



The Origins of Idolatry and the Emergence of Avraham By David Silverberg

The bulk of Parashat Noach is devoted to the flood: its causes, God's decision to destroy the world and save Noach and his family, the actual deluge, and its aftermath. As Maimonides does not discuss Noach or the flood in his writings, we will turn our attention this week to the final, and perhaps less prominent, section of Parashat Noach (chapter 11), which traces Noach's descendants through Avraham, the first of the three patriarchs.

Idolatry is Born

The Mishna in Masekhet Avot (5:2) gives us a general perspective on this period: "There were ten generations from Noach until Avraham, which teaches just how much patience He has, for all the generations continued to anger Him until Avraham our patriarch came along and accrued reward for them all." This description parallels the immediately preceding passage in the Mishna: "There were ten generations from Adam until Noach, which teaches just how much patience He has, for all the generations continued to anger Him until He brought the floodwaters upon Him." The Mishna thus compares the ten generations before the deluge to the ten subsequent generations, between the flood and the emergence of Avraham. The latter ten generations, like the first ten, sinned and angered God, but this time the world escaped destruction thanks to the piety and achievements of Avraham, which earned sufficient merit to offset ten generations worth of iniquity.

Maimonides fills in the details of the religious deterioration that characterized the world's early generations, and how Avraham worked to reverse this trend. In the first of the fourteen books that comprise *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides includes a section entitled *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, which outlines the laws relevant to idolatry, such as the prohibitions against worshipping idols, bowing to idols, mimicking pagan practices, and so on. In the first chapter of this section, Maimonides introduces this set of laws with an interesting overview of the historical and theological origins of idolatry. We cite here selected passages from this introductory chapter:

During the time of Enosh [Adam's grandson], human beings made a great error, and the counsel of that generation's scholars became foolish... This was their error: They said, since God created these stars and planets to rule the world, and placed them in the heavens and afforded them honor, and they are attendants serving Him, it is fitting to praise them, glorify them, and show them honor. And this [they thought] is the Almighty's will – to exalt and honor that which He has exalted and honored, just as a king wishes to show honor to his attendants, and this is honor for the king. Once this matter came to their minds, they began building temples to the stars, offering them sacrifices, praising them and glorifying them with words, and prostrating themselves towards them, in order to fulfill the divine will in accordance with their evil thoughts. And this is the essence of idolatry... not that they would say that there is no God beside this star...

A while later, false prophets arose among the people and said that the Almighty instructed them, saying: Worship such-and-such star, or all the stars; sacrifice to it, pour such-and-such libations to it, build a temple for it and make its image to bow before it... And he would inform them of the image that he had invented and would say, "This is the image of such-and-such star" of which he was told in his prophecy. In this manner they began making images in the temples...and assemble and bow

to them, and they would say to everyone that this image brings goodness and causes evil, and it is worthwhile to worship it and fear it... And other charlatans began to emerge and say that the star itself, or a planet or angel, spoke to them and said to them, "Worship me in this way..." This matter spread throughout the world – to worship images... and sacrifice to them and bow down. Over the course of time, the great, awesome Name [of God] was forgotten by everyone in existence and their minds, and they did not recognize Him. It turned out that all people on earth, including women and children, recognized only the wooden or stone image, and the stone temple before which they had been trained since youth to bow... And the scholars among them...presumed that there was no God other than the stars and planets for which these images were made and which they resembled. But the Rock of the earth [God] – there was no one who recognized Him and knew Him, except for just several individuals in the world, such as Chanokh, Metushelach, Noach, Shem and Ever. The world continued to progress in this manner until the birth of the pillar of the world – namely, Avraham our patriarch.

Maimonides describes the emergence of paganism as a multistage process. It began with the mistaken notion that God wants His subjects – mankind – to show honor to the celestial beings and forces of nature, much as a human king demands that his high-ranking officials be shown honor and respect. The first pagans, according to Maimonides, worshipped the celestial bodies – and, later, images of the celestial bodies – not as a rejection of God, but rather, quite to the contrary, on the assumption that this constitutes the divine will. As time progressed, however, people's attention began to focus exclusively on the images, to the point where God Himself – who was the One who had allegedly called for the worship of these images – was entirely forgotten.

