



## NOACH: WHY DID GOD DESTROY THE WORLD?

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Noach!

### A Premonition of Comfort

In this week's parsha, the Torah talks to us about Noah's name and tells us how, exactly, he got it. It turns out that Noah's father, a man named Lemech, made a declaration upon Noah's birth – and in concert with that declaration, he named his child. But there's something puzzling, almost chilling, about that declaration. Let's take a look at this episode, as the Torah relates it to us.



#### LOOK INSIDE: Noah's Name

Read Lemech's declaration below. What is this curse that he refers to? Have we come across this idea earlier in the Torah?

##### Genesis 5:29

29 And he named him Noah, saying, "This one will comfort us from our deeds and from the sadness of our hands, from the land that the Lord has cursed."

##### בראשית ה:כט

כט וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ, לֵאמֹר: זֶה יִנְחֵמֵנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ, וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יְדִינוּ, מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר אָרְרָה יְקוּהָ.

Strangely, Lemech senses that this child is going to comfort him – and he names Noah for this idea. Indeed, the first two letters of Noah's name – *nun* and *chet* – borrow from the first two letters of the Hebrew root for comfort: *Nun, chet, mem*. But according to Lemech, Noah's "comfort" will play out on a grand scale: Noah is not just going to comfort Lemech; he will comfort *all* of mankind – from some sort of 'curse of the land.'

What is this curse of the land?

### The Curse Of The Land

The 'curse of the land' goes back to two of the earliest stories in the Torah, in both humankind's encounter with the Tree of Knowledge and the subsequent story of Cain and Abel. Read the text carefully, and you'll find that there were two main consequences to each of these sins.



## INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

### About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Noach: Why Did God Destroy the World?" (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Let's explore the first consequence. Immediately after eating the forbidden fruit, what do Adam and Eve do?

Genesis 3:8

וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי יְקוּהָ אֱלֹקִים בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן

And the man and his wife hid from before the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden

They *hide* from God. And fascinatingly, Cain does the same, in the aftermath of his own sin:

Genesis 4:14

הֲגֵרֶשֶׁת אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּמִפְּנֵיךָ אֶסְתֵּר

Behold You have driven me today off the face of the earth, and I shall be hidden from before You.

Indeed, Cain senses that he will spend his entire life *continually* hiding from God. This impulse to hide seems to express a kind of distance or awkwardness that has been introduced into the relationship between God, on the one hand, and Adam, Eve and Cain, on the other.

So both Adam and Eve, and Cain, hide from God after they sin. Let's call this **first consequence** "alienation from God" - the distance between man and God, as a result of man's sins.

## Title

But there was also a **second consequence** that devolved from these sins. There was a different kind of alienation that came about – an alienation between humans and land. Let's see it play out in the verses, starting with the curses the God doles out after Adam and Eve's sin:

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### Genesis 3:17-19

17 And to man He said, "Because you listened to your wife, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you saying, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground for your sake; in sadness shall you eat of it all the days of your life. 18 And it will cause thorns and thistles to grow for you, and you shall eat the herbs of the field. 19 With the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, for you were taken therefrom, for dust you are, and to dust you will return."

### בראשית ג:יז-יט

יז וּלְאָדָם אָמַר, בִּי-שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ, וְתָאֲכַל מִן-הָעֵץ, אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ--אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה, בְּעִבְרֹךָ, בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה, כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. יח וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדַּר, תִּצְמִיחַ לָךְ; וְאָכַלְתָּ, אֶת-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה. יט בְּזַעַת אַפֶּיךָ, תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם, עַד שׁוֹבֵךְ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה, כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ: כִּי-עָפָר אַתָּה, וְאֶל-עָפָר תָּשׁוּב.

Adam is told, for example, that he shall work the land in sadness, by the sweat of his brow. No longer shall the land simply provide, almost effortlessly, for Adam and Eve.

