" interjected Nimrod.

"He is here," said Terrach. "He has come to see what will be with his brother, of whom he is very fond. But he has told me that the priests will not be able to answer Avrom."

While he was speaking, a man moved forward from the assembled people and now he bowed down to Nimrod and said, "Your Majesty."

Nimrod eyed him coldly. "I am sure," said the king, "that the priests and wise men will be able to answer your questions, if you will but open your mind to their words. But your questions can

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wait a while longer. Let us not be distracted from the matter of your brother.” Turning to Terrach, the king commanded: “Continue!”

Terrach resumed his account. “The last thing Avrom did was so serious that I had to inform the priests.”

“What was that?”

“About a month ago I left him in the workshop, as I had business in the market, telling him to take care that no one should touch the holy statues. When I returned, all the statues lay in pieces on the floor, except the one of Nannar. In front of him was a bowl of food-offerings and next to him a heavy stick. When I asked the boy what had happened, he said that a woman had brought the offerings, that the gods had quarrelled over them and that finally Nannar had smashed the others. Now, I am not a learned priest, but I have never heard of a statue moving, and neither had any of the priests whom I asked. The boy must have broken the statues himself and made up the story as a blasphemous jest.”

The king turned to Avrom. “Is this true?”

“It is, Your Majesty,” answered Avrom. “I did break the statues.”

“Why did you do it?” demanded the king.

“Because I wanted to force my father to admit that the gods cannot move. And that if they cannot move to defend themselves, how much less they can do good or evil to men!”

There were angry exclamations from the bystanders, but the king held up his hand for silence. He considered for a moment, then he said: “Did you not know that you were doing wrong? Do you not know that in our lands everyone is allowed to choose the god he wishes to worship? But no one can interfere with the worship of others. If he does, he will be punished by the gods and by me, for I am their governor on earth. Which god do you worship, then? Is it Bel?”

“Your Majesty,” answered the prisoner, with a faintly pitying smile on his lips, “neither Bel nor any of the others have any power. There is only one true G-d, and He is the Master of the sun, of the moon, and of everything, and He is our true Master, too.”

“Who is this G-d of Whom you speak? Have you seen Him? And who was it who first spoke to you about Him?”

“I have not seen the true G-d, Your Majesty,” replied Avrom. “Neither has He spoken to me. I do not know His name, so I call Him “Lord.” No one told me of Him, yet I know that He exists.”

He had spoken so firmly and fearlessly that everybody had forgotten that here was a prisoner on trial for his life — and only a boy, too. They listened to him seriously, all the while trying to think of arguments to convince him.

The king spoke again: “If you have not seen Him, nor heard from Him, how then do you profess to know about Him?”

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“When I was still a small child,” began Avrom, “perhaps three or four years old, I began to feel that there must be someone, someone very mighty and very good, from Whom I receive my life and everything else that is given to me — ”

“Yes,” interrupted the king, “that was a truly religious feeling. You might become a priest yet. Go on.”

“My nurse,” continued the boy, “told me stories of the gods, but I could not feel that any of them was that power that I felt was there. They sounded like men: jealous of each other, fighting each other — ”

“Don’t worry about that!” said the king. “A priest will explain those mysteries to you — if you are worthy of instruction, that is!”

“Then,” went on Avrom, “when I came out of the darkness — ”

“What do you mean?” interrupted Nimrod.

“Out of the dungeon, Your Majesty,” said the prisoner. “Until about two years ago I lived in a dark cellar under my father’s house.”

“What is this?” demanded the king of Terrach. “Why did you keep the child in a cellar?”

Terrach had grown deathly pale. Now he threw himself down before the king.

“Stand up and answer!” thundered Nimrod. “What are you hiding from your king?”

With difficulty, Terrach obeyed. “Your Majesty, my life is at your mercy, for I am guilty of a grave offence. When this boy was born, the soothsayers and astrologers said that he would grow up to defy the king. I was ordered, in the name of Your Majesty, to hand him over to be killed. I was weak. In my love for my child I paid no heed to the warning, nor to my king’s command. I concealed the child. In his place I surrendered a slave’s baby which had just died. Woe to me that I have saved the life of a blasphemer!”

After a moment the king replied sternly: “Your offence is grave indeed, but I will not pronounce judgement about that matter yet. This is no ordinary case: perhaps the gods have made it happen for their greater glory. If that is accomplished, your life might be spared.” Then, turning to Avrom, he said more kindly: “Proceed with your account.”

“When I was brought up from the dungeon that first night,” continued Avrom, “I was very excited and curious to at last see the world and the great light of which I had heard so much. In the darkness of the night, the house looked much the same as the cellar, only neater and with better furniture. But outside — I saw the sky and the measureless space — dark, but much lighter than the cellar was when the lamp was out. And it was so vast! I was afraid: who knew what there might be lurking in the great outside?”

“I spent a great deal of time thinking about this new world outside the cellar. It was all so new to me and I did not sleep at all that night. Then a grey light appeared to shine from one side of the sky. Soon it turned red. Many shades of red. Changing all the time and getting brighter and

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brighter. Then a great white light, brighter than anything I had seen before. I stood and looked. I could not take my eyes away from the brightness.

“Then the sun himself rose, slowly, majestically. Fear gripped me, but trembling I was still forced to gaze at the great light until the sun had quite risen and I could see nothing at all any more, so great was the light. And I threw myself upon my face and covered my eyes ...”

There was silence in the great hall.

“You saw Shamash in all his glory,” said the king at last. “I begin to see why the gods wanted you to grow up in darkness. Coming out of the darkness you saw what few men ever see, just because they have always known the light. Yes, indeed. And what happened then?”

“All that day,” continued Avrom, “I sat in the darkest corner I could find in the house — for the light still hurt me — and I thought of what I had seen. Surely, I thought, this must be the supreme god whom I had sought for so long. And yet he was different from what I had imagined. I had seen power, unimaginably great power, and even where I was sitting I could see the light and feel the great heat. But I had not seen mercy, nor goodness. I spoke to no one about it, fearing that they would not understand me, as they had never understood what I said of the gods, that they would get angry and call me wicked or stupid. But I kept thinking: was I wrong all that time, was my G-d really different from all I felt about him? And if so, who was it that had given me life, who was it that provided the food and drink that I am given, who was it that refreshed me and healed me when I had the fever? Who was it that gave me courage and hope when I was frightened and lonely, who made me good again when I had been angry or disobedient, who was it that was telling me all the time — without words — that He was good and loving and that we must be good and loving like Him? This new one who possessed the great light and heat was powerful and terrible, but he showed no mercy ...”

“Yes,” commented the king, “Shamash! He is mighty and terrible. I have seen, out in the desert, the bleached bones of the men and beasts that he has struck down in his anger. I have seen the parched lands when he was victorious over the rain god and made thousands die of famine. It is true that Shamash is merciless in his wrath. That is why the world could not exist if other gods did not restrain him. But tell me what you decided on that day.”

The hall was hushed. Priests, courtiers and guards were fascinated by the boy’s tale, this boy who dared to have his own opinion about the gods, who might well be a demi-god himself — for had he not charmed Nimrod the Terrible to take his unheard-of ideas seriously?

The boy continued: “I did not find the answer that day. I sat alone and would not answer when spoken to, nor did I touch any food. Only when the light ceased and night came and lamps were lit did I stop feeling afraid. In the softer light I felt more safe and peaceful, but I was exhausted. My mother gave me a cup of milk to drink and put me to bed.

“I slept — I do not know how long. When I awoke, I felt cold and lonely. All was still in the large house, but from afar I could hear from time to time strange howls and snarls, and shrieks like an evil laughter. I was so frightened that I did not dare to move or call.

“Then I noticed upon the floor near my bed a soft, white light, and the patch of light moved slowly until it reached me. Then I saw through the window a wonderful, pale light, something

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like a face, shining in the sky, so soft and peaceful ... It looked at me and seemed to say: "Do not fear, even in the dark I am watching."

"And I thought: this is he whom I have known in my heart, now he has come to give me peace..."

"Nannar," said the king, softly. "Nannar, the peaceful one, the merciful bringer of light in the darkness."

"But it was still cold," continued the boy. "There was still the howling and the growling, and then, far worse, I could make out human cries, calling out for help, and cries of pain — and then only moaning and weeping. I said to myself: "He is beautiful and soft, but he is weak. He does not help." He moved away from my window and I got up and looked out after him. He was still smiling, but he did not help. And he went lower and lower in the sky till I could not see him any more. And then, on the other side of the sky came up the same grey light as the day before, and then the red and then the great white light ... and suddenly I knew!"

"What did you know?" asked Nimrod, sharply.

"I knew that neither of them was the G-d I was waiting for, that both of these were only His servants, who must forever do the things they were given to do. They cannot help being cruel or standing by and watching cruelty. But we men — in us is the spirit of the living G-d, bidding us to help those in suffering and want, telling us to defend the helpless against evil men and beasts. He Who tells us this and bids men to be good, is the true G-d. He Who made such mighty servants is mighty enough also to help us do His work, to spread goodness throughout the world. And since that day I have never been afraid but have worked and spoken for G-d."

The boy had finished. No one spoke. All now looked at the king, but the king had nothing to say. He beckoned to Annu-ki, the eldest of the priests.

"Have you ever heard anything like this before?" he asked him quietly.

"Your Majesty," said the white-haired elder, but his words were intended for all the people in the hall, too. "Those men who were old when I was young used to tell that the demi-gods who lived long ago, before the Great Flood, and Utanapishtim-No-ach himself, who was saved from the Flood and became the father of this race of men — they knew such a G-d of gods. But, they told us, only demi-gods can know Him, not mere men. We mortals dare not presume to come near to the Most High G-d for we are not worthy of His attention. We cannot worship One we cannot see, nor One that we cannot imagine or understand. The gods are indeed the Great G-d's servants, but as the peasant must honour and obey the king's servants and cannot hope to see the king himself, so must we mortals honour the immortals and we must not try to pierce the mysteries that are not for us, lest we die. Does not a man who looks upon Shamash in his glory go blind? Is not he who defies the storm god struck down by the fierce arrow of his lightning? We can see where this child has been led by his overbold questing — he hankers after a G-d he can never know — and he defies the gods he should fear! With his dangerous thoughts and blasphemous talk he has set himself up as the enemy of all that is holy. He probably even thinks himself greater than the gods — see how by his own admission he smashed the holy idols! He must repent — or he, and we all, will surely suffer the anger of the gods!"

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Everyone breathed more easily. Here was wisdom, here was the mystery made plain!

The king himself was regal once more. “You have heard the words of the wisest of the priests,” he said. “I, Nimrod-Amra-Phul, master of all men, command you to desist from these thoughts which can bring only untold harm and woe to you and anyone who might listen to you. You must never speak of these things again — or you shall die! Here and now you must end your doubting and choose a god whom you will worship faithfully. A real god, that is, one that is visible on earth. I, Nimrod the Terrible, governor of the gods, command it!”

It was the boy’s turn to look worried and perplexed. “But, Your Majesty,” he brought out at last, “whom can I choose? It must be someone so great and good that no one is greater than him. And I know nothing visible that is not subject to something greater!”

“Then,” proclaimed the king, “I will help you to choose your god! Nothing is mightier on earth than fire. Fire consumes things and men; fire is powerful on earth like Shamash himself is powerful on high. I, Nimrod, born of the mighty fire-god Osram-Mazda and his High Priest on earth, command you to worship Osram-Mazda. Worship fire!”

“But,” said Avrom, “fire is put out by water, so it is not supreme!”

“Well then,” replied Nimrod at once, waving this problem away with his hand, “choose water! Worship the god of the rivers and the lakes!”

“But water,” continued Avrom, “is sucked up by the air and carried by the wind.”

“Choose the wind, then,” said Nimrod, “the mighty god of the storms who raises high the waves of the sea and carries the clouds, with the flashing arrows of his lightning!”

“But the wind is not supreme,” argued the boy. “Men can resist the wind and they carry the air in their lungs.”

Anger had at last come to Nimrod. He stood up and shouted: “So you say that man is mightier than all? Well then, worship man, worship *me*, the mightiest of men!”

The boy was shivering with fright, but he swallowed his tears and stammered: “But, Your Majesty, man is not supreme! He is here today but gone tomorrow. He does not live forever!”

The king was trembling with rage, and the red vein that friend and foe alike had learned to fear stood out on his sweating forehead. “Enough!” he thundered. “Enough! This evil spirit has plagued us long enough! You will not worship the gods? Then die in their honour! You refuse fire, so I, Nimrod-Amra-Phul, Great High Priest Zoroaster of the mighty fire-god Osram-Mazda and his appointed governor on earth, command that fire shall be your punishment!”

He motioned to the guards. “Take him to the great kiln where the bricks are made for the Great Tower and chapel. Throw him into the fire!”

The guards approached the prisoner warily, for he stood fearless and erect, his eyes flashing. But the boy said: “Come, do your duty! Long have I worried what I could do for G-d Who gave me everything. If He wishes that I give my life for His glory, I give it gladly!” Smiling, he went out of the hall, surrounded by the soldiers.

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Nimrod mopped his brow and the fan-bearers waved their fans. “He is mad,” said the king. “Possessed by an evil spirit. That is why he was able to bewitch us all at the start. But, glory be to the gods, I have broken his spell, and the power of the gods must triumph in the end.” Then, turning to Annu-ki, the old priest, he asked, “What do you think of my judgement?”

“Your Majesty’s justice is clear as Nannar and powerful as Shamash,” said the old man. “You have truly shown yourself to be the gods’ governor on earth, valiant defender of the faith against evil men and spirits alike!” Then, casting a malevolent glance in the direction of Horrion, he added loudly, as much for the assembled crowd as for the king, “I am sure that the boy’s brother has now seen the truth, too. But we must make sure that he repents from his blasphemy.”

“Quite so,” said Nimrod quickly. “Step forward, Horrion son of Terrach, and let us hear where you stand now!”

Two guards stood to either side of Horrion as he bowed his head before Nimrod. “May it please Your Majesty,” he said nervously, “I will not deceive my king by saying what he wants me to say if I do not in my own heart feel that I am convinced about the power of the gods over the G-d of Avrom.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nimrod, sharply.

“Without disrespect to the gods, Your Majesty, maybe — ”

Just then there was a commotion in the hall. The Captain of the Guards came up to the throne, running without dignity, pale as death, his eyes bulging. Not waiting for permission to approach, all protocol thrown to the winds, he called out wildly, “Your Majesty!” and then he faltered. He would have fallen if two men had not sprung to his aid. “Your Majesty — the prisoner!”

“What, man?” asked Nimrod, staring at the soldier. “What about the prisoner?”

“Your Majesty ... he walks ... walks about in the kiln! The fire has not touched him! He walks, like a man walking in a garden, amongst the flames!”

“Impossible!” cried Nimrod, but he trembled. Then he rushed out of the hall. The Court streamed after him, all formality forgotten.

There, in the open kiln, was the prisoner, Avrom, walking serenely through the fire.

Nimrod stood shaking in every limb, fighting for breath. “Come here, Avrom!” he called at last.

The boy came out of the kiln and saluted the king, who shrank back from him in terror.

But Avrom looked as if he hardly noticed the king. His eyes were far away. Happiness and resolution shone from his face.

“Avrom,” said the king, “do you hear me? Your G-d lives! I see that now. He has saved you! Pray to Him to forgive me. You are free. Go, you and your father, but go far from here. No one shall harm you. But do not preach to us for you are not like an ordinary person!”

Annu-ki had slowly made his way from the hall to the open kiln and now stood at the king’s side, clearly agitated.

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He spoke to Nimrod quietly. “My lord king,” he said with exaggerated respect, “even if this boy has for some reason found favour with his G-d and been saved from the flames, nevertheless, as the Great High Priest Zoroaster, Your Majesty of course does not doubt the power of fire. Perhaps the G-d of Avrom can wreak a miracle and even be victorious over the god of fire. But will He be victorious a second time? From this one instance dare we suppose that the G-d of Avrom is more powerful than all the gods? In any case, my lord king does not need reminding that he is in the process of judging the boy’s brother. Let us see what will be when he is thrown into this same kiln!”

The king was still visibly trembling from the shock of Avrom’s incredible survival. He could hardly help himself as he stared at Avrom in amazement and saw that the only effect of the flames was that the ropes that had bound Avrom’s wrists had been burned away without even a hair on his head being singed. But at the same time he was also aware that the crowd was looking keenly at him. The words of the old priest impressed Nimrod and he quickly grasped at the opportunity of reasserting his authority. Imperiously, he turned on his heel and, motioning to his courtiers to follow him, he returned to the throne room.

It was some time before decorum was restored. Everyone was watching carefully to see how the king would proceed. Nimrod rose to the challenge.

“Horron son of Terrach,” he said, coldly, “we have all just now witnessed the power of the G-d of Avrom. But I, Nimrod, the Great High Priest of the mighty fire-god Osram-Mazda and the appointed governor of the gods here on earth, warn you not to tempt the gods to anger by denying their power! I warn you that even though the invisible G-d of Whom your brother has spoken has shown His power to save, nevertheless the gods are not to be defied! You must now affirm that you will not deny the gods — or let your Invisible G-d save you from their power! What do you say, Horron son of Terrach?”

Horron was frightened at these words. In an agitated voice he replied: “Your Majesty! I do not wish to show any disrespect to the gods or their power. But if the Invisible G-d can save my brother Avrom, He can save me, too!”

Nimrod looked at the old priest. Annu-ki was tensely standing nearby, his fists clenched tight. Nimrod, too, understood what was at stake — he must regain his authority. But if Horron, too, should survive the flames ...

With chilling intensity, Nimrod quietly spoke: “Throw him in!”

The assembled crowd watched as Horron was led out.

Other business followed. Disputes and questions were put to the king, who tried to restore normality to the proceedings after the previous excitement. But gradually, imperceptibly at first, the great hall became quite empty as people went outside and walked the short distance to the great kiln to see what was happening there. Even the old priest could not contain himself. Making his apologies to the king, he made his way determinedly towards the kiln.

By the time he arrived there, it was all over. Annu-ki allowed himself a short look into the fierce flames to make sure, smiled to himself contentedly, and returned to the throne room. As he entered, Nimrod looked at him questioningly. The old priest nodded slowly and deliberately, and

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then Nimrod, too, smiled. He was pleased. The crisis was over. And on the faces of the people who saw him smile, there was fear.

Afterwards, Nimrod commanded that Terrach be brought, with Avrom, to his private audience rooms. "I bid you farewell, Terrach, son of Nachor, and you, young Avrom." A note of triumph crept into his voice. "It would seem that your G-d is not so powerful after all, and we have now seen that the gods have taken vengeance for the disrespect you have shown them."

Terrach stood silently before the tyrant who had killed his son. To his right side stood the mother of Horron, Adena daughter of Avar-Nahu, weeping silently. On his left, stood Terrach's other wife, Am-tala-a, daughter of Kar-Nebo, quietly happy, yet wondering anxiously what further ordeal might be in store at the hands of the king. Terrach himself looked haggard and sullen. The death of his son Horron had horrified him and, worst of all, Terrach had brought it all upon himself. But why, he wondered to himself, if the Invisible G-d had saved Avrom, had He not saved Horron, too?

"Your Majesty!" Avrom's young voice broke into his father's thoughts. "G-d is all-powerful and He is truly the G-d of all gods! But above all He wishes us to come to that realization of our own accord and not by the force of His miracles. For that reason, even as He performs miracles and wonders, He does not allow that to take away our choice to believe in Him or not. Why I should have been saved and my brother not, I cannot say. But now that G-d has saved me, I know that it is so that I shall spread the knowledge of G-d to all men."

The king waved his hand as if to dismiss these words, spoken so firmly and resolutely. Annu-ki stepped forward. He spoke very quietly to the king: "I feel uneasy about this boy, Your Majesty. I fear that one day he will return, even to this place, and will defy my lord again, just as the astrologers foretold when he was born." He was silent for a moment, then went on thoughtfully. "If there was some way that we could be kept informed of his movements ... At least we would be forewarned."

Nimrod understood straightaway. Ever the warrior and the hunter, he had been thinking along the same lines himself, and he already had a plan in mind. As if in reply to Avrom's words, he spoke. "You are wrong, young one. But you speak your words with courage. And for your courage I commend you. Before you go, therefore, I, Nimrod, wish to bestow upon you a gift, a personal tribute" — and here he smiled coldly — "from one man of courage to another. I give you my own son, Eli-Ezzer to join you. He shall accompany you on your travels from here. He shall be your guardian, that no one shall harm you. He shall be at your service — your own servant — a tribute from Nimrod the Terrible!" Turning to Annu-ki, he said: "Tell him to prepare himself for his task." With that, Nimrod rose from his place. The audience was over.

And so they went out from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Kenaan. But when they came to Chorrion, they stayed there and went no further for some years.

It was at Chorrion that people began to join Avrom and his message started to spread over the whole world.

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : פָּ

*This week's Haftorah is taken from the Sefer Yeshayohu.
Sefaradim read from Chapter 54 from verse 1 to verse 10
Ashkenazzim continue till Chapter 55, verse 6.*

1. In this Haftorah, Yeshayohu comforts the Jewish People in exile with a vision of the future, when HaShem will publicly take us back again as His Chosen People. He describes that idyllic time in the future in terms of endearment and great love, using, as Yeshayohu often does, the metaphor of HaShem as the husband and the Jewish People as the wife who are reconciled in love and compassion — but this time, for always.
2. Some of the expressions used by Yeshayohu are famous for their portrayal — so powerful and at the same time so beautiful — of the wondrous time when HaShem and His People will be together again. The Novvi repeatedly makes the point that HaShem's reconciliation with His People will be permanent. "The mountains may go; the hills may be removed — but My love for you will never again be taken nor My covenant of peace ever be removed." The time of our long exile and banishment, with all the cruelties that we were made to suffer, will be as a mere moment in comparison with our being back with HaShem, which will be forever, says Yeshayohu. That is, although the years of exile seemed interminably long, nevertheless in the context of the vast sweep of time that is the history of HaShem's Chosen People, HaShem's anger will be seen as but a short moment. Terrible indeed have been the hardships and cruelties inflicted upon us during our years of banishment, says the Novvi, but the kindness of HaShem towards His People will be an everlasting kindness. "You might have been as a forsaken wife — but would I then push you away forever?"
3. There is a precursor, a sign, of this promise of the great future to come, of the time when HaShem will take us to Him again, never again to cast us aside in anger. That precursor is another promise by HaShem, this one not only to the Jewish People but to all Mankind, and it is the link to this week's Sidra. It is the promise that HaShem made to No'ach, the father of the new Mankind, that HaShem would never again bring a Great Flood upon the whole world. "As I have sworn never to bring the Waters of No'ach to again destroy the world," says Yeshayohu in his message from HaShem, "so, too, I swear never to be angry with you nor to ever again sharply rebuke you." The comfort lies in the fact that there has indeed never been another Great Flood and so too will HaShem's promise of the future come true.
4. HaShem promises that "any weapon that is made to hurt you will fail, every tongue that speaks against you will be confounded by the facts of your righteousness" when HaShem proves the goodness of His People to all the Nations of the world. "See! I have established you as My witnesses to the nations, you are to be a prince and a guide for all Mankind" for through the Jewish People, all of humanity can be elevated and find blessing.
5. Besides the mention of the Great Flood of No'ach and the promise of HaShem not to bring another, there is another connexion between the Sidra and this Haftorah. The Great Flood was brought to destroy a horribly corrupted world, but as a result of this destruction, a better world emerged — from destruction came rebirth. So, too, through the tribulations of the Jewish People in exile, they are cleansed and purified and prepared for their role as leader and teacher of Mankind, to usher in a new world of righteousness and justice and brotherly love between all peoples. It is an awesome responsibility and is our sole purpose in being HaShem's Chosen People.