Thus, the progenitors of paganism worshipped in a misguided attempt to serve God, but their heirs ultimately did not recognize God and attributed divine powers to graven and smelted images.

Maimonides returns to this subject in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:36):

You must know that idolaters when worshipping idols do not believe that there is no God besides them; and no idolater ever did assume that any image made of metal, stone, or wood has created the heavens and the earth, and still governs them. Idolatry is founded on the idea that a particular form represents the agent between God and His creatures...

The infidels...though believing in the existence of the Creator, attack the exclusive prerogative of God, namely, the service and worship which was commanded, in order that the belief of the people in His existence should be firmly established... By transferring that prerogative to other beings, they cause the people, who only notice the rites, without comprehending their meaning or the true character of the being which is worshipped, to renounce their belief in the existence of God.

The pagan theologians did not, themselves, deny God's existence. However, the practices they advocated led the masses to deny this belief, as all the rituals they witnessed and participated in involved supposed intermediaries, rather than the direct worship of the Almighty.

Maimonides' understanding of the origins of paganism is cited and disputed by a later halakhist/philosopher – Rabbenu Nissim of Gerona, known as the Ran (14th century, Spain). In his classic philosophic work *Derashot Ha-Ran* (chapter 9), the Ran posits a different theory as to the roots of idolatrous beliefs, arguing that they resulted from serious theological contemplation and study, rather than from a misconception by the boorish masses. According to the Ran, ancient theologians determined that God, as a transcendent being, could not possibly take interest in human affairs. He is simply too great and powerful, they concluded, to bother governing mankind. Undoubtedly, then, He must have delegated divine authority to the natural forces, and man must therefore worship these forces, rather than God Himself. To the contrary, the direct worship of God is nothing short of an insult to His honor, as it presumes the Almighty's involvement in ordinary human affairs – a realm that the pagans considered well beneath His dignity. The Ran goes so far as

to claim that the pagans looked upon monotheism with even more revulsion than we look upon paganism. They considered the direct worship of God far more objectionable than we deem the worship of statues, given the grave insult to God they saw as inherent to monotheistic worship.

There is room to speculate as to why Maimonides did not embrace the Ran's theory, but he most likely arrived at his understanding based, very simply, on the historical data at his disposal. In the second chapter of *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* (*halakha* 2), Maimonides mentions that idolaters composed many volumes detailing the guidelines of pagan rituals and customs. And in the third section of the *Guide* (chapter 3:29), he quotes extensively from numerous sources regarding the beliefs and customs of ancient idolaters, as background information for his explanation of many *mitzvot* as means of rejecting these customs. Maimonides was thus clearly well-versed in pagan doctrines, and it is most likely on this basis that he describes the origins of paganism as he did.

Avraham – the “Pillar of the World”

As cited earlier, Maimonides described how mankind ultimately denied the existence of God, until the emergence of Avraham, to whom Maimonides admiringly refers as “the pillar of the world.” (This accolade might stem from the aforementioned Mishna, which tells that Avraham saved the world by accruing merit equal to the accumulated depravity of the previous ten generations.) In the next paragraph, Maimonides – based on numerous Midrashic passages – describes Avraham's theological odyssey:

Once this *eitan* [“mighty one,” or “hero”] was weaned, he began wandering with his mind – still just a child – and began thinking day and night. He wondered, how is it possible for the zodiac to run constantly without it having an operator, someone to turn it? For it is impossible for it to turn by itself. He had no teacher or anyone who showed him anything. He was rather submerged in Ur Kasdim among foolish idolaters; his father, his mother and all the people were idolaters, and he worshipped with them as his mind wandered and contemplated until he arrived at the true path... He knew that there was a single God who runs the zodiac and created everything, and that there is no God other than Him in all of existence... At forty years of age Avraham recognized his Creator.