And that curse seems to intensify in the age of Cain. Let's listen in on what God tells him after he slays his brother, after Cain causes the land to take back the blood of Abel:

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### Genesis 4:12

כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה, לֹא-תִסְרֶף תִּת-כֹּחָהּ לָךְ

When you till the soil, it will not continue to give its strength to you

When it came to Adam and Eve – well, the land might no longer provide effortlessly for them anymore, but at least if they worked it, they could expect to yield its rich bounty. Somehow, that promise becomes compromised with Cain. Even if Cain exhausts himself working the land, still, he will sense something missing in land's response to his efforts: it will no longer continue to give him its best. Cain will look upon the bounty of the land and find it wanting. And this second alienation - alienation from land - *this* is the "curse of the land" that Lemech was referring to.

## Lemeh Senses Change is Afoot

And now, generations later, Lemeh senses that things could be different; that somehow, we as humans could and would get beyond this curse. And he expresses that thought in terms of an idea he calls “comfort.”



### LOOK INSIDE: Understanding Comfort

Reflect again upon this declaration of Lemeh: *“This one will comfort us from our deeds and from the sadness of our hands, from the land that the Lord has cursed.”* How do you understand the word “comfort” here? How do you envision that Noah’s birth might bring comfort?

What, exactly, does Lemeh mean by “comfort”? He seems to mean that his generation will be relieved, somehow, from the effects of Adam’s curse, of Cain’s curse. But comfort is a word that you and I don’t usually associate with getting past divine curses. Comfort is something we associate primarily with death and mourning. Someone loses a loved one, so they seek comfort. What, exactly, does comfort have to do with Noah and humankind’s response to “the curse of the land”? How do we understand Lemeh’s cryptic premonition?

It turns out that the Torah gives us a series of clues that enable us to decode Lemeh’s premonition. Indeed, there is a remarkable textual pattern that seems to be lurking just below the surface of the verses that we’ve been examining, a pattern which points to another account in the Torah. The implications of the pattern are as far-reaching as they are chilling.

## Uncovering The Pattern



### PONDER THIS

Let’s start first with this notion of “comfort.” It turns out that the Hebrew root for “comfort” - נחם - shares a root with another word: “regret.” Can you think of any other biblical stories that talk about “regret”?



**Hint 1:** In this story, God is the one doing the regretting...

**Hint 2:** It comes just before a massive disaster...

Think about God regretting having created man, just before He decides to bring the flood. Fast-forward just a few verses from Lemeh’s declaration, and you’ll find the following:

Genesis 6:6

6 And the Lord **regretted** that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart.

בראשית ו:ו

ו וַיִּנְחַם יְקוּוָה, כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ; וַיִּתְעַצֵּב, אֱל-לְבוֹ.

Well, that's an interesting coincidence, you might say. But here's the remarkable thing: it is not just this word נחם in God's declaration that echoes Lemech. Other parts of the Almighty's declaration do, too.



## LOOK INSIDE: Looking for Parallels

Take a closer look at God's pre-flood declaration, and compare it to Lemech's language when Noah is born. How many parallels can you find between the two accounts? (The parallels are much more evident in the Hebrew, so if you're looking at the English, just do the best you can!)

### LEMECH'S DECLARATION

Genesis 5:29

בראשית ה:כט

כט וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ, לֵאמֹר: זֶה יִנְחֵמֵנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ, וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יְדִינוּ, מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר אָרְרָה יְקוּהָ.

29 And he named him Noah, saying, "This one will comfort us from our deeds and from the sadness of our hands, from the land that the Lord has cursed."

### GOD'S DECLARATION (before the Flood)

Genesis 6:6-7

בראשית ו:ז-ו

ו וַיִּנְחַם יְקוּהָ, כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ;  
וַיִּתְעַצֵּב, אֶל-לִבּוֹ. ז וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוּהָ, אֲמַחֶה  
אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, מֵאָדָם  
עַד-בְּהֵמָה, עַד-רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם: כִּי  
נַחַמְתִּי, כִּי עָשִׂיתָם.

6 And the Lord regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became saddened in His heart.

7 And the Lord said, "I will wipe out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the land, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them."

Don't turn to the next page until you've given it your best shot...

Let's compare notes:

## LEMECH'S DECLARATION

Genesis 5:29

בראשית ה:כט

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אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בָּרַאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, מֵאָדָם  
עַד-בְּהֵמָה, עַד-רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם: כִּי  
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7 And the Lord said, "I will wipe out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the land, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them."

When you see the parallels all lined up, it's astounding: **four** of the words from Lemech's declaration are repeated in God's declaration, just before bringing the flood:

1. Comfort/regret (נחם) - (red)
2. Deeds/made (עשה) - (blue)
3. Sadness (עצבון) - (green)
4. Land (האדמה) - (pink)

And not only are they repeated; they are repeated in the *exact same order* in which Lemech used them. It really does seem that God is consciously echoing Lemech's words.

## What's Going On?

The correspondences between the verses don't seem to be mere happenstance. On the contrary: it seems like, for some strange reason, the declaration to destroy the world has as its *prototype* the naming speech that Lemech gave for Noah. But why would that be? Lemech's declaration was made in joy – it was the product of a father exulting in the birth of a new child. God's declaration has a much darker provenance: it foretells the end of the world. One declaration heralds a single new life; the other declaration signals the death of all. Why would God build the decision to destroy His creation out of Lemech's innocent hopes for his newborn child?

We'd like to suggest that the answer to this question centers around this notion of comfort, the first of the textual parallels. Ask yourself: how is it that Noah is supposed to bring comfort to his generation? Lemech doesn't say, but Rashi (quoting the Sages of the Midrash) offer a fascinating explanation:

Rashi on Genesis 5:29

עד שלא בא נח לא היה להם כלי מחרישה והוא הכין להם

Before Noah, men did not have plowshares. Noah prepared [such tools] for them.



### PONDER THIS

How do you understand this? How might the invention of the plow be a source of comfort?

According to this Midrash, Lemech saw prophetically that Noah would be the creator of the plow. The plow would be a form of comfort for humans; it would be a salve for the "curse of the land." After all, the curse of the land meant that it would be extremely hard to make anything grow. It would require toil and back-breaking labor -- and even then, all of man's hard work might yield a bounty mixed with thorns and thistles, or no bounty at all. But the plow could help to solve that problem. It would make it easier for man to cultivate the soil. Suddenly, labor would be halved and yield would be tripled. The worst of the curse of the land -- well, mankind could move beyond it. At the very least, the curse would no longer be as pronounced.



### PONDER THIS

And now we're ready to return to our outstanding question: why is there this connection between Lemech's declaration and God's decision to bring the flood? Lemech is predicting that his son is going to decrease pain and suffering - which sounds like a good thing! So why should it augur the destruction of the world?

What's so bad about the plow? What is wrong with this notion that it will bring comfort?

## What Does Comfort Really Mean?

We think the answer has everything to do with how we understand the idea of "comfort." What is comfort, anyway? And what does it mean for us to achieve it?

Comfort is the antidote for loss - or if it is not the antidote, it is the balm we humans use for loss that allows us to actually be able to bind our wounds and move on. When we are wracked by a terrible loss, we seek “comfort” for it; we seek to get over it. But getting over it isn’t easy. Someone in mourning asks a question: *Why did this happen?* - but there is no answer to such a question. So, in the absence of an answer, the only thing a mourner can do is somehow *reconcile* himself to the simple fact that, inexplicably, it *has* happened.<sup>1</sup>

Comfort involves a shift in perspective. I stop trying to *change* an uncomfortable fact, and instead just *accommodate* myself to it. When we’re talking about mourning the loss of a loved one, that is difficult - but ultimately healthy and necessary. But here’s the challenge: **Not all uncomfortable facts should be accepted.** There is a certain kind of pain that perhaps we should *not* seek comfort for. That kind of pain is not meant to be *accommodated*, but perpetually *challenged*. It is a kind of pain that is ultimately meant to be overcome. It’s a pain which is meant to spur us to change something about ourselves. If we allow ourselves to get used to it, to live with it, then we never make the necessary change. And it is that pain, we want to argue, that was expressed by the curse of the land.

## Sadness and Toil

Ask yourself: What were the purposes of the curses of the land? Why did they even exist?

A clue comes from the language God uses in imposing the curse. The Almighty suggests that in the wake of the first humans’ sin, they would experience “sadness”<sup>2</sup> in working the land.



### PONDER THIS

What is so sad about working the land? Given what we know about the curse of the land, we might have expected the verse to say, “In *difficulty* shall you eat of it...” - but that’s not what it says. What is sad about hard work which doesn’t yield anything?

**Here’s our answer:** Hard work isn’t sad, by *definition*. But when hard work is hard because it *could* have been easier – well, then there’s something sad about that. There’s a kind of futility involved. And our sadness, our disappointment, is a recognition of that - a recognition that things could have been different.

The curses in the wake of the Tree of Knowledge, and in the wake of Cain’s murder of Abel – they were curses that, as we suggested above, imposed a kind of distance between us and land, and between us and God. Hiding from God is one way we felt the distance – and the other way was in this sadness: the sadness that would prevail when we worked the land. We would not be as close to land as we might like to be; the interaction between us and land would be more difficult, more fraught, than we would like it to be. There *was supposed* to be an inherent closeness that man would experience with God and with land, a natural warmth and intimacy. After all, in a sense, both God and land are our creators, our source. That’s what life was like for man in the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. But because of our sins, a kind of distance would creep into the relationship. And *that* was the curse.

<sup>1</sup> That, indeed, might be why the Hebrew word for “mourner” is אבל - which also spells “but” or “nevertheless.” Being a mourner means embracing “nevertheless-ness”: *Why did this happen? I don’t know. But nevertheless, it happened.*

<sup>2</sup> Most conventional translations render the word עֲצִיבוֹן (“*itzavon*”) as “toil”, but literally, it means “sadness.”



## PONDER THIS

But why would God react to man's sins this way? Why would God want us to feel sad? Why would God want us to feel alienated from Him, from the land?

The answer, perhaps, is that this feeling of alienation – it is a kind of homing beacon. We were once one with God and with land, and there is a part of us that craves that oneness, that closeness, always. We always want to come back, to come home. And so, the more one becomes alienated from one's creator, from one's source, the more one wants to return; the stronger the homing beacon becomes.

And *that*, perhaps, is the point of the curses. They bid us to understand the consequence of our sins, to see how alienated we have become – and, by extension, to imbue us with a longing to return. But in order to feel that longing, we need to experience the futility of toil; we need to feel that sadness. You see, there was supposed to be something *productive* about that sadness - but instead, we wanted to escape it, to anesthetize ourselves to it. That's what the plow was meant to do - and that's what made it deeply problematic.

## The Breaking Point

So there's something "problematic" about the plow – it was a sort of Tylenol for a pain, the sadness, that we were supposed to be experiencing, head-on. But to return to our outstanding question: why should it bring about the destruction of the world? Doesn't that seem a little harsh?



## PONDER THIS

Ask yourself: if man's evil gradually increased over time, when would a benevolent Creator decide to give up on the project called creation and start over? As man's evil deeds accumulated, each was only incrementally worse than the last. When, then, does a Creator decide enough is enough?

That comes, perhaps, when man chooses to find comfort in all the wrong places. It comes when man finds comfort in the plow. **The plow is a technological solution to a spiritual problem.** *"Take heart, men, a solution to our sadness is at hand! We can work the land with the plow now. We don't have to deal with the alienation anymore; we can inure ourselves to it..."* It is at that moment that God gives up. God gives up because we have given up, because we've reconciled ourselves to perpetual alienation, perpetual distance. Because we show no signs of ever wanting to come back into the relationship.

At this point, God decides to bring one family into an ark, and to start over. In doing so, the Almighty uses the exact same language that we used to comfort themselves. God mimics Lamech's decision to name his child "comfort" – with a decision of His own, to bring *this* world to a watery end. With the purpose of the curses exhausted, this world will go now, will pass into the night – to be replaced with a new one, as God and the children of men start anew, seeking to forge a brand new relationship on better terms.

Genesis 5:29

בראשית ה:כט

29 And he named him Noah, saying, "This one will comfort us from our deeds and from the sadness of our hands, from the land that the Lord has cursed."

כט וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ, לְאמֹר: זֶה יִנְחֵמֵנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂינוּ, וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יְדֵינוּ, מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר אָרְרָה יְקוּהָ.

Genesis 3:8

בראשית ג:ח

8 And they heard the voice of the Lord God going in the garden to the direction of the sun, and the man and his wife hid from before the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden.

ח וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת-קוֹל יְקוּהָ אֱלֹקִים, מִתְּהַלֵּךְ בְּגֵן--לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם; וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ, מִפְּנֵי יְקוּהָ אֱלֹקִים, בְּתוֹךְ, עֵץ הַגֵּן.

Genesis 4:14

בראשית ד:יד

14 Behold You have driven me today off the face of the earth, and I shall be hidden from before You, and I will be a wanderer and an exile in the land, and it will be that whoever finds me will kill me."

יד הִן גֵּרְשֵׁת אֹתִי הַיּוֹם, מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, וּמִפְּנֵי, אֶסְתֵּר; וְהָיִיתִי נֹעַ וְנָד, בְּאֶרֶץ, וְהָיָה כָל-מֹצְאִי, יַהַרְגֵנִי.

Genesis 4:12

בראשית ד:יב

12 When you till the soil, it will not continue to give its strength to you; you shall be a wanderer and an exile in the land."

יב כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה, לֹא-תִסְפֵּךְ תִּת-כֹּחָהּ לָךְ; נֹעַ וְנָד, תִּהְיֶה בְּאֶרֶץ.



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Genesis 3:17-19

בראשית ג:ז-יט

17 And to man He said, "Because you listened to your wife, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you saying, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground for your sake; in sadness shall you eat of it all the days of your life. 18 And it will cause thorns and thistles to grow for you, and you shall eat the herbs of the field. 19 With the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, for you were taken therefrom, for dust you are, and to dust you will return."

יז וְלָאָדָם אָמַר, בִּי-שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ, וְתָאכַל מִן-הָעֵץ, אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ--אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה, בְּעִבּוּרָךָ, בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה, כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. יח וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדַּר, תִּצְמִיחַ לְךָ; וְאָכַלְתָּ, אֶת-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה. יט בְּזַעַת אַפֶּיךָ, תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם, עַד שׁוֹבֶךָ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה, כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ: בִּי-עֹפֵר אֶתָּה, וְאֶל-עֹפֵר תֵּשׁוּב.

Genesis 6:6-7

בראשית ו:ו-ז

6 And the Lord regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart. 7 And the Lord said, "I will wipe out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the land, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them."

ו וַיִּנְחַם יְקוּה, בִּי-עֲשֵׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ; וַיִּתְעַצֵּב, אֶל-לְבוֹ. ז וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוּה, אֲמַחֶה אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, מֵאָדָם עַד-בְּהֵמָה, עַד-רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם: כִּי נִחַמְתִּי, כִּי עָשִׂיתִם.

Rashi on Genesis 5:29

רש"י על בראשית ה:כט

**This one will give us comfort:** He will give us rest from the toil of our hands. Before Noah came, they did not have plowshares, and he prepared [these tools] for them. And the land was producing thorns and thistles when they sowed wheat, because of the curse of the first man (Adam), but in Noah's time, it [the curse] subsided.

**זה ינחמנו:** ינח ממנו את עצבון ידינו, עד שלא בא נח לא היה להם כלי מחרישה והוא הכין להם, והיתה הארץ מוציאה קוצים ודרדרים בשזורעים חטים, מקללתו של אדם הראשון, ובימי נח נחה, וזהו ינחמנו, ינח ממנו.