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ARE ALL SINS UGLY?

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Beauty is not truth, justice is not compassion, and loyalty is not holiness. Most of us understand that we have a plurality of value-sources, and that genuine values can conflict with one another. Yet we still have a hard time acknowledging that sin can be beautiful, and beauty sinful.

I don't mean that we think all beautiful **people** are always good. What I mean is that we think that mitzvot must be beautiful, and that sins must be ugly. So it bothers us very much to acknowledge that a beautiful **relationship** can be sinful. Yet if we acknowledge that beauty draws from a different source of value than, for example, holiness, there is no reason to presume that sins can't be beautiful.

The distinction between the beautiful and the commanded seems to be a key message of the story of Adam and Eve. Eve is not fantasizing when she perceives the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of God and Evil as aesthetically attractive, nor is she being fooled by an illusion. The Fruit really is attractive, both physically and intellectually. Eating it **will** enable her to experience that beauty and to enhance her appreciation of other forms of beauty. Nonetheless she behaves wrongly when she eats it. Adam's loyalty to and love for Eve, expressed in his eating the fruit so as to share her mortality, is beautiful. Eating the fruit was nonetheless a violation of G-d's command.

Recognizing multiple sources of value gives us a plausible and tantalizing conception of redemption as a time and space in which those values don't conflict. This ties into the idea that eating the Fruit was not wrong per se, but rather only because Eve ate it too early, and was unable to wait until Shabbat. G-d's plan was to include all beauty within human religious experience.

Perhaps more importantly, it gives us a way to think about conflicts between halakhah and the cultures we are embedded in without resorting either to easy black/white dichotomies or to denying that anything but a specific Divine command can generate value.

We must also acknowledge that this approach has its own false extreme. One might reach the conclusion that every decision has great value on some axis, and therefore end up with a position resembling relativism.

The story of Noach's post-flood inebriation may offer a useful case study for navigating this Scylla and Charybdis. Do we see his decisions as basely motivated and resulting in squalor and cruelty?

Or do we find noble motives and actual or potentially glorious results that are undone, inevitably or otherwise, by events?

Analyzing this question requires us to read the text closely and to examine our conceptions and assumptions about both alcohol and sexuality.

The story of Noach begins with his naming (5:29):

וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ לְאָמֵר

זֶה יִנְחֵמֵנוּ

מִמַּעֲשֵׂי נֹשׁ וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יְדֵינוּ

מִן־הָאֲדָמָה

אֲשֶׁר אָרְצָהּ יְקִיָּק:

He (*Lemakh*) called him (*his son*) Noach:

"This (*one*) will **menachem**/console/ease us
from our actions and the fruitless toil of our hands

from the **earth**

which was cursed by Hashem."

Rashi and others seek to find concrete technological contributions that Noach made to agriculture. But in the context of the narrative, it seems more likely to me that the first layer of meaning is ironic. Noach's name is embedded in the verb *venachameinu*, but he does not bring *nechamah*/consolation to any human being with regard to the earth. Instead, 6:6-7 suggests that his birth may be the catalyst for G-d wiping humanity off the earth.

וַיִּנְחַם יְקִיָּק כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ

וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לְבָבוֹ:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקִיָּק אֶמְחָה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם

עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם

כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִם:

G-d **vayinachem**/regretted that He had made the human in the land

He was saddened to His heart.

Hashem said:

I will erase the human which I have created from on the face of the earth

from human to cattle to creeper to flyer of the heavens

because **nichamti**/I have regretted that I made them.

His father's failure to understand Noah's role is emphasized in the next verse, which informs us that Noah's name is actually backward – "Noach found *chen*/favor in the eyes of Hashem. Finally, a possibly authentic meaning of the name emerges in 8:4 when the ark comes to rest/*vatanach* on the hills of Ararat. But that cannot be the end of the story, because in 8:9 the dove cannot find a resting place/*manoach*. A possible end is 8:21, when Hashem smells the *reiach nichoach* of the sacrifice Noach brings and

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקִיָּק אֶל-לִבִּי
 . . . לֹא-אֶסְףּ לְקַיֵּץ עוֹד אֶת-הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם
 Hashem said to His heart

I will not continue to curse the earth on account of the human . . .