In the *Guide* (3:29), Maimonides adds that Avraham determined through his study and analysis not only God's existence, but also His incorporeal nature and His having created the universe.

The question of at which age Avraham determined God's existence is subject to some controversy. The Ra'avad, responding to Maimonides' assertion that Avraham reached this conclusion at age forty, makes reference to a passage in the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) which states very clearly that this occurred at age three. The Gemara finds an allusion to this age in God's remarks to Avraham's son, Yitzchak, promising him the land of Canaan and many descendants “because Avraham heeded My voice,” or, in Hebrew, “*Eikev asher shama Avraham be-koli*” (Bereishit 26:5). The numerical value of the word *eikev* equals one hundred and seventy-two, three shy of Avraham's total years – one hundred and seventy-five (see Bereishit 25:7). The verse thus implies that Avraham “heeded My voice” for the period of *eikev* – one hundred and seventy two years – suggesting that the patriarch's devotion to the Almighty began at age three.

In the Midrash, however, the issue is debated by the *Tanna'im*. *Bereishit Rabba* (64), *Shir Hashirim Rabba* (6) and the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Lekh-Lekha, 3), among other sources, cite two views as to whether Avraham recognized his Creator at age three or at age forty-eight. According to some manuscripts (see *Torah Sheleima*, Bereishit, chapter 26, note 25), the second view puts Avraham at forty years of age, rather than forty-eight. Regarding Maimonides' view, as well, we encounter some discrepancy between different manuscripts. Although in prevalent editions, as cited above, Maimonides speaks of a forty-year old Avraham recognizing God, the *Ma'aseh Rokei'ach*, an early commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, cites earlier editions that read “forty-eight.” This is indeed how the text reads in the Constantinople edition (“*Defus Kushta*”) of *Mishneh Torah*, and the

Hagahot Maimoniyot (another early work on *Mishneh Torah*) suggests emending the text accordingly.

In any event, many writers, including the *Hagahot Maimoniyot*, assert that Maimonides reconciled the two seemingly divergent views in the Midrash, maintaining that Avraham began his intellectual quest at age three, or perhaps in his third year, and conclusively determined God's existence at age forty (or forty-eight). Maimonides therefore describes Avraham as "wandering with his mind" from the time he was "weaned," which likely refers to his third year, and finally establishing God's existence as an adult. In a slightly different vein, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik, in his *Parach Mateh Aharon* (on the *Mada* section of *Mishneh Torah*), suggests that the two views in the Midrash perhaps refer to two different types of "awareness" – emotional and intellectual. Already as a small child, Avraham recognized God emotionally; he felt that a Creator must exist. But only as a mature adult could he prove God's existence through logical deduction and reasoning.

Avraham and Migdal Bavel

If we follow the texts that point to Avraham's forty-eighth year as the point of his recognition of God, then we might be able to attribute Avraham's theological discovery to a seminal event in world history – the debacle of *Migdal Bavel* (the Tower of Babel), which the Torah narrates towards the end of Parashat Noach (11:1-9). The Rashbatz (Rabbi Shimon Ben Tzemach Duran, 14th century, Spain-North Africa), in the introduction to his work *Magen Avot*, expresses his support for the texts of *Mishneh Torah* that read forty-eight, rather than forty, and draws the association between Avraham's discovery and *Migdal Bavel*. He cites from *Seder Olam* (a historical record from the *Tanna'im*) that Avraham was forty-eight years of age at the time of the *Migdal Bavel* disaster. The Torah (10:25) indicates that the dispersion that served to punish the tower's builders occurred during the lifetime of Peleg, a great-great-grandson of Noach's son Shem. According to *Seder Olam* (cited in Rashi's commentary to 10:25), the dispersion occurred in Peleg's final year. Now Peleg begot his son, Re'u, two hundred and nine years before his death (11:19), and thus Re'u was two hundred and nine years when the events of *Migdal Bavel* occurred. His son, Serug, was born in Re'u's thirty-second year, or one hundred and seventy-seven years before the dispersion. Serug begot Nachor, Avraham's grandfather, in his thirtieth year of life, or one hundred and forty-seven years prior to the dispersion (11:22), and Avraham's father, Terach, was born twenty-nine years later (11:24), one hundred and eighteen years before the building of the tower. Terach begot Avraham seventy years later (11:26), and thus Avraham was forty-eight years of age when the tower was built and the people's languages were confounded.

The Rashbatz contends that according to Maimonides, it was the incident of *Migdal Bavel* that led Avraham to the firm belief in God as Creator, and to reject the pagan doctrines that had become universally accepted. It was no coincidence that Avraham recognized God at age forty-eight; this resulted naturally from the dramatic events of the *Migdal Bavel* episode.

If we indeed assume that Avraham's discovery resulted from the incident of *Migdal Bavel*, then we may perhaps gain a clearer understanding of what the construction of the city and tower was all about. Many scholars have endeavored to explain God's angry response to this project. If this response led Avraham to conclusively establish the existence of God, then we might assume that the construction of "a city with a tower extending to the heavens" (11:4) was aimed specifically at demonstrating the absence of a Creator. The builders of the tower perhaps sought to extend the earth to the heavenly spheres, and thereby attempt to prove that no divine force exists above the earth. The failure of this project convinced Avraham of God's existence, and that any attempt to deny this basic belief cannot succeed.

(For more on the connection between Avraham and *Migdal Bavel*, see Menachem Leibtag's discussion of this topic at www.tanach.org/breishit/noach/noach.htm.)

Avraham in Charan

Later in his discussion of Avraham's early years (in the opening chapter of *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*), Maimonides tells of the patriarch's disputations with his contemporaries as part of his vigilant campaign against idolatrous beliefs and worship. Maimonides further tells that the monarch at that time (generally identified in Midrashic literature as Nimrod) sought to kill Avraham for disseminating monotheistic ideas. Though Maimonides does not record the famous incident told in the Midrash of Avraham's miraculous survival in the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim, he does mention that "a miracle was performed for him, and he left to Charan." In Charan, Maimonides tells, Avraham intensified his efforts and assembled crowds of people to teach them the principles of monotheism.

This sequence of events, as told by Maimonides, clarifies a glaring difficulty that arises from the final verses of Parashat Noach, with which many Midrashim and commentaries have struggled. The Torah tells, "Terach [Avraham's father] took his son Avram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, wife of his son Avraham, and left with them from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan; they came to Charan and settled there" (11:31). For some unknown reason, Terach decides to relocate with his family in the land of Canaan (*Eretz Yisrael*), but makes it only to Charan. (The next verse tells of Terach's death in Charan, and it thus appears that he either died or took ill upon the family's arrival in Charan, and for this reason they never made it all the way to Canaan.) The Torah gives no clue as to why Terach suddenly wanted to move; as mentioned, various theories appear in the Midrashim and commentaries. To resolve this difficulty, the Radak goes so far as to suggest that these verses appear out of chronological sequence, as Terach's departure from Ur Kasdim occurred after God's revelation to Avraham, instructing him to move to Canaan. Terach simply followed his son out of Ur Kasdim, towards the land of Canaan.

According to Maimonides, it appears that Terach did not simply decide to move from Ur Kasdim; he fled from Ur Kasdim. After Avraham's miraculous escape from execution, Maimonides writes, "he left to Charan," seemingly referring to the mysterious Biblical account of Terach's departure from Ur Kasdim. If so, then Maimonides understood the verse to mean that Terach took his family away from Ur Kasdim in order to save Avraham's life. We might explain his decision to head specifically towards *Eretz Yisrael* in light of the comment by *Chizkuni* (11:30) that Canaan was initially designated for the progeny of Shem, and Terach – a descendant of Shem – sought to settle there rather than in the regions controlled by the family of Cham. Maimonides perhaps similarly felt that Terach escaped from Ur Kasdim to save his son's life, and decided to head towards Canaan, the region of Shem, where he would find safe refuge.