The phrase "to His heart" reverses His decision to bring the flood, and the content of G-d's declaration reverses His curse of the land. But there is no mention of *nechamah*.

Nonetheless, we and Noah might reasonably conclude that the task set out in his naming has been completed. The earth is no longer cursed, and human beings can now support themselves via agriculture. There is no longer a risk that G-d will change His mind about creating humans.

Or, he and we might conclude, the task is not done. Nothing Hashem says suggests that He has changed His mind again and is now pleased to have created humanity. G-d has undone His punishment of Adam for eating the fruit, but seemingly out of hopelessness rather than out of affection.

All this brings us to the peculiar events of 9:20-21.

וַיִּחַל נֹחַ
 אִישׁ הָאָדָמָה
 וַיִּטֵּעַ כֶּרֶם:
 וַיִּשְׂתַּח מִן-הַיַּיִן
 וַיִּשְׁכָּר
 וַיִּתְגַּל בְּתוֹךְ אֹהֱלָה:
 Vayachel Noach
 a man of the earth
 He planted a vineyard
 He became drunk
 He became exposed within his tent.

Commentaries on *vayachel* Noach generally focus on whether its root meaning is "to become desacralized," "to become," or "to begin." I suggest that insufficient attention has been paid to 8:10;

וַיִּחַל עוֹד
 שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אַחֲרָיִם
 וַיִּסְףּ שְׁלַח אֶת-הַיּוֹנָה מִן-הַתְּבִיחַ
 Vayachel more
 seven other days
 He continued sending the dove from the ark.

Here there seems a consensus, based on context, that *vayachel* means that Noah waited. What was he waiting for? The previous verse told us that the dove had found no *manoach*; Noah is therefore waiting for the dove to find one. But the truth is that after these seven days the dove brings back an olive branch, and after Noah *vayachel*/waits another seven days (8:12) the dove simply fails to return. Neither we nor Noah can know for certain whether it has found its *manoach*.

I suggest that our *vayachel* must be parallel to Noah's two previous *vayachels*. It reflects yet another effort to bring his name to fruition. To find his own *manoach*, he must try to bring about another *nechamah* on the part of Hashem, so that He will once again be happy to have created human beings.

Moreover, this attempt cannot be seen as the product of despair. Rather, as seems clear from the drumbeat of verbs in this section, Noah's actions are patiently planned. Noah **waits** for his chance to become the man who redeems the land (perhaps recalling that the original sin resulted from impatience). He plants a vineyard, knowing that it will eventually produce wine. When it produces wine, he drinks it. Everything is going according to plan.

He becomes drunk – is that part of the plan? He becomes exposed within his tent – but there is an obvious paradox in becoming exposed within a private enclosure. Exposed to whom? In context it seems that he becomes exposed to his grandson Cham, but it also seems clear that Cham's presence was not intended.

I often argue that Noah's drunkenness is an attempt to undo Adam and Eve's acquisition of the "knowledge of good and evil," and that his nakedness is an attempt to recreate their prelapsarian shamelessness. Perhaps he planned to do this in the privacy of his own tent, so that no one would be damaged if it turned out that innocence cannot be recreated, or if losing the knowledge of morality turned him into a monster rather than a being higher than angels. But it all goes horribly wrong.

Those who celebrate the release from inhibitions that intoxicants bring, or the triumph of sexual attraction over legal or psychological barriers to its full expression, are not always wrong to see beauty there. But they are almost always insufficiently attentive to and aware of the ancillary damage this beauty does to the value-structures of their broader society, and the price It exacts from other people.

Moreover, sometimes they are just wrong, and there is no beauty there at all. Noah was tasked with bringing comfort to people from a Divine curse; that he ends up cursing people himself suggests that his final attempt was wrongheaded from the